

Talk

about Today's Public Schools

Editor's Note:

STRAIGHT Talk is a publication of Northside ISD (San Antonio, TX) that contains one of a continuing series of articles that is meant to enlighten the public and staff about a variety of issues. STRAIGHT Talk content is either written by NISD or copied with permission from other sources.

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Legislature provides no additional funding for schools

As the dust settles on the 80th legislative session, districts across Texas are scrambling to figure out the impact of dozens of education-related bills on schools, students, and staff. At this point, many questions remain unanswered, but the bottom line is this: Once again, the Legislature provided no additional funding to account for inflation and the increasing costs of operating schools.

I do not understand how lawmakers do not acknowledge or address this issue and leave the burden on local taxpayers. The load is even heavier for fast-growth school districts like Northside. According to Moak, Casey, and Associates, who are consultants to the Texas School Alliance, this past school year (2006-07), Texas school districts needed \$13.1 billion more in total revenue than they collected in 1997-98 just to keep pace with inflation and enrollment growth.

When you couple the lack of additional operational funding with the slew of unfunded mandates the Legislature passed this session, it puts school districts in a serious financial bind. More than 80 percent of our operational budget goes to teacher and staff salaries, which doesn't leave a lot of wiggle room for additional, unplanned costs. I support the intent of many of these mandates – such as additional safety training for coaches and sponsors of athletic extracurricular activities, or more detailed background checks of potential employees. But the state is mum on how these additional requirements will be funded.

A prime example is Senate Bill 530, which will require that all students in grades three through 12 be assessed annually for physical fitness. It's important to improve the health of our students, and we already do annual assessments of elementary and secondary students who take physical education classes. However, I have big concerns about how Northside will afford assessments for the many thousands of students who aren't enrolled in a physical education class.

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5900 Evers Road, San Antonio, Texas 78238, 210-397-8500

The other major disappointment of the 80th legislative session is in the area of teacher salaries. As part of House Bill 1, lawmakers approved an across-the-board pay increase of about \$425. I know it's better than zero, but I was astounded that the Legislature would give such a small salary increase to teachers, considering the millions of dollars left in the state's budget surplus. I appreciate the \$2,000 increase the state gave teachers, counselors, nurses, and librarians last year, but we still have such a long way to go to make teacher salaries more commensurate with their responsibilities.

To make matters worse, at the same time, the Legislature potentially increased employees' contribution into the Teacher Retirement System to pay for additional compensation for retirees. This could even further reduce the state's salary increase. Any increase in compensation provided to retirees is a cost that should be borne by the state, not placed on the backs of current employees and teachers.

I would be remiss not to recognize the positive actions of the Legislature this past session. House Bill 323 is paving the way to outfit all school buses with seatbelts by 2010, but only if the state can find the money to fund the measure. House Bill 3851 will require the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board to standardize grade point averages so that student GPAs can be fairly compared. I'm also encouraged by Senate Bill 1031, which will replace TAKS tests in high school with end-of-course exams. And I am appreciative that lawmakers have replaced cuts in funding for several programs.

But looking at the big picture, the Legislature still has not addressed the fundamental problem and issue facing all Texas public school districts. Yes, the state has reduced the property tax rate, but now, the state is the beneficiary of any increases in property value instead of the local school districts - which desperately need this money to cover increased operational costs due to inflation. Unless there is another special session, the Legislature will not meet until 2009, which means we have another two years to operate at the same revenue per student that we had this year.

By John M. Folks, Ed.D.
Superintendent, Northside Independent School District



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5900 Evers Road, San Antonio, Texas 78238, 210-397-8500