

TSTA Legislative Program

Challenges Ahead

The greatest challenge facing public education in Texas is the need for the state to enact a school finance plan that will provide our public schools the resources necessary to give every child the opportunity to be prepared for college, the job market and life in the 21st Century. HB 1 from the 79th Third Called Session did little if nothing to fix school financing problems in Texas, and now districts across the state will be conducting roll back elections to increase property taxes to help finance local needs.

TSTA and the public agree that legislators must make a genuine, long-term commitment to meet the educational needs of the children who are the future of our state.

In fact, in January of 2007, TSTA conducted a poll of Texas voters which showed bipartisan agreement that the top priority of Texans is still Education at 33% versus Property Tax Cuts which received one of the lowest priorities at 10%. Further, an overwhelmingly 81% stated that the 2006 special session did not solve school funding issue with 67% saying school funding should be increased and that teacher pay falls short and should be increased. Finally, by a 57% - 34% margin, voters prefer a pay raise for all teachers instead of "incentive" pay hikes for a few based on test scores.

In January 2009 the fiscal facts of life are that many districts are eliminating programs, reducing expenditures for extracurricular activities, dipping into reserve funds and laying off staff just to meet their current operating budget. Districts cannot provide the quality education program our students deserve on 2006 funding levels.

Charting a Course for Success and Progress

Between 1984 and 2005, the Legislature restructured schools and revamped educational programs in a bipartisan manner. According to Texas Education Agency (TEA) reports, these changes indicate the most dramatic gains in student performance have been realized by minority and economically disadvantaged students.

In looking at the most recent reports on standardized test scores, it is important to remember that the new Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills test is more difficult than its predecessors; that students are being tested on more subjects and in greater depth, and that there will be a more rigorous graduation standard. This is all about to change with the new End of Course exams enacted by the 80th Legislative Session. An entirely new high stakes testing scheme is on the horizon in 2011, and it cannot be determined at this point in time how these new exams will affect students or teachers.

One thing is for certain, outside the home teachers play the most critical role in our children's education. With higher standards in place, Texas must have the best prepared teaching force in the history of the state to enable our schools and students to succeed. We face this challenge with a devastating shortage of appropriately certified teachers in Texas public school classrooms. According to the State Board for Educator Certification (SBEC), during the last school year over 50,000 teachers were assigned to teach classes they had not been certified to teach.

When they address school finance, legislators must remember that the basics are taught in the classroom, and that the most basic issue in education is investing the resources necessary to make sure all public school students have the appropriately certified teachers they deserve.

The TSTA Legislative Agenda

1. Ending the Teacher Shortage

According to the NEA average teacher salary rankings for 2006-07, Texas is ranked 30th in the nation. A significant across-the-board pass-through pay raise is needed to get Texas closer to the national average; and attempts to pit teachers against each other through merit or “incentive pay” schemes are not a valid alternative to an across-the-board state pay raise. The only way to get qualified and trained individuals in the classroom is to pay a living wage, not conditioned on high stakes testing or value added improvement schemes.

To end the massive shortage of appropriately certified teachers in Texas classrooms, TSTA supports:

- 1.1** Legislation to give teachers significant across-the-board pay raises that will be passed through directly to teachers to help recruit and retain appropriately certified teachers in every classroom.
- 1.2** Legislation that requires high standards for teacher certification and provides prospective teachers with a better understanding of how to teach, including requiring practical experience before entering the classroom. Texas should financially reward those individuals who obtain National Board Certification and voluntarily hold themselves to much higher standards.
- 1.3** Legislation that provides mentors for new teachers. Mentors should be trained, compensated, and provided release time to work with new teachers. According to SBEC data, one-third of new teachers quit after the first year and 50% leave by the fifth year. Data from the Texas Beginning Educator Support System (TxBESS) and similar projects shows that an effective mentoring program can reduce first year attrition rates to less than 10 percent.
- 1.4** Legislation to protect and enhance Teacher Retirement System’s defined benefit program. All educational employees should be able to make plans for their retirement without worrying about the Legislature changing or reducing benefits. Retired educational employees deserve a system that provides annual cost of living adjustments and health insurance they can afford.

TSTA will oppose:

- 1.5** Legislation that would create incentive or merit pay programs based on a competitive model using standardized test scores. There is no way to attribute a student’s test performance to the performance of an individual teacher in a given year at a certain campus.
- 1.6** Legislation that would move the Teacher Retirement System toward a defined contribution system.

2. Creating a Positive Work Environment for Educational Employees and Students

The working environment provided to educational employees is also a learning environment for our students. Educational employees consistently list working conditions as a major reason for leaving the profession. Furthermore, TSTA believes that all educational employees deserve reasonable working conditions, salaries, and benefits.

In order to provide a positive working environment for educational employees and students in Texas, TSTA will support:

- 2.1** Legislation that provides educational employees with a meaningful voice in the important decisions that relate to their working conditions and students’ learning environment. To that end,

TSTA supports strengthening site-based decision making at the campus level, mandating consultation at the district level, permitting collective bargaining in individual school districts after a local option vote, and repealing the prohibition against collective bargaining in order to give educational employees a necessary and critical role in the decision making process.

- 2.2 Legislation mandating a reduction in paperwork, limiting the number of meetings, and providing time for collaboration and professional learning. Giving teachers adequate preparation time is essential to successful teaching and learning. Students benefit when teachers have more time to teach. Teachers need less paperwork, fewer meetings, and more time to plan and collaborate. Numerous studies have shown that working conditions are a primary factor in teacher attrition.
- 2.3 Legislation to maintain safe and orderly schools. Educational employees must have the authority to remove disruptive students and maintain discipline. Discipline must be dealt with in a uniform and effective manner. Student violence directed at staff or students must be dealt with swiftly and those students should be immediately removed to an appropriate alternative learning environment.
- 2.4 Legislation that restores the \$500 health insurance stipend that was lost in the 2003 legislative session and provides health insurance benefits for all educational employees, comparable to those provided state and higher education employees. The state and district insurance plans should provide appropriate disclosures and notices of what benefits are covered and what fees and deductibles employees may be obligated to pay.
- 2.5 Legislation that provides all public school employees with a living wage, including annual cost of living adjustments.
- 2.6 Legislation to provide all employees with employment contracts and strong due process provisions regarding contractual, statutory, and constitutional rights.

TSTA will oppose:

- 2.7 Legislation designed to restrict the ability of TSTA to organize and provide services to educational employees.
- 2.8 Legislation that would make current state standards subject to “home rule” or otherwise allow school districts to be exempt from or to roll back the current standards that protect the quality learning environment for students. Attempts to erode state standards for educational quality, in the name of “cost saving,” “local control” or “eliminating unfunded mandates,” could mean the end of 22-1 class size limits, the salary schedule, and other benefits necessary to provide teachers and students a productive educational environment.

3. Increased Support for Public Education

Our public schools have made tremendous progress over the last decade. Today, we are challenged to continue that progress and build on our successes as changes are made in our school finance system. Texas cannot stand still or turn away from successful, proven programs in the name of so-called “reforms” that would shortchange our schools and set up our students for failure. Moving forward requires vision and the will to commit the necessary resources to provide a quality public education for all students.

In 2005-06, Texas dropped to and remains 42nd in the nation in per pupil expenditures for instruction, and even in light of this dismal showing, the Texas Legislature failed to add any new money to the education budget for the 2007-08 fiscal year. And now that districts are operating at a much lower tax rate, with more and more reliance on bond elections and roll back elections to add new money to the system, we

have reached critical capacity. The Legislature will be forced to come up with another way to finance our public school system.

In order to improve the public schools in Texas, TSTA will support:

- 3.1** Legislation that creates a long term, equitable school finance solution that generates substantial new revenue for public education, including sufficient revenue to pay for a substantial across-the-board teacher pay raise. A revised tax system must have the capacity to generate sufficient additional revenue in the future as our student population increases and additional funding needs arise.

TSTA will oppose:

- 3.2** Legislation that would shift public tax dollars to private entities. Vouchers would take the funding we have for public schools and give it to students to attend private, religious schools that are exempt from our accountability system. TSTA believes we should use our state resources to offer every student a quality public education.
- 3.3** Legislation that turns management of public schools over to for-profit companies. Experience has shown that privatization is a failed approach that provides an inferior education to our students.
- 3.4** Legislation that would establish initiative and referendum. In states where initiative and referendum are legal, the procedures have been used to by-pass the legislative process, undermine the decisions of elected representatives and to limit funding for public education. TSTA supports the system of representative government that allows us to affect change through the electoral process.

4. Enhancing our Public School System

The public schools in Texas have dramatically improved over the last decade. Evidence of improvement in the Texas public schools includes:

- Reading Scores Are Up
- Writing Scores Are Among the Nation's Best
- Math Scores Are Up
- More Public Schools than Private Schools Offer AP
- Among the Best in the Nation in Students Taking Advanced Math Courses
- Among the Best Gains in the Nation in Students Going to College
- Schools Are Safe

Educators know that even with all we have accomplished there is still room for improvement in the public schools in Texas. In particular, schools that have high populations of low socioeconomic students have test scores that lag behind the rest of the state and have dropout numbers that are unacceptable.

In order to improve the public schools in Texas, TSTA will support:

- 4.1** Legislation that establishes and fully funds a full-day kindergarten program. Research indicates that the initiation of high-quality early care and education programs leads to a reduction in special education placement.
- 4.2** Legislation reducing class size across grade levels. Both the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the National Association of Elementary School Principals recommend a student-teacher ratio of 15:1 – a real and effective student-teacher ratio rather than one that includes all campus instructional personnel.

- 4.3** Legislation requiring full-time registered nurses, counselors and librarians on every campus. This should be a priority for all schools; however it should be a high priority for campuses that have large numbers of poor children and an incidence of high mobility.
- 4.4** Legislation expanding the Children's Health Insurance Program. The quality of health care is directly related to the standard of living. Children from poor homes are less likely to have access to adequate and preventive health care.
- 4.5** Legislation supporting teacher preparation programs that balance content knowledge and pedagogy. A basic requirement for any teacher going into the classroom is that s/he meets the state requirements for full certification before entering the classroom for the first time. Another part of this involves comprehensive mentoring programs that pair novice teachers with master teachers.
- 4.6** Legislation minimizing the use of standardized assessments in our schools. Standardized tests serve a purpose in the education setting. However, the overdependence on them to measure student performance and progress has created a situation where higher test scores have become synonymous with learning. Student assessment should be based on multiple measures that are related to the educational needs of students.
- 4.7** Legislation supporting and funding effective, subject-specific technology training for educators in the use of proven programs. With increases in the use of technology systems in the workplace, our students deserve instruction in subject-specific technology by teachers who are proficient in its use.
- 4.8** Legislation limiting class sizes for self-contained classrooms for emotionally disturbed and special education students to 10 students. Special needs children in self-contained classrooms must have more one-on-one instruction time with appropriately certified teachers in order to succeed.
- 4.9** Funding and support for programs to assist English language learners. Globalization has brought students from around the world into Texas public school classrooms. These students need effective programs and appropriately certified teachers to help them become successful English language learners.