



TSTA NEWS

TEXAS STATE TEACHERS ASSOCIATION

316 W. 12th St., Austin, TX 78701 • 877-ASK-TSTA • Fax 512-469-0766

COMMENTARY

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Contact: Joe Bean
512-476-5355, ext. 1233; joebean@tsta.org

LAWMAKERS SHOULD MAKE PUBLIC SCHOOLS HIGH PRIORITY

By Rita C. Haecker

New allies of public education won election to both the Texas House of Representatives and the Texas Senate in this year's historic election, giving us more reason to believe that the 81st Legislature will make our public schools a high priority.

The way Texas funds our public schools and the way the state measures performance have punished them, their students and their employees for too long. Instead of truly supporting our schools, the state has crippled them in the name of tax relief and accountability. We must change these systems so we can effectively educate all the current and future students in our state.

We need a new system of funding public schools that is sufficient to meet the needs of the 21st century and flexible enough to keep pace with the many changes our state is experiencing. House Bill 1, which the 79th Legislature passed in special session in 2006, was more about cutting property taxes and re-electing a governor than it was about meeting the long-term needs of Texas public schools and their students.

HB 1 freezes state funding at 2006 levels, with very few exceptions. As a result, more than 200 of the state's 1,031 school districts have sought voter approval for increased tax rates to pay for higher expenses for supplies and operations and to fund employee salary hikes.

Many of the districts that have won voter approval of higher tax rates have maxed out at the state-imposed cap. They cannot later go back to voters for more money to fund ever-increasing operating expenses. But not all of the districts seeking voter approval have won it, which has severely strained their budgets. Other districts have temporarily staved off what are surely inevitable tax rate elections by draining reserve funds to risky low levels.

This convoluted, inadequate system is not an appropriate way to fund the most important responsibility the Texas Constitution assigns state government.

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We also need a new accountability system that focuses on overall growth in student performance; that nurtures, rather than punishes, both students and educators; that encourages success rather than instills fear.

For it to provide meaningful and accurate measurements of performance, an accountability system has to:

- Be diagnostic, not punitive.
- Be compatible with the federal accountability system.
- Measure growth.
- Evaluate necessary skills rather than irrelevant content.
- Have local control rather than remote control.

Accountability is about measurement only, not achievement. Changing the Texas accountability model must begin with this premise. Otherwise, change is likely to repeat the mistakes and shortcomings of the seriously flawed system it will replace. That would be bad for the students, teachers and, most important, future of Texas.

And we need a Teacher Retirement System that is solvent for the long term, one that ensures retired educators will have the means to live in the dignity they deserve and that pledges the same to current educators when they retire.

TRS and its holdings have experienced serious turmoil over the past year. The dramatic decline in the stock market severely hit the TRS portfolio, which dropped below \$90 billion in fall 2008.

The push by some state officials to use retirement funds, including TRS, to invest in state infrastructure projects such as toll roads could put the system's holdings at even greater risk. And the long-term wisdom of TRS's recent decisions to invest in alternative assets and hedge funds is impossible to predict now. We do not yet know whether these will prove to be more productive or more risky investments.

The 80th Legislature in 2007 raised the state contribution to TRS to 6.58 percent, which was a modest increase. Now, Gov. Rick Perry has directed TRS to adopt its budget requests for the next two years based on the lower rate of 6.4 percent. Coupled with the stock market decline, that would virtually guarantee no cost-of-living increase for retired educators.

The 81st Legislature needs to boost the state's contribution to TRS so retiree pensions can keep pace with inflation. TRS did issue a "13th check," a one-time bonus for retirees, at the end of 2007. It was the first benefit increase since 2001. But rare one-time bonuses are no substitute for regularly scheduled cost-of-living increases.

Failing to properly fund the Teacher Retirement System so it can provide regularly scheduled cost-of-living increases will hurt current retirees and also help drive younger teachers out of Texas classrooms into more lucrative employment.

Texas already has 50,000 classrooms staffed by teachers who are not appropriately certified. Properly funding public school operations and the Teacher Retirement System would go a long way toward increasing the number of well-qualified and appropriately certified teachers in Texas classrooms.

The needs of our public schools and our students are diverse, challenging and rapidly changing. The members

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of the 81st Legislature should do justice to those needs, not postpone real, much-needed reform. Nothing less than the future of Texas depends on lawmakers addressing these issues both soon and properly.

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Rita C. Haecker is the president of the 65,000-member Texas State Teachers Association, which is affiliated with the 3.2 million-member National Education Association. Write to her at TSTA, 316 W. 12th Street, Austin, Texas 78701.

A high-resolution photograph of President Haecker is online at <http://www.tsta.org/Pressroom/current/images/RITA-HAECKER.jpg>.

TSTA's Legislative Program for the 81st Legislature is online at http://www.tsta.org/legislative/update/Legislative_program_2009.pdf.