



Texas Association of Community Schools

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TACS LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

This week's update will take a more philosophical look at the session. The education committees have considered close to 100 bills this week, and it seems like a good time to look at the big picture. We are one month from the end of the 85th Texas Legislative Session. May 29th can't come too soon. In preparing a legislative update that I presented to Region 12 earlier this week, I reflected on some key drivers of the session. I explained that I try to look at the session as a soap opera, with our elected leaders as characters in the show. It helps me stomach some of the behavior and decisions I witness, and it keeps me sane. (Well, almost.)

The Governor, Lieutenant Governor, and Speaker each outlined their priorities for the session early in the year. Governor Abbott and Lieutenant Governor Patrick both had school choice and cracking down on inappropriate teacher-student relationships among their top issues. They both also listed several extremely controversial political issues. However, what they didn't mention tells as much as what they did identify as top priorities. In contrast, Speaker Straus, listed three issues, all of which focus on improving the lives of children: investing in the state's mental health system, fixing the "broken" school finance system, and reforming the embattled child welfare system. It is not surprising then that the House has focused its efforts on ways to improve and increase funding for public schools. HB 21 passed out of the house last week with an amendment that would bar the use of public funds for private schools. The bill adds \$1.8 billion dollars to public education in addition to funding enrollment growth. The house has also made a point of taking back more of the responsibility of funding public schools at the state level, rather than continuing to increase the percentage forced onto the backs of local taxpayers. The Senate budget does just the opposite. Not only do they not increase funding beyond enrollment growth, but they let the local property taxpayers fill the bucket first and then they pay the rest. Where the budget ends up and how it is funded, will be determined by the recently appointed members of the budget (SB 1) conference committee, but it will reflect priorities of the people we have elected to represent us. Yes, we have chosen each of the people that is making decisions about our public schools and other issues about how our society is run.

In each of the key areas so important to the health and strength of the public education system, there are bills that offer contrasting views of how to improve education and, more fundamentally, what government is designed to do. School finance, accountability, assessment, and vouchers are just some of the issues that deserve thoughtful consideration and legislation to support the state's responsibility articulated in Article 7 of the Texas Constitution. "A general diffusion of knowledge being essential to the preservation of the liberties and rights of the people, it shall be the duty of the Legislature of the State to establish and make suitable provision for the support and maintenance of an efficient system of public free schools."

Lucky for us, we get to pick the people who make the vital decisions that shape and support the 5.3 million children in our public schools. This session, we have seen the Speaker encourage members to "vote your district," even on issues about which he may have a differing personal opinion or conviction. In the Senate, however, we have seen countless examples of Senators voting to please the Lieutenant Governor (instead of their constituents) in order to keep "a seat at the table." Unfortunately, those votes aren't good for the children relying on the legislators and the state to provide them with their one shot at a

great education.

I attended a post mortem on the 84th Legislative Session almost two years ago, and the speaker pointed out that Texas has one of the lowest voter turnout rates in the country. Just over half of Texans voted in the 2016 election, and less than 25% voted in the primary election. Non-presidential election years yield even lower results, and 90% of state and local elections in Texas are determined in the primaries. Based on Secretary of State data, less than 10% of registered voters (and just over 7% of the voting aged population) voted in the 2014 Republican Primary. That same year, 4% of registered voters and less than 3% of the voting aged population voted in the Democratic primary. That means that about 10% of eligible voters chose the leaders who are making extremely important decisions about our children, their education, and our state.

This was one of the reasons TACS decided to create the **Texas Educators Vote** project. We realized that it would be easier to have great education policies put in place if we had leaders who value and support our children and their education. The remarkably small number of Texans who voted in the 2014 Republican primary runoff elections, that determined many of today's Texas leaders, is roughly equal to the number of people working in Texas public schools today, somewhere around 700,000. Texas has about 19 million eligible voters. Rest assured, we will tell you more about this program and help you create a culture of voting in your districts after the session.

The legislators who were brave enough to buck the Lieutenant Governor and vote their district (Senators Seliger and Nichols), and the over 100 house members who voted to restrict public funding from non-public schools will be in grave danger next election. Privatizers, or "education reform" organizations and wealthy donors are already looking for opponents and they are ready to fund them handsomely to defeat the resistance to vouchers in Texas. Public educators aren't known for their deep pockets, but we do have the power of the vote. Let's awaken the sleeping giant and elect representatives at all levels of government who will support our children and vote to support their constituents, not to protect their "seat at the table."

Thanks for all of your hard work running our districts and supporting the over 5.3 million students in Texas public schools. Thirty-one days left until Sine Dai on May 29th!

Enjoy your weekend!

Laura Yeager
TACS Governmental Affairs