



## Texas Association of Community Schools

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### TACS Legislative Update

Things are moving pretty quickly around here these days. Before we could hit send on last week's legislative update, there was more news to report. Today, we will share some highlights from late last week and the earlier part of this week!

On Thursday, January 12th, Senator Kel Seliger and Representative Dan Huberty had a joint press conference announcing companion bills that would make Individual Graduation Committees (IGCs) permanent. Senate Bill 149, that passed last session, created IGCs for students who failed one or two EOCs, but who had met every other requirement for graduation. That bill is set to expire September 1, 2017 and these new bills (SB 463 and HB 966) would eliminate the sunset provision and make IGCs a permanent option for this small subset of students in our schools. Currently, only 13 states still have passing state exams as a requirement for graduation and almost all of those have some sort of "escape clause" similar to what the IGCs offer for students. Few oppose the continuation of IGCs, but those that do (Bill Hammond and friends) are vocal and will likely force a fight to keep these alive. Thanks to Senator Seliger and Representative Huberty for filing these bills.

On Friday, I attended a hearing at TEA about new rules they had published regarding STAAR passing standards and proposed labels for the various levels. Levels TEA Proposed:

*Did Not Meet Grade Level: below 2015-16 pass standard*

*Approaches Grade Level: scored at or above 2015-16 pass standard*

*Meets Grade Level: scored at or above final level 2 or 2021-22 pass standard*

*Masters Grade Level: scored at final level 3 pass standard*

While many of the dozen educators, parents, and others who testified appreciated the agency moving to set standards, there was uniform opposition to the labels proposed for those passing levels. Of particular concern was the term "approaching grade level" which would be given to students who "passed" at the 2015-16 rate up to those who just missed passing at the 2022 pass rate. The predominant argument was that it is both confusing and misleading to say that a student passed the exam, but that they are "approaching grade level." If the student passes the exam, they should be told that they "met standards." Various options were proposed including "met standards" "satisfactory", "meets minimum standards", "met grade level", and others. Dr. Penny Schwinn, Deputy Commissioner for Academics oversaw the hearing and said that she would meet with the Commissioner to discuss the testimony from the hearing and report back on their final determinations.

Early this week, the Senate and House filed wildly divergent budget proposals, reflecting their different priorities. Senator Jane Nelson, who has been reappointed as Senate Finance Chairwoman by Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick, filed the Senate budget. Her budget comes in even below the figures projected to be available by Texas Comptroller Glenn Hagar last week. The Senate proposal includes cuts in health and human services, public education, and higher education. The senate cuts in public education are estimated at \$1.5 billion. While the Senate budget accounts for funding population growth in schools, it does so using local property taxes, rather than funds coming directly from the state budget.

The House, in contrast, proposed a budget that is higher than that proposed by the Senate, and notably higher than Hagar's projections. The House budget supports enrollment growth, as well as an additional \$1.5 billion that could only be spent if the legislature reforms the school finance system. The House budget also includes additional spending on Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program. The House is proposing to pay for these programs through cuts, deferrals, and possibly dipping into the Rainy Day Fund, which is estimated at over \$10 billion. (Perhaps this is the rainy day we have been saving for.) In a press release, Speaker Straus said, "The initial 2018-19 budget puts additional resources into public education, child protection, and mental health while increasing state spending by less than 1 percent."

Agreeing on the budget is the only thing the Texas legislature is required to do. If past sessions are any guide, they will reach this consensus on the final day of session, after much back and forth on priorities and principles.

Most of you were probably focused on your districts Tuesday evening while I sat at my computer watching the confirmation hearing of Betsy DeVoss, the nominee for U.S. Secretary of Education. It was dreadful. Mrs. DeVoss is a Michigan billionaire who has worked to privatize public education in her home state. The hearing showed that she is inexperienced, unsupportive of public education, and a tireless advocate for "choice" of all kinds. While it is unclear how much damage she can do from the federal level, she is not a friend of public education. She did not attend public schools, send her kids to public schools, work at a public school, or ever engage with public schools. Among the things the hearing showed were her lack of knowledge and support for protections for special needs students, her lack of understanding about proficiency versus growth, and her lack of commitment to having any institution receiving taxpayer funds meet the same accountability standards as traditional public schools. Many say she is one of the most dangerous appointments to the new administration's cabinet as she has the potential to undermine a major tenet of American democracy: public education.

Late Wednesday, Lieutenant Governor Patrick released Senate committee lists for the 85th legislative session. Senators Kolkhorst, Rodriguez, and Garcia are no longer on the Senate Education Committee. The new members who will replace them are Senators Hall, Hughes, and Uresti. The complete list is as follows:

Senate Education Committee:

Larry Taylor – Chair

Eddie Lucio – Vice Chair

Paul Bettencourt

Donna Campbell

Bob Hall

Don Huffines

Bryan Hughes

Kel Seliger

Van Taylor

Carlos Uresti

Royce West

The House has not yet released a list of committee members.

Let's end on a cheerful note. It was made public this week that H-E-B CEO Charles Butt pledged \$100 million to create a non-profit that will work with school districts. Mr. Butt has been a tireless supporter of Texas public schools and a thorn in the side of "reformers" who seek to privatize public education and earn a profit using taxpayer funds that are intended for public schools. The new nonprofit is named the Holdsworth Center after Mr. Butt's mother who was an educator and a philanthropist. The organization will offer development programs for superintendents, principals, and districts overall. We will share more information on the organization and how you can apply to participate as it becomes available.

All of this and session has barely begun! Stay tuned for next week's TACS weekly legislative update.

Regards and thanks for reading,

Laura Yeager

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