

OUTLOOK

Our 'ample safety net' leaves a lot to be desired

Recipients navigate complex system for meager benefits

By Rachel Tolbert Kimbro

Presidential candidate Mitt Romney seems to be celebrating his lopsided victory in the Florida Republican primary by informing Americans that he is “not concerned about the very poor.” But don’t rush to judgment, let’s put his remark in context. First of all, he’s also “not concerned about the very rich.” Whew! What a relief. But let’s not be hasty — it’s not that he “doesn’t care about poor people,” as Kanye West once famously remarked about George W. Bush. He’s just not concerned about them because of our “very ample safety net.” Anyone who would call the American system of programs for the poor “very ample” is obviously someone who has never come close to experiencing it or met anyone who has attempted to navigate it. Let’s give Romney the benefit of the doubt, however: He did manage to self-correct a little in the interview with CNN’s Soledad O’Brien by saying that “if (the safety net) needs repair, I’ll fix it.”

This then seems like an excellent opportunity to take advantage of the recent national dialogue about inequality and poverty and outline just a few of the ways that our “safety net” is far from ample.

First, let’s take food stamps (now called SNAP, for Supplementary Nutrition Assistance Program), one of the programs Romney outlined as part of the safety net that works well. Due to the Great Recession as well as recent changes to reduce red tape and increase eligibility, more than 40 million Americans now receive SNAP — more than double the number just 10 years ago. Far from the image portrayed via political rhetoric of a lazy adult who does not want to work, nearly half of SNAP recip-

ients are children and another 8 percent are elderly. Many SNAP recipients live in households with a wage earner, but earnings tend to be low — just \$731 per month on average. Moreover, SNAP is hardly a panacea for these families. Most recipients run out of food only halfway into each month, and we still are serving only 70 percent of eligible families.

And how about Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF), usually known as welfare benefits? In Texas, in exchange for a monthly benefit of around \$250 (the maximum for a family of one adult and two children), recipients must extensively document their eligibility every six months, submit paternity information to the state, complete work-related activities, and there is a lifetime maximum of five years of assistance.

That \$250 a month won’t go very far — and housing vouchers, transportation assistance and child care assistance programs (necessary if one is going to work or else be sanctioned) have long waiting lists.

America’s poverty policies do assist the destitute — if they can navigate a complex bureaucratic system of rules, requirements, sanctions and time limits. But the implication that we do not need to worry about the very poor in this country because of the “ample social safety net” is not only misguided, it’s misleading. Aside from adding to the series of missteps the very wealthy Romney has had in relating to middle-class voters, his remarks betray a common misperception that the poor in America are the undeserving beneficiaries of taxpayer largesse, living high on the taxpayers’ dime. The very poor deserve better — from our government, our politicians and our citizens.

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Special session needed to restore budget cuts

Campaign is over, so let's get to work on state's problems

By Rita Haecker

Parents are justifiably concerned about STAAR, the newest version of Texas’ upside-down school accountability system. The new standardized test, which debuts this spring, is but the latest example of Gov. Rick Perry and the legislative majority imposing accountability on everyone in the educational process but themselves.

While loading more “accountability” onto children in the form of STAAR, which is supposed to be a tougher, higher-stakes set of tests than the TAKS it is replacing, the same state officials slashed \$5.4 billion from an already inadequate public education budget. Those cuts put more than test scores at stake by denying students and teachers the resources they need to succeed.

At least 32,000 school employees, including 12,000 teachers, have lost their jobs, according to one estimate. More than 8,200 overcrowded elementary classrooms have more students than the limit set in state law, and schools are being marked for closure. The damage will worsen next year if additional cuts are allowed to take effect.

The Texas State Teachers Association is urging the governor to call a special legislative session and appropriate \$2.5 billion from the rainy day fund to restore the school budget cuts for 2012-13. That would be about half of the district funding obligations and educational grants that were eliminated when the biennial appropriations bill was adopted last spring.

There is enough rainy day money to do this and meet other anticipated state

needs, including a big hole in the Medicaid budget, because the fund is growing and will continue to replenish itself. According to the comptroller, the rainy day fund balance, now about \$6.1 billion, will grow to \$7.3 billion by Aug. 31, 2013, the end of the current budget period. Other experts, including Senate Finance Chairman Steve Ogden, believe the balance will grow even faster, thanks to higher oil prices and increased production.

The comptroller also has predicted that state government will realize \$1.6 billion more revenue during the next two years than expected when the budget was written, thanks to an improving economy. We can’t leave schoolchildren

behind. Tapping the rainy day fund — which is the taxpayers’ money — can save thousands of school jobs, relieve overcrowded classrooms, save neighborhood schools from closure and spare local property tax increases.

More substantial school finance reforms will take longer than a special session. But the rainy day money can stop the bleeding now. Most Texans don’t want more cuts to their public schools. Parents don’t want more teacher layoffs because they know larger classes compromise their children’s learning

environment.

Last year, Perry demanded that the Legislature hoard more than \$7 billion of the rainy day money while making devastating cuts to state services. Maybe he wanted to brag to Republican voters around the country that he had solved Texas’ budgetary problems while keeping money in the bank.

Perry’s presidential campaign is over. It is time for the governor to cut the politics and stop cutting away at our children, their educations and our state’s future.

Haecker is president of the Texas State Teachers Association.

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Most people could use some help in developing a worldview



David Brooks says if you want to defy authority, you should find a well-developed school of thought that you think is on the right path.

A few weeks ago, a 22-year-old man named Jefferson Bethke produced a video called *Why I Hate Religion, but Love Jesus*. The video shows Bethke standing in a courtyard rhyming about the purity of the teachings of Jesus and the hypocrisy of the church. Jesus preaches healing, surrender and love, he argues, but religion is rigid, phony and stale. “Jesus came to abolish religion,” Bethke insists. “Religion puts you in bondage, but Jesus sets you free.”

The video went viral. As of Thursday, it had acquired more than 18 million hits on YouTube. It speaks for many young believers who feel close to God but not to the church. It represents the passionate voice of those who think their institutions lack integrity — not just the religious ones, but the political and corporate ones, too.

Right away, many older theologians began critiquing Bethke’s statements. A blogger named Kevin DeYoung pointed out, for example, that it is biblically inaccurate to say that Jesus hated religion. In fact, Jesus preached a religious doctrine, prescribed rituals and worshipped in a temple.

Bethke responded in a way that was humble, earnest and gracious, and that

generally spoke well of his character. He also basically folded.

“I wanted to say I really appreciate your article man,” Bethke wrote to DeYoung in an online exchange. “It hit me hard. I’ll even be honest and say I agree 100 percent.”

Bethke watched a panel discussion in which some theologians lamented young people’s disdain of organized religion. “Right when I heard that,” he told *The Christian Post*, “it just convicted me, and God used it as one of those Spirit moments where it’s just, ‘Man, he’s right.’ I realized a lot of my views and treatments of the church were not Scripture-based; they were very experience based.”

Bethke’s passionate polemic and subsequent retreat are symptomatic of a lot of the protest cries we hear these days. This seems to be a moment when many people — in religion, economics and politics — are disgusted by current institutions, but then they are vague about what sorts of institutions should replace them.

This seems to be a moment of fervent protest movements that are ultimately vague and ineffectual.

We can all theorize why the intense desire for change has so far produced

relatively few coherent recipes for change. Maybe people today are simply too deferential. Raised to get college recommendations, maybe they lack the oppositional mentality necessary for revolt. Maybe people are too distracted.

My own theory revolves around a single bad idea. For generations people have been told: Think for yourself; come up with your own independent worldview. Unless your name is Nietzsche, that’s probably a bad idea. Very few people have the genius or time to come up with a comprehensive and rigorous worldview.

If you go out there armed only with your own observations and sentiments, you will surely find yourself on very weak ground. You’ll lack the arguments, convictions and the coherent view of reality that you’ll need when challenged by a self-confident opposition. This is more or less what happened to Jefferson Bethke.

The paradox of reform movements is that, if you want to defy authority, you probably shouldn’t think entirely for yourself. You should attach yourself to a counter-tradition and school of thought that has been developed over the centuries and that seems true.

The old leftists had dialectical materialism and the Marxist view of history. Libertarians have Hayek and von Mises. Various spiritual movements have drawn from Transcendentalism, Stoicism, Gnosticism, Thomism, Augustine, Tolstoy, or the Catholic social teaching that inspired Dorothy Day.

These belief systems helped people

envision alternate realities. They helped people explain why the things society values are not the things that should be valued. They gave movements a set of organizing principles. Joining a tradition doesn’t mean suppressing your individuality. Applying an ancient tradition to a new situation is a creative, stimulating and empowering act. Without a tradition, everything is impermanence and flux.

Most professors would like their students to be more rebellious and argumentative. But rebellion without a rigorous alternative vision is just a feeble spasm.

If I could offer advice to a young rebel, it would be to rummage the past for a body of thought that helps you understand and address the shortcomings you see. Give yourself a label.

If your college hasn’t provided you with a good knowledge of countercultural viewpoints — ranging from Thoreau to Maritain — then your college has failed you and you should try to remedy that ignorance.

Effective rebellion isn’t just expressing your personal feelings. It means replacing one set of authorities and institutions with a better set of authorities and institutions.

Authorities and institutions don’t repress the passions of the heart, the way some young people now suppose. They give them focus and a means to turn passion into change.

Brooks is a columnist for The New York Times.