



Texas Association of Community Schools

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TACS LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

I am sad, disappointed, and above all, I am angry. Chairman Dan Huberty is disappointed, and the 5.4 million students in Texas public schools, their parents, the taxpayers who fund the schools, and the 700,000 Texans working in Texas public schools should be angry too. The Texas Senate shortchanged our kids again and we should be outraged all the way to the voting booth.

On Tuesday night, the House of Representatives knuckled under and accepted the Senate's committee substitute of HB 21, which originally was a school finance bill. In the end, it helps retired teachers with health insurance costs, helps many ASATR districts, and will help a small number of students with disabilities get some extra resources. It also will eliminate the small school penalty. Still, it is nothing compared to what the House bill would have done.

When HB 21 was voted out of the House August 7th, 2017 (130-13) it would have infused \$1.8 billion into the public education system, including a \$210 per WADA increase to the basic allotment that would help just about every student in the state. It also had a good chunk of money to help districts facing hardships from the expiration of ASATR, a new dyslexia weight, a slightly increased weight for bilingual education, increased CTE funding, and more. The Senate version of HB 21 introduced last Friday, August 11th, slashed \$1.5 billion from the bill, had ZERO increase in the basic allotment, no increased weights, and no other systemic changes. The Senate's HB 21 provides \$311 million, including \$150 million for ASATR hardship grants over the next two years, \$41 million to slowly phase out the small school penalty, \$60 million for charter facilities funding, \$60 million for traditional public schools' facilities funding via the EDA, and \$40 million for two two-year grant programs for dyslexic and autistic children. The Senate craftily threw in the \$212 million for retired teachers so the House couldn't easily say no to this pittance of a bill. By countering with this bill, the Senate, Lieutenant Governor, and Governor showed loud and clear that they do not support public education and that they do not intend to fund it. Additionally, instead of using money from the bulging "Rainy Day Fund," the Senate chose to take money from already cash-strapped Medicaid programs serving our poorest children.

When HB 21 was finally heard on the Senate floor late on Sunday night (after the Senate had pushed the proverbial snooze alarm countless times during the weekend), many Democratic senators proposed updating the weights for educating bilingual students, and increasing the basic allotment that would grow the pie for all students and districts. Chairman Taylor replied repeatedly that the system is broken and that he doesn't want to add money he can't take away. He explained that the Senate sees HB 21 as a 2-year bridge until their "commission" can come up with a new way to approach school finance. Senators Van Taylor, Huffines, Hall, and others spent much of the evening praising efficiency and competition, charter schools, home schools, and private schools. They said that they want to see which programs are working and then just fund those rather than funding all.

I am extremely grateful to Chairman Huberty, the House Public Education Committee, and above all to Speaker Straus for focusing on what is important—investing in and educating our children. While 95% of Texas kids go to underfunded and micromanaged public schools, the state has continued to reduce its percentage contribution to public education year after year and forced a growing tax burden on local taxpayers while not even spending those funds for education. The House acknowledged this reality and

grappled with real solutions.

I was hopeful on Saturday when Rep. Phil King, the House sponsor of the commission on public school finance bill, allowed a number of excellent amendments that would guide the commission to study the important questions like how much should we be paying to educate our kids? How much more does it cost to educate students with various needs? Amendments also broadened the list of who would serve on the commission including additional educators, and it would have required the commission to hold open meetings. Unfortunately, since the Senate rolled SB 16, Chairman Taylor's public education finance commission bill into HB 21, it reverts to the Senate version that requires none of the good things listed above.

Wednesday morning, Governor Abbott was on a radio program where he explained that the school finance commission will act like an ISD sunset commission. As one could predict based on Chairman Taylor's comments, they see the commission not as a way to improve how we fund our schools, but as a chance to determine if we should even have public schools as we know them or if there is a more "efficient" and "effective" way to deliver education at a lower cost.

In my humble opinion, our kids are not widgets and their education is not where we should be scrimping. The view that education is a business and that we should have competition, winners, and losers, doesn't make sense in the provision of a common good. If that is how we choose to approach education, then our democracy is headed to a much faster demise than I imagined.

There has been an intentional creation of a scarcity mindset by leaders who don't support public education, who prefer to see it as a business, and maybe even have some friends who will profit off this growing industry. By cutting funding and increasing the hoops through which public schools must jump, would-be education allies are forced to fight against each other for limited resources. Representative Senfronia Thompson hit on this when she described what was wrong with the Senate's version of HB 21. "In this bill, they (the Senate) are pitting children against children, school districts against school districts, and teachers against children." For years, they have pitted rural against urban, poor against rich, parents against districts, and teachers against kids by limiting vital resources. This is how you cut the knees off your opponents. Force them to fight amongst themselves while you make off with the goodies.

I have a friend who grew up extremely poor. She had many siblings and they were always hungry. One of her brothers died unexpectedly and the family was heartbroken. However, with one fewer person at the dinner table, she sometimes got to eat a whole egg, instead of just part of one. Her story stayed with me and reminds me of what our leaders are doing to our public schools. By making us all fight for every last resource, we get distracted from our common goal of electing leaders who will invest in our students, our public schools, and the future of the great state of Texas.

The fact that educators are getting organized, rallying, and talking about voting out legislators and statewide leaders who are anti-public ed, spurred the Senate to add some money for retired teachers. (It also got bills on the call aimed at keeping teachers from organizing.) What it didn't get us was more money for all the kids the schools. This is the time for the education community to come together, to register and to vote for leaders who will support public education and the children who are our future.

Many thanks for your continued dedication to serving all children and being on the front lines with them no matter what odds you face and what limited resources you are given.

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