

Board shifts view against vouchers

More conservative education panel pulls prior suggestion to legislators

By Edward McKinley
AUSTIN BUREAU

scind its recommendation from late last year that the Legislature deny any measures to provide public funding for private schools.

AUSTIN — The State Board of Education has changed course on school vouchers, voting to re-

The vote Thursday re-

presents how voucher proponents have the wind at their back, both in Texas and nationally. A universal voucher program was passed last year in Arizona, and similar policies are being pursued across the country, with Iowa most recently signing a voucher program in-

to law. And Gov. Greg Abbott announced in a speech this week that he would support vouchers “for every child in the state of Texas.”

The State Board of Education is made up of 15 independently elected members from around the state. It sets policies for

public school textbooks and curricula, gives approval to charter school applicants and manages the state’s investment fund for public schools.

In November, the Republican majority on the board approved legislative recommendations that included an item calling on

lawmakers “to reject all attempts to divert public dollars away from public schools in the form of vouchers, an education savings account, taxpayer savings grants, tuition-tax credits, a business franchise tax credit or an insurance premium tax

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New twists to nature sprout in Botanic Garden



Photos by Raquel Natalicchio/Staff photographer

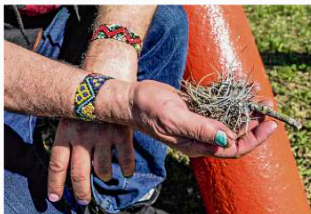
“Intertwined: Exploring Nature’s Networks” features Steve Tobin’s sculptures throughout the Houston Botanic Garden.

Artist’s sculptures, one of them honoring Biles, an exploration of nature

By Andrew Dansby
STAFF WRITER

Steve Tobin twists off a handful of Spanish moss from an oak tree and begins fiddling with it. Without looking at this raw material, he shapes the moss into a nest in seconds. A small rock plays the part of an egg. Tobin places the nest under another tree at the Houston Botanic Garden. He has been doing this throughout the morning, depositing little treasures around the grounds for visitors to discover.

“The place is so well mani-



Steve Tobin holds a nest at the exhibit made from natural materials. A pebble can be the egg inside it.

cured, it can be hard to find an orange rock,” he says. A few of the nests hold little shining eggs he made from polished steel.

This series of intimate actions and little creations contrasts with what occurred a few days earlier when eight tractor-trailers rolled up to the Botanic Garden. The trucks delivered “Intertwined: Exploring Nature’s Networks,” an exhibition of a dozen of Tobin’s sculptures that are placed throughout the grounds. Some of his pieces require a little hunt. “Head in the

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Suicide hotline sees calls take off

The surge reveals a demand for help following pandemic

By Anna Bauman
STAFF WRITER

Calls to the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline have surged in Texas and the United States since its launch last summer, highlighting the demand for mental health services in the wake of the pandemic and the related workforce challenges.

Staff at four call centers in Texas answered 9,478 calls in December, a significant increase from 5,043 calls in the same month in 2021, said Jennifer Battle, vice president for community access and engagement at The Harris Center in Houston.

The Harris Center handled more than half of those calls, Battle said, with trained crisis counselors working around the clock to pick up the ringing phones.

The nation has seen climbing call volumes over the last six months after transitioning from the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, a 1-800 number, to a shorter, more memorable three-digit code. People experiencing thoughts of suicide, a mental health or substance use crisis, or other emotional distress can call, text or chat online 24/7 with a trained crisis counselor.

Contributing to the soaring call volume is ease of access, increased awareness from media and social media campaigns, investments by states and federal agencies to fund and build the crisis care network, and the significant mental health impacts from the pandemic, Battle said. Calling the crisis lifeline should be similar to calling 911 or 211 for other services, she said.

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EXHIBIT

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Clouds" — a series of cloudlike shapes made from hammered steel — is nestled among some brown grasses that in a few weeks will spring back to life and partially obscure his work.

There's no hiding "Steelroots," a tall collection of tendrils that suggests both a tree's underworld and the human circulatory system. It rises 30 feet from the ground, resplendent in red.

"I find the audience in gardens like these is predisposed to the message in my work," he says. "Which is worshipping and appreciating nature."

He loves the way a space like the Botanic Gardens offers a variety of settings. And because his work will be there into the middle of August, those settings will undergo regular transformation as winter (such that it is) yields to spring (such that it is) and then summer.

"I like these spaces and the changing environments," he says. "As opposed to the formality of art museums."

Word play

Coursing through the garden takes visitors past "Syntax," a Death Star-like orb whose surface is all metal letters. Tobin invested 2,000 hours in the piece.

His work bears a playfulness but also ample gravity. "Romeo and Juliet" embodies this duality: Two root systems from trees upended in a flood reach out toward one another. Tobin cast the roots in bronze. The spell cast by the piece is both heartening and heartbreaking. "Romeo and Juliet" bears echoes of "Trinity Root" — a renowned piece by Tobin that was cast from a sycamore tree that shielded St. Paul's Chapel in New York City from debris falling down on 9/11.

In another part of the garden, Tobin has dropped large hammered steel eggs into tornado-like cones made from branches. The variety of the pieces throughout the garden is part of its attraction, particularly because the Botanic Garden itself boasts such an array of plant life. "I take pride in the fact that it looks like a group show," Tobin says.

A nod to Simone Biles

A Philadelphia native, Tobin operates from his studio and foundry north of the city. He spent time in Houston last year surveying the garden. He was back last month with his teenage son in tow for the installation. In addition to art, they attempted to hit as many barbe-



Photos by Raquel Natalicchio/Staff photographer

"Intertwined: Exploring Nature's Network" features a dozen of Steve Tobin's sculptures throughout the Houston Botanic Garden.



Tobin is a Philadelphia native who operates from his studio and foundry north of the city.

cue places as possible while here.

His interest in some muddy middle space between nature, science and mankind lends his work a universal resonance, with little elements that also offer regional connections.

"Steelroots," for instance, was made from repurposed oil

pipes, a nod to something he says "is near and dear to the Houston community."

A more recent endeavor is his "Twistys." Made from repurposed steel pipes, these yellow squiggly figures spring joyfully from a flat field at the garden. They're meant to be interactive as they rotate from a base



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sunk a foot into the ground.

The "Twistys" were inspired by Asian calligraphy but named to honor Houston-based gymnast Simone Biles, whose struggles with disorientation during the Olympic Games in 2021 pulled gymnastics terminology into mainstream usage.

"Her discussion, it was such an elegant and honorable communication about an issue she struggled with," Tobin says. "She inspired a lot of people, like my daughter, to frankly discuss your psychological

state of mind."

As with much of Tobin's work, the "Twistys" are full of potential and sometimes conflicted meaning.

"In a way, it's bigger than gymnastics," he says. "It's about disorientation in the moment."

"But they're also supposed to be free-flowing, elegant and beautiful. The hope is to have layers of meaning, so it can be accessed by everybody in a community."

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