

A Conversation with Tom Luce

Civic Leader Seeks to Bolster Texas Attributes by 2036 Bicentennial

Tom Luce, a Dallas attorney, has been involved in a variety of state, federal and civic projects. He played a key role in Texas education reform in the 1980s and served as an undersecretary for education during the George W. Bush administration. He is currently leading Texas 2036, which aims to create a policy roadmap for Texas as it heads toward its bicentennial.

Q. Many know you for your work on behalf of public education reform in Texas. What did you learn from that effort?

I learned several valuable lessons that continue to influence how I approach policy development. First, I learned the power of bringing data to a policy conversation. Without data, you're just another person with an opinion. But if you can really show people data indicating what is happening, they're more likely to focus on the real problem at hand.

Second, I learned that changing policies that actually change lives takes a long time. If you make a change in the K-12 education system, it's going to be five, 10, 15 years before the students in the system today graduate. This means you have to be thinking long term. If you think about how long it takes to get a road built or a dam constructed or change a health care delivery model, the same holds true for other policy areas as well.

I also learned that the successful adoption of a policy is really only part of the equation; you also have to pay close attention to implementation of that policy, both in agency rulemaking and in enforcement.

In 1983, I wrote the legislation that ultimately passed and banned social

promotion in Texas. But you know what happened? Social promotion continued because the mechanisms for defining what that meant to thousands of educators was not transparent. I also learned the value of focusing on incremental yet persistent progress.

We made a number of important changes in education in the early '80s in Texas. Those changes were sustained and advanced over the next 20 years, and we saw continuous, positive growth in student achievement across five governors from two political parties. Progress didn't happen overnight, but it happened and our state was the better for it.

Q. In your time working to achieve policy reforms in the state, what have been the most significant challenges?

Data have always been a big challenge, both the lack of available, trustworthy data to inform policymaking and a lack of the utilization of available data by both policymakers and state agencies. I would also say keeping a broad coalition active and focused on achieving and sustaining success over time.

There are so many competing priorities, and it is easy once some sort of policy victory or defeat has occurred for people to drift off toward other issues they are

interested in, leaving some core challenges without the broad base of advocates needed to ensure sustained action.

Finally, I would also say that the "tyranny of the urgent" is a big challenge. Legislators in Texas have a lot to do in a short period, and so too often the larger, looming problems that may not be felt yet, but will be here soon, go unaddressed.

Q. What is Texas 2036 and why is it important? Who is behind it?

Texas 2036 is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to ensuring Texas remains the best place to live and work through the state's bicentennial, in 2036 [as the Texas Republic], and beyond. I founded the organization a couple of years ago based upon my belief that we have some serious storm clouds gathering on the horizon but, if we act now, we can adjust course and overcome the challenges.

These are not challenges that can be easily addressed. They are large and systemic and have long timelines, which means there has to be a coordinating force that is working toward long-term, integrated and collaborative solutions; that's the role that Texas 2036 plays.

As I've traveled around the state sharing the data we've collected and the vision for what we want to accomplish, the response has been overwhelmingly positive; people understand we've got challenges up ahead and want to do their part to ensure future generations have the same opportunities they did. I'm grateful that many individuals, foundations and companies in Texas, who we've acknowledged at texas2036.org/support, have generously enabled our work.

Q. What has the Texas 2036 effort told you about what the state could be like in two decades?

Texas is going to continue growing, and our population will likely surpass 40 million residents, with the majority of that growth occurring within the state's Hispanic population. That population growth is going to require substantial job creation—around 6 million jobs—if



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we are going to keep unemployment where it is today.

To put that in context, that is roughly the number of jobs that exist in the Dallas–Fort Worth and Houston metro areas today. Those jobs are going to require a much higher level of education on average than jobs do today.

Approximately 65 percent of jobs that will exist then will require a national training certificate, a two-year degree or a four-year degree, which our state is currently not doing a great job of helping students achieve. Today, about 22 percent of our high school graduates achieve one of these milestones within six years of graduating from a Texas public high school.

Increases in state health care expenditures have outpaced tax base growth and, if left unchecked, could consume as much as 75 percent of the state budget in 2036; this leaves little money for other priorities, like education and infrastructure.

On the infrastructure front, we need to make sure we have the transportation and technical infrastructure to ensure that people can access jobs and that goods and services can be moved around and exported from the state. At our present pace, we aren't going to have the infrastructure to sufficiently support anticipated growth.

Q. What do you see as Texas' greatest strengths? What makes Texas different?

Texas has so many things going for it: the diversity of people and industry; the abundance of natural resources; its strategic location in the middle of the U.S., North America and Central/South

America and large coastline accessible for international trade; and tremendous business and philanthropic leadership. But I think the state's greatest asset is really the spirit of my fellow Texans.

Back in 1982, then-Gov. [William P.] Clements established the Texas 2000 Commission, which focused on ensuring the success of the state in the year 2000. If you go back and look at the priorities the commission members set, they were extremely successful in achieving them, and all of us in Texas today greatly benefited from their work.

In the preface of their report, they said, "Rather than yield the future to a course of events imposed from outside, we are confident that Texans will choose to rely on a great, longstanding asset: the determination to shape their own destinies." I think that sums up well who we are as Texans and why I am confident that we'll be able to address the challenges before us.

Q. With the biennial session of the Legislature under way, what advice can you offer lawmakers?

This is a very big state with many needs and not much time during the legislative session to address them. On day one, lawmakers face the "tyranny of the urgent," which often, though not always, is focused on issues that are not necessarily the most important for the long-term growth and health of our state. That said, I hope to see more conversations in Austin that are based on quality data.

The last thing I'd encourage our representatives in Austin to do is to really think about the long term. Be assertive

in addressing future issues now but also evaluate success not on a two- or four-year cycle but over time and hold state agencies accountable for the implementation of policy over time.

Q. As one of Texas' senior statesmen, what do you hope your legacy will be?

That's one of the nicest ways someone has ever called me old. But, seriously, I hope that my seven grandsons have children (sooner rather than later and at least one girl) who get to grow up in Texas and have the same opportunities for a quality education and an affordable cost of living and to begin a career, launch a business and start a family like I did in my early 20s.

That's really the driving force behind Texas 2036—ensuring the prosperity and quality of life of this great state for the generations to come. Texas has a unique and incredible legacy since its founding nearly 200 years ago, and I want to focus on what we want Texas to be like for its third century.