

Texas Lone Star

A Publication of the Texas Association of School Boards | Volume 41, Number 8 | September/October 2023



**Bright
Ideas at
txEDCON23!**

**Inspiration,
insight, and
innovation
at Convention**

Featured Event

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SEPTEMBER

29-Oct. 1 • txEDCON2023 — TASA | TASB Convention — Dallas

30 • TASB Delegate Assembly — Dallas

OCTOBER

11-12 • TASB HR Services: Navigating Educator Certification — Virtual Event

26-27 • TASB Conference for Administrative Professionals — Austin

NOVEMBER

6-7 • TASB HR Services: HR Academy — Georgetown

6-7 • TASB HR Services: Advanced HR Academy — Georgetown

14 • TASB Legal Services: Fall Legal Seminar — Tyler

15 • TASB Legal Services: Fall Legal Seminar — Waco

15 • TASB Risk Fund: School-Based Law Enforcement Summit — Austin

15-16 • TASB HR Services: Service Record Management — Virtual Event

18 • TASB Legal Services: Fall Legal Seminar — South Padre Island

29-30 • TASB HR Services: Understanding Compensation in Schools — Virtual Event

Call for submissions to District Voices!

We want to hear more about what is going on in local school districts around Texas and invite you to send us submissions for our new, occasional feature, District Voices. Do you have an interesting program to discuss? Lessons learned as a school board member? For submissions or questions, contact managing editor Laura Tolley at laura.tolley@tasb.org. We look forward to hearing from you and your district!



For more information about these events or deadlines, visit the TASB website at tasb.org or call TASB at **512-467-0222** or **800-580-8272** toll-free.

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Texas Lone Star • Volume 41, Number 8

Texas Association of School Boards
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512-467-0222 • 800-580-8272

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Address changes should be sent to Michael Pennant, TASB, P.O. Box 400, Austin, Texas 78767-0400.

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Postmaster: Send address changes to TASB, P.O. Box 400, Austin, Texas 78767-0400.

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See You at txEDCON23!

Explore all the learning opportunities at Convention

by Debbie Gillespie



Debbie Gillespie

When I was in third grade, my school held a contest to draw the popular Zilker Park Christmas tree in Austin. I loved to draw and color, so I couldn't wait to get started. As the drawings were submitted and posted in the cafeteria at Austin's Summitt Elementary School, there was a definite difference between the drawings by those who had seen the tree and those who had not. I had not.

I remember being disappointed about my interpretation of the tree. But without ever seeing it, how was I to know that it actually wasn't a real tree, but a 155-foot tall "tree" of thousands of multicolored lights, and that you could stand under it and gaze up at the magical swirl of color.

But I learned a valuable lesson back then — never be afraid to ask thoughtful questions and don't assume others know enough to ask those questions. None of our backgrounds or life experiences are the same. We really don't know what we don't know.

Reflecting on that last statement, do you ever look back on mistakes made or missed opportunities? I know I do. I have found that most misunderstandings come from a lack of information or misinformation because helpful details or explanations were not provided upfront.

I told you a few months ago that one of my goals this year was to finish a few books that I had started over the last year. One of those was *Generations at Work: Managing the Clash of Boomers, Gen Xers, and Gen Yers in the Workplace*, by Ron Zemke, Claire Raines, and Bob Filipczak. I really loved this book be-

cause it doesn't criticize anyone or any generation. The authors really speak to how and why each generation is so different and how to understand and manage those differences. One of our speakers at this year's txEDCON23 TASA | TASB Convention, Meagan Johnson, will discuss different generations in the workforce. I am really looking forward to learning from her.

As leaders in our communities, we all know that it isn't always easy to know what each parent, staff member, or community member needs to understand our decisions. We all learn and understand differently, just like our students. Building relationships and getting your community involved helps not only build trust, but also helps each of us to recognize the changing needs of our growing communities.

I can't help but think about the adorable kindergartners I had the great opportunity to have lunch with on the first day of school this year. The excitement of watching these children begin their public school journey was so gratifying. They came from different backgrounds, cultures, learning environments, and families. One sweet little girl had tears in her eyes, so I sat next to her. She told me she felt like vomiting and needed a hug. Her first day was also only her second day in this country. Of course, I hugged her, telling her it was all going to be OK and she was going to love it here!

Getting back to txEDCON23, there are so many interesting offerings. Together, the Texas Association of School Administrators and TASB do a great job in providing sessions and programs that fit the needs of a wide range of interests, learning levels, and topics

that are relevant to the work we do as trustees. I always learn so much and really enjoy comparing session notes with colleagues, walking through the vendor expo, and connecting with fellow trustees. This year, I am more excited than ever because not only do we have great sessions and a stellar speaker line-up, but as a fine arts parent and avid believer and supporter of fine arts education, I cannot wait to see Frisco ISD and Aldine ISD student performances at the general sessions.

Also, don't forget about Delegate Assembly. This is where each district has a voice in deciding the vision and direction of TASB and how we support our members. Your voice matters and is crucial to TASB's efforts to help trustees provide the best public schools possible for our students.

Finally, I have said before that I am a life-long learner, and I am passionate about education. So, in my final column as TASB President, I leave you with a few lessons I value the most: Embrace change, be flexible, never make assumptions, ask questions, civility is a (good) choice, treat others with respect, and never, ever stop learning.

Thank you all for your dedication to public education, and until we meet again, always remember to look for the joy!★

Debbie Gillespie is the 2022-23 president of TASB.



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Learning from Each Other

Convention connectivity yields results

by Laura Tolley



Laura Tolley

One of the aspects I like most about the annual TASA | TASB Convention is how it brings together large, medium, small, and even tiny schools districts in one place to focus on a vital mission: providing the best education possible to all Texas public education students.

It's probably the old reporter in me, but I think listening to the individuals who are on the frontlines of an issue, working hard to maximize opportunities and overcome challenges, offers one of the deepest learning opportunities.

And when it comes to possessing energy, passion, and dedication, Texas public ed folks lead the pack, and it's always inspiring to spend time with them. Obviously, many of our members feel the same as thousands of school trustees, administrators, superintendents, educators, and others are expected to gather in Dallas later this month to be inspired by each other at txEDCON23 TASA | TASB Convention.

There is no shortage of important issues to address in public education today, especially after an intense legislative year that apparently isn't over yet. Improving classroom instruction, attracting and retaining teachers, cultivating leadership, building relationships within the community, keeping schools safe, and increasing access to mental health services — all of these subjects and more are session topics this year. Read our Convention preview on page 8.

Leading by example

Many of these sessions — more than 50 — will be led by Texas school district leaders who are deep into the work of designing and implementing innovative

programs and initiatives to help improve student achievement. These leaders have spent hours developing these sessions in the hope that they will inform, inspire, and encourage their Texas public education partners.

Take Gonzales ISD, for example. Located in the historic town of Gonzales in South-Central Texas, the school district of about 2,600 students will be fully represented by their board and administrators at Convention. Gonzales ISD officials are leading three sessions:

Strategic Vision Design With Community Buy-in: How Will You Tell Your Story? — by Gonzales ISD Superintendent Elmer Avellaneda.

Staff Over Staff: Prioritizing Student Need, Staff Retention, and Innovation Through Collaborative Budgeting Strategies — by Amanda Smith, Gonzales ISD's chief financial officer.

Rewriting the Narrative: Improving District Morale and Stakeholder Relationships Starts with Leadership — by Veronica Johannsen, chief of Administration, Communications, and Safety.

Those three sessions alone touch on several important issues such as teacher and staff retention, budgeting, and leadership.

Gonzales ISD is not alone in hosting multiple sessions at Convention. La Feria ISD, located in the Rio Grande Valley with about 3,000 students, will host two sessions by board member Gloria Casas about providing mental health resources to rural communities and related issues.

Districts of all sizes

Large districts will be represented as well. Plano ISD, a district in North Texas with nearly 50,000 students, is hosting a

session about engaging the entire school community in addressing chronic absenteeism. And Goose Creek CISD, which serves nearly 24,000 students in the Baytown area of Southeast Texas, will lay out some strategies for success in the age of artificial intelligence, a topic of increasing significance in the public ed world.

As I perused the session offerings, I was once again impressed by the incredible range of programs and initiatives school districts of all sizes are taking on to benefit their kids.

Leaders from Milano ISD, a small district of about 400 students in a town of the same name near Bryan-College Station, will be delving into a health issue of growing concern in a session titled, Puff, Puff, We'll Pass: Disciplining Vape Pen and Opioid Use. And Gorman ISD, a school district of about 300 students in Northwest Texas, will have a session on how to establish an effective cosmetology program in a small district.

The sessions offer a peek into all the innovative and inspiring work taking place in Texas school districts today. Convention officials are always seeking ways to give attendees a meaningful learning experience. We hope to see you for all the bright ideas in Dallas!★

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Laura Tolley".

Laura Tolley is managing editor of Texas Lone Star.



**Bright
Ideas
at
txEDCON23!**

**Inspiration,
insight, and
innovation
at Convention**

by Savanna Polasek

Thousands of trustees will be heading to Dallas this fall for txEDCON23 TASA | TASB Convention, where they can gain inspiration and insight on innovative ways to best serve public school students.

Held at the Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center Sept. 29-Oct. 1, Convention is the largest assembly of state public education decision-makers, including school board members and superintendents. Hosted by the Texas Association of School Administrators and TASB, it offers an in-depth learning experience through a wide array of sessions and other events that can help school leaders improve their governance and leadership.

The event showcases successful programs and practices from school districts across the state and offers opportunities to hear from TASA and TASB experts, as well as other K-12 public education leaders. Participants can earn up to 15 hours of continuing education credits while choosing from more than 140 sessions, developed through a grassroots process that includes member input.

"This premier event is not to be missed for superintendents and board members," said TASB Executive Director Dan Troxell. "With so much going on in Texas public education, this conference offers insights and expertise into issues and topics most relevant for school leaders, from school safety to teacher recruitment and retention. It's also an inspirational experience to be surrounded by thousands of others who are all working to create even stronger schools for the millions of Texas public schoolchildren."

Attendees are encouraged to attend Convention with their leadership team members to enhance their learning experience about a variety of public education issues as well as solutions for the challenges districts face.



Dallas

"What I love about Convention is the way it's centered on teams of eight," said Jackie Clark Spencer, director of Event Operations and Convention at TASB. "There's something for everyone, whether you're coming from a small district, you're a new board member, or you're a superintendent looking to collaborate with your board."



Photos by TASB Media Services

Last year's SOTY winner, Temple ISD Superintendent Bobby Ott, holds his trophy at the award celebration. With him from left are Mildred Watkins, a TASB Director and a La Vega ISD board member, Mary Jane Hetrick, TASB Secretary-Treasurer and a Dripping Springs ISD board member, and Dan Posey, a Temple ISD board member.



Convention attendees at a session of the txEDCON22 TASA | TASB Convention in San Antonio.

Guest speakers

This year's keynote speakers are Meagan Johnson, a generational expert, Damon West, a criminal justice professor and philanthropist, and Ken Williams, a coach and trainer.



Johnson speaks to audiences all over the world on how they can motivate and manage different generations in the workforce. As a generational expert and humorist, she knows all about the differences between each generation, but also how they can successfully work together, and highlights those methods with clarity and humor.



West is a criminal justice professor, a philanthropist, speaker, and the author of several books. While playing college football, he suffered a career-ending injury. He turned to drugs and was later sentenced to prison, where a conversation with a fellow convict sparked a spiritual awakening in him. West emerged from prison with renewed faith, a miraculous second chance at life, and a story of redemption, grit, and determination that continues to inspire audiences today.



Williams is a nationally recognized trainer, speaker, coach, and consultant in leadership, instructional equity, and school culture. His firsthand experience with transforming challenged schools translates into action-oriented presentations that inspire hope and offer practical strategies to those overwhelmed by challenges.



Sessions and workshops

While the official conference begins Friday, Sept. 29, there are three pre-conference workshops Sept. 28 featuring hands-on sessions, including how to pass an annual budget.

Two Council of School Attorneys Spotlight Sessions also will be offered. One is on First Amendment issues related to instructional resources, policy, and library book challenges. The other will be about First Amendment issues related to trustees and social media posts. There will also be a panel discussion with the State Board of Education.

Attendees will want to visit the Exhibit Hall, which will include 22 school safety exhibitors alongside state-of-the-art services that can help school leaders find specialized solutions for their districts' needs.



Merlyna Valentine, an award-winning teacher, principal, and school district leader, speaks at the txEDCON22 TASA | TASB Convention.

Field trip to Mesquite ISD

Remember the fun of venturing to a new place and learning things hands-on in a different environment? At Convention, attendees can go on a field trip to nearby Mesquite ISD, where they will learn about the Mesquite ISD Promise, an initiative to build character, shared values, and a greater sense of belonging in the district.

After a recent survey showed that only 43% of Mesquite ISD's students in secondary schools feel a sense of belonging in their school and community, the district decided to act. Participants in the field trip will learn how Mesquite ISD has enacted changes to help students feel more connected to their district and community.

"The Mesquite Promise is a framework to create belonging in Mesquite, especially with the recent growth of the district," said Spencer. "The district also wants each student to feel an innate sense of worth while attending Mesquite ISD schools."



Photo by TASB Media Services

txED TASA | TASB Convention CON23

Haven't registered yet? Don't worry, there is still time. Just head to tasa.tasb.org/registration. If you're bringing a guest, note that they will also need a ticket to the conference, which will be held Sept. 29-Oct. 1 in Dallas.

Who should attend txEDCON23?

- Leadership team members
- Board members
- Superintendents
- Key administrators and staff
- New and experienced education leaders

Attendees are encouraged to attend with leadership team members to learn more about the issues facing districts and discover solutions for those issues.

What can attendees expect?

- Relevant, practical programming
- Networking with peers across the state
- Expo to help you find the best products and services to fit your district's needs

Learn more about pre-conference sessions, Board Officer and Texas Trustee institutes, the field trip, the small district seminar, and more at tasa.tasb.org.

TASB manages attendee registration. If you have questions, get in touch with us at **800-580-8272, ext. 3611**, or registrar@tasb.org.



Photos by TASB Media Services

Attendees in the registration area at the txEDCON22 TASA | TASB Convention last year in San Antonio.

Small district challenges

If you're from a small district, the Small School District Seminar is a can't-miss event. Designed specifically for school districts with 999 or fewer students, the seminar will focus on how small districts across the state implement creative solutions to overcome challenges while leveraging the incredible advantages they have to offer.

This year's seminar will honor the unique characteristics of small school districts and their board members, before digging into ways to best lead and serve these schools.

The morning will include a board member panel from a variety of small districts discussing effective board leadership, followed by a panel of superintendents



Attendees gather in the Learning Lounge at Convention last year.

exploring some of the best ways to create and carry out a vision for these districts.

The seminar will conclude with three district spotlights focusing on some of the issues most prevalent in small schools: teacher recruitment and retention, creative strategies for funding, expansion of course offerings, and more.

"[I'm looking forward to] the knowledge we obtain. The courses have a lot of information for small districts," said Carlos Phoenix, Milford ISD school board member. "No matter what size, you gain from going, whether you're a small or large district. And you can learn from the large district sessions as well."

In fact, Phoenix attended a session last year on the four-day school week, and Milford ISD is trying it out this year as a way to recruit teachers.



Board training

New and experienced trustees will benefit from attending the Texas Trustee Institute or Board Officer Institute. TTI is designed specifically for new trustees and features the specialized training new board members need to be a successful and collaborative part of a school board, while giving them the opportunity to connect with other new board members from across the state.

BOI supports leaders by offering new board officers, and those considering taking on a leadership role, the in-depth training needed to effectively prepare for and facilitate board meetings, keep meetings focused, and build collaborative board-superintendent relationships. Don't forget to pre-register for these one-of-a-kind learning experiences!



An attendee asks a question during a session at Convention last year.

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Inspiring performances

Of course, it wouldn't be txEDCON without some celebration! Attendees won't want to miss a magical show by Frisco ISD with the theme Pure Imagination. Frisco ISD is using its time in the spotlight to bring together fine arts students of every age from across the North Texas district to show what it means to be a community. There will be singers, dancers, band members, and even some faculty members!

Aldine ISD's performance, *The Fabric of Aldine*, will show the beautiful tapestry of arts students create in their Southeast Texas district, stitching together songs, dances, acting, and live painting into a vibrant and colorful display. Throughout the show, the audience will follow along with the journey of a student in Aldine ISD, as they start out in elementary school before growing up and graduating. Board members will be included in the finale, Louis Armstrong's *What a Wonderful World*. This will be Aldine's third performance at Convention, where they've performed every 10 years since 2003.

The top honor in the TASA School Board Awards program and TASB's Superintendent of the Year winner will also be announced during the general sessions on Friday and Saturday. The Honor Boards recognize school boards that have demonstrated outstanding dedication and rendered ethical service to the children of Texas. The SOTY award recognizes achievement and excellence in public school administration.

Community service project

Attendees can also celebrate the combined impact of giving back — trustees and administrators will be making 1,000 hygiene and 1,000 stop hunger kits to be donated to the United Way of Metropolitan Dallas this year.

"Our combined impact is truly amazing," said Spencer. "It goes to show what can happen when we collaborate and take action. Trustees are making a big difference together in Texas."★



Students from Los Fresnos CISD perform during a session at Convention last year.

Photos by TASB Media Services

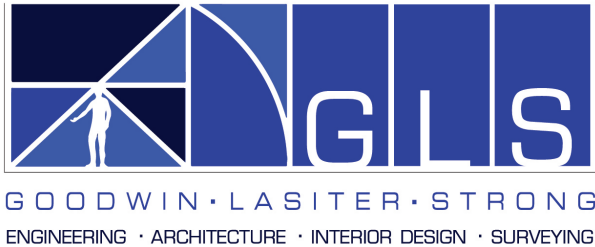


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Housing Benefits

Districts seek options to attract, retain teachers

By Mary Ann Lopez



Pecos

When Brent Jaco became a superintendent, he knew he'd be overseeing district properties, but he never anticipated that one day he might be a landlord worrying about lockouts, broken stoves, or clogged plumbing. But that's exactly what happened when the Pecos-Barstow-Toyah ISD school board hired him in July 2020 as the district's new superintendent.

Located in oil and gas rich West Texas, a nearly six-hour drive from the state Capitol, Pecos-Barstow-Toyah ISD began offering teachers affordable housing in 2016. The housing makes the move to the rural community a bit less stressful for teachers who might struggle with paying high rental rates, which are common in the area, Jaco said. And more importantly, subsidized housing for teachers is proving to be an excellent strategy to attract and retain qualified teachers in an increasingly competitive market.

"I am an educator. I got into this to be an educator 20 plus years ago," Jaco said. "I'm not an apartment manager, but it is one of the necessary pieces of the job. We're having to



navigate it and it's a new concept. We are learning as we go with it and working to make adjustments."

Recruitment and retention

When Jaco was hired, his district, which serves about 2,600 students, already had 56 housing units, including trailer homes, duplexes, and triplexes set aside for teachers and a few administrators.

But there was so much interest in the affordable units — currently there are 42 teachers waitlisted — that in 2021, the district's school board allocated capital funds to build its own apartment complex.

The all-in cost to build the as-yet-unnamed apartment complex: \$16.6 million. But for districts trying to recruit teachers, especially in rural or high-cost housing areas, the investment may be worth it.

"Housing has been a hot topic on our recruiting trail," Jaco said. "We will have all of our elementary teacher positions filled by the new year, and it will be the first time since I've been here. And we are excited to have certified teachers in the classroom."

A new normal

These days, it's no longer unusual for districts to use subsidized housing as a tool to attract and retain teachers. Many districts across Texas either have some form of teacher housing or are considering building or providing subsidized units.

For example, in June, Round Rock and Pflugerville ISDs each approved individual memorandums of understanding with the Texas Workforce Housing Foundation to provide teachers in their districts, both located in Austin suburbs, with subsidized rental options. Also, in the November 2022 election, Travis County voters approved Pflugerville ISD's Proposition H, a \$43.9 million bond that will allow the district to purchase property and build its own affordable housing for teachers and staff.

Meanwhile, Austin ISD is trying to find a partner to develop sites, such as the district's Anita Ferrales Coy Facility.

Photo courtesy of VLK Architects



A rendering of the completed apartment complex that will offer 64 new units to teachers at Pecos-Barstow-Toyah ISD.

Photo courtesy of Pecos-Barstow-Toyah ISD



The apartment complex, which is still under construction and unnamed, is expected to be ready for teachers in January.

In an interview earlier this year with KXAN-TV in Austin, Jeremy Striffler, Austin ISD's director of real estate, said, "Our focus is building high-quality, attainable housing." The housing would be prioritized for district teachers and staff but would be open to anyone who qualified.

"All these efforts we are doing around housing are by no means to replace the need to increase compensation," Striffler said in the KXAN interview.

The cost of a living

High housing costs, coupled with stagnant teacher salaries, have created a financial strain for some of Jaco's teachers.

"When housing does become available, it is a hot commodity, and therefore is priced pretty high," Jaco said. "We've had to do something different to make sure we could attract teachers to Pecos and make sure they have a place to live."

Pecos' booming oil and gas industry has fueled the region's competitive housing market. Energy industry workers often receive housing stipends, which inflate rental prices

well above the recommended 30% of a teacher's salary, roughly \$1,665 based on the district's new teacher salary of \$55,500 in 2023-24, according to the district's website.

A quick search on the rental site **apartments.com** shows that rents for the limited apartments listed online for the Pecos area can start at \$1,485 for a studio and go as high as \$2,045 for a three-bedroom unit — when they are available.

To combat the high rental prices, Jaco and his school board began exploring the idea of building housing. The district had a piece of property that would make a great site. The goal was to build 64 units — eight buildings each with eight apartments.

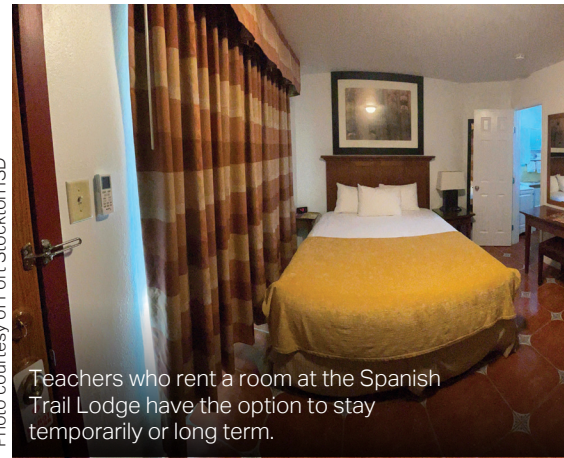
The construction project began in 2022 and should be completed by January 2024. The district had hoped to have the apartments ready for teachers during the fall, but construction issues have delayed the project's completion, Jaco said.

The old is new again

Ector County ISD, also located in the oil-rich Permian Basin and about an hour northeast of Pecos in Odessa, was also having challenges finding



Pecos-Barstow-Toyah ISD is building a new apartment complex to provide subsidized housing to some of the district's teachers.



Teachers who rent a room at the Spanish Trail Lodge have the option to stay temporarily or long term.

qualified teachers who could afford local rental rates. The district currently serves more than 32,000 students.

Around 2014-16, monthly rents in the area were pricey, at around \$1,600-\$2,000 for a one-bedroom apartment, said Steve Brown, a TASB Director and an Ector County ISD board member who is in his 11th year of board service.

"The district would extend offers to teachers, but when they were unable to find housing, they would resign," he said.

The district bought a property, now known as the Barbara Chancellor House. It had served as a boarding house in the 1940s and later as a bed and breakfast. The property has 15 rooms, with three common living areas, a large dining room, and a commercial kitchen.

"The initial idea was to use it as transitional housing for people who were moving here and didn't have a place to stay," Brown said. "The economy here was extremely robust but the housing options weren't."

Around that time, the district also purchased a 31-unit apartment complex, the Michael C. Killion House, which was renovated with the district's teachers in mind. Each apartment is furnished, and the gated complex offers free laundry, cable, Wi-Fi, on-site gym, and other amenities.

But by the start of the 2019-20 school year, Ector County ISD was 400 teachers short, which was about 18% of the district's teaching staff, Brown said.

"We found ourselves in a precarious situation," he said.

So, the district entered into a three-year contract with a property management company, which would make 100 apartments available to teachers, offering them a discounted rate and waiving any deposits, Brown said. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, not many of the units were needed and the district didn't renew the contract.

Down the road, the district might reconsider working with the

property management company, Brown said. Even though rentals can still be pricey, rates have decreased as more homes and apartments have been built in the Odessa area.

Over the years, the district has made a point of offering teachers good benefits, pay, and opportunities for development, which in addition to its subsidized housing has helped to attract and retain teachers, Brown said. At the start of the 2022-23 school year, the district was short only 80 teachers, less than 1% of its staff.

"We saw a need that we had to address if we wanted to be in a better position to recruit teachers," he said. "We were losing teachers because we didn't have any kind of housing available."

Forced to innovate

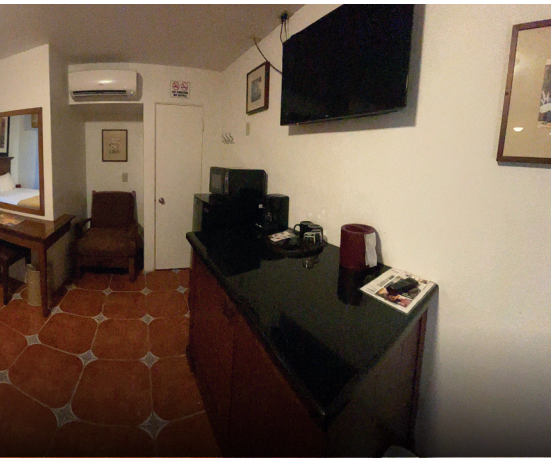
About 80 miles southwest of Odessa off Interstate 10 is Fort Stockton ISD, which serves 2,230 students. Unlike Ector County ISD, which was attracting teachers but losing them for a lack of affordable housing, Fort Stockton ISD needed subsidized housing to be more competitive with other districts, such as Ector County and Pecos-Barstow-Toyah ISDs.

When Superintendent Gabriel Zamora was hired at Fort Stockton ISD in 2021, he inherited six three-bedroom duplexes that the district built for teachers.

"The purpose behind it [teacher housing] is that we are competing...to attract the



Fort Stockton ISD purchased the Spanish Trail Lodge to provide additional subsidized housing for teachers in the district.



best educators, the best administrators,” Zamora said.

When he first moved to Fort Stockton, Zamora stayed in one of the district’s three-bedroom apartments as he awaited touch ups to the district’s superintendent home.

“The duplexes they built are nicer and way more modern than the superintendent house,” Zamora said. “The houses that they built are top notch.”

Zamora had a decision to make: He could offer his teachers small pay raises, which over time would require him to continue tapping into the district’s fund balance, or the district could use the funds — \$705,000 — for a one-time purchase of a well-maintained motel.

Realizing how beneficial the subsidized housing was for teachers, the district bought the Spanish Trail Lodge to provide an additional housing option to attract teachers.

Zamora said the 19-room motel was renovated in 2018 and the rooms were already in great shape. At the motel’s center was a home that was previously used as a residence for the on-site manager. It became a workout room and a flex space for resident use. The motel office now serves as a full-size kitchen to make the units feel homier.

“We’re charging \$250 a month, all bills paid. It’s been a blessing,” Zamora said. “The way we sell it, it’s a month-to-month thing. They’re not required to stay there the entire year. If they need to, they can use it as transitional housing,

if they want to find an apartment or a house...it’s been a success.”

While the housing benefits some of his teachers, Zamora said it’s not intended to be a permanent solution. He hopes that his teachers are able to save money so they might buy a home or consider other housing options. Regardless, he hopes the teachers stick around.

“I am a strong believer that we have to continue to work on innovating to attract teachers and staff,” Zamora said.

Recruitment efforts

Districts with subsidized housing may also have an advantage when recruiting international teachers, said Cortney Smith, the new chief facilities and operations officer at Midland ISD, a district that is about 30 minutes east of Odessa.

Smith has plenty of experience managing teacher housing. Prior to his role at Midland ISD, he worked at Ector County ISD as its executive director of district operations. While subsidized housing is beneficial for new teachers just starting out, Smith said it is also another way districts can support international teachers, who sometimes arrive with only two suitcases of personal items.

Ector County ISD used some of its housing not only to attract the international staff, but to help them feel more connected far from home, both Smith and Brown said.

“The response from teachers has been very positive, especially

from our international teaching community,” Smith said. “They come here, say you get six or eight people from Colombia who come, and they live in the same apartment complex, and it provides a community atmosphere for them. They’re very appreciative.”

Midland ISD is another district in the Permian Basin offering subsidized housing to any of its qualifying staff. Midland ISD, which has more than 26,000 students, has a total of 69 units, including 49 apartments and 20 modular homes, Smith said.

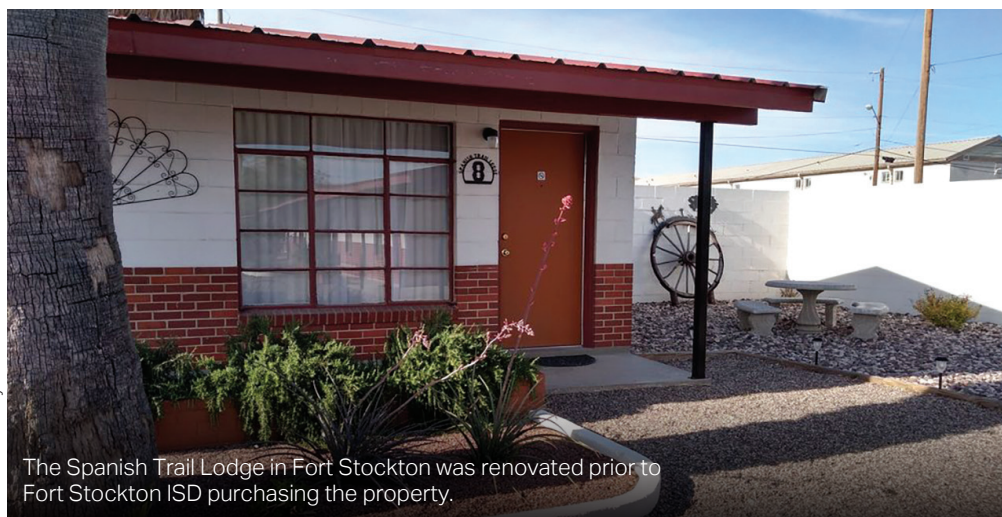
“With housing in the Midland-Odessa area, it’s not uncommon for a one-bedroom to go for over \$1,000 a month, so it is a really good option for teachers and employees,” Smith said.

For now, the district is happy with the housing it has available and has no plans to expand, though the district has been contacted by folks with properties to sell, Smith said.

“I would not discourage a district from doing it,” Smith said. “It’s a good selling point for your district, for international teachers and for first-year teachers. I don’t think I would tell a chief of operations to actively search for properties, but if you have them, you should maintain them and offer that to your teachers but keep it on a manageable scale.”★

Mary Ann Lopez is a staff writer for Texas Lone Star.

Photo courtesy of Fort Stockton ISD



The Spanish Trail Lodge in Fort Stockton was renovated prior to Fort Stockton ISD purchasing the property.

New Leadership at TSPRA

Veteran school communicator focused on members



Photos courtesy of Patti Pawlik-Perales

Patti Pawlik-Perales, the new executive director of the Texas School Public Relations Association.

Patti Pawlik-Perales has enjoyed a diverse career in public education, serving school districts across South and Central Texas in the areas of educational television, communications, public relations, marketing, and service to education foundations.

A 1984 graduate of A.C. Jones High School in Beeville, she attended Texas Tech University, earning a Bachelor of Arts degree. She went from college classroom to public education at KBSD, the educational access television station at Brownsville ISD, where she served as a scriptwriter and station manager, writing, hosting, and producing numerous television programs.

Her career in public education continued at San Benito CISD, where she helped build a new educational access station and partnered with San Benito High School and the Career and Technology Program to develop and launch a media technology program for students that earned numerous accolades. After moving to the San Antonio area, she worked for New Braunfels ISD's instructional television station and served as a communications specialist. Soon after, she was hired at Alamo Heights ISD, where she served 14 years as a

communications specialist and communications coordinator for the district. In 2022, she returned to her hometown to join the Beeville ISD team, where she served as director of Communications and Foundation.

Pawlik-Perales retired from her public education career at the end of June, marking 34 years of dedicated service to the students, schools, and districts she supported. On July 1, she stepped into her new role as executive director of the Texas School Public Relations Association. A career-long member of TSPRA, she continues the work of leaders before her, providing professional development, strategic learning, networking, and connectivity for the organization's members. She is focused on serving TSPRA members and supporting those who tell the unique and inspiring stories of Texas students, teachers, families, and schools. TASB talked to Pawlik-Perales about her new role at TSPRA. Her comments have been lightly edited.

Q: What are you enjoying most about your new role?

A: I absolutely love the opportunity to get to know our membership. We have a talented #TSPRATeam that is serving in unique ways to promote the amazing work of our Texas public schools, students, teachers, staff, and the communities that support them. Each #TSPRATeam member has a huge heart for public education, and they all love the work they do. It is such a joy to meet them where they work, learn about their unique challenges and celebrations, and learn how to better serve them professionally through TSPRA.

Q: What's been most surprising?

A: Texas is a big place, but the will to ensure the success of our students and schools is even bigger. The connectivity between schools, districts, organizations, and communities is amazing. When you are working in a district, with laser focus on the work before you, you know the support of your district colleagues and friends. When you have the opportunity to look up from that local work, you realize the true scope of support that spans the state. It is amazing!

Q: What are some of the key challenges facing Texas public school district communicators today?

A: Things move so quickly. Technology has made our jobs easier, but there also exists the expectation for quick responses to requests that come via email, text, messaging via social media, and more. The job has never been what some might call an "8 to 5," but now, the work bleeds over into evenings, weekends, holidays, vacations. The ability to carry your work

in the palm of your hand, to always be just a click away, is empowering and exhausting. Work-life balance is essential for our communications professionals and our districts as a whole!

Q: What are some of the opportunities?

A: School communicators have so many new tools to help share the good news about our Texas public schools. We can share the initiatives, events, announcements, achievements, challenges, successes, and celebrations, while we are literally right in the moment, using social media, video, live streaming, graphic software platforms, and more to enhance our messaging and engage our communities. It is empowering to be able to show and share what is happening in our schools and the success of our students, their teachers, and the community that supports them, every day.

Q: How is TSPRA helping its members handle these challenges and maximize these opportunities?

A: TSPRA has been the trusted professional organization of choice for school communications officers for more than 60 years. Our mission ensures that we promote effective public relations practices, provide professional development for our members, and improve communication between Texans and their public schools. To do this work, we provide our 1,200+ members opportunities for networking and support, online learning opportunities, monthly newsletters filled with industry information and timely topics, access to hundreds of examples of professional communication documents in our unique TSPRA Document Vault, 60+ opportunities to enter our awards contest to have their communications work professionally critiqued, emails that provide updates on legislative and other issues affecting Texas public schools, and access to our four-day annual conference with 20+ hours of professional development. Learn more at tspra.org.

Q: Based on your experience, what are some of the best ways for district communicators to work with their district leadership, including school board members, to better communicate with students, parents, and community members?

A: School communications professionals work to be transparent in their communications, within the parameters of the law. Sharing information that is factual and timely is the best communications practice no matter who you are in a school or district. Share the facts, provide as much information as you can, while remaining positive and sharing your unique story honestly.

Q: How can board members help amplify the good news in their districts?

A: It's simple. Share it! When something great is happening in your schools, say it, share it. When you meet a talented teacher during one of your school visits, tell his or her story and how impressed you were by them and their work. When a gifted student shares what they are learning at a board meeting, during a classroom presentation, on the playing field, in a



From left: Communications professionals Maury Vasquez, San Antonio ISD; Patti Pawlik-Perales, TSPRA executive director; Kim Cathey, Judson ISD; Anne Marie Espinoza, Uvalde CISD; Monica Faulkenberry, Northside ISD; and retired KENS Excel Award Coordinator Paige Ramsey Palmer, gather during a San Antonio Area meeting of TSPRA.



Communications professionals from across Texas gather to network during the National School Public Relations Association Conference, July 16-19, in St. Louis. The annual national conference provides targeted training, networking, leadership development, and professional growth opportunities for organization professionals across the nation. TSPRA is one of the largest member chapters of NSPRA.

fine arts program, or career and technology education competition, compliment them. Tell others about all of the amazing things you see and what a privilege it is for you to serve and see the work of your district unfold daily. Tell them about how your district has overcome challenges and how you work together collectively and collaboratively to ensure continued growth and success. Tell them how proud you are to amplify the good news, to serve as an ambassador for your ISD. Your words will inspire others to do the same!

Q: What three words would you use to describe TSPRA?

A: Dynamic. Trusted. Professional.★

Staying in Compliance

TASB gives practical guidance on new laws

by Sylvia Wood

School boards may be wondering what they need to do to be in compliance this school year with all the new laws passed during the legislative session that impact school district operations. The timing of regular and special sessions of the 88th Texas Legislature left a narrow window for districts to digest and implement the new laws, many of which took effect Sept. 1.

“The time between the end of the legislative session and the start of school seemed to evaporate,” said Joy Baskin, education counsel and associate executive director of TASB Policy and Legal Services. “But we work as fast as we can to get school leaders the information they need to understand and implement new laws. We hustle to get all relevant policy and legal updates into the hands of our members as soon as possible.”

Analyzing the laws

That task is anything but simple considering 1,357 bills passed during the session, including 238 bills related to public education or school district operations — not to mention two special sessions and counting. Yet one of the key benefits of an active TASB membership and an additional subscription to TASB Policy Service is having access to a team of attorneys and policy experts who do the review, summary, and analysis on behalf of members.

“We read every bill that passes the Legislature, so you don’t have to pay a lawyer to do that for you. We save districts time and money by digging through the new laws to determine potential changes affecting school operations,” Baskin said.

The work of analyzing each bill from a legal perspective is the first step to determining what requirements may need

to be reflected in policy — either legal or local. “We estimate that one bill takes an average of 20 hours of lawyer time to review, analyze, and determine policy implications,” Baskin said.

Next, TASB shares the news about what happened in the session. In June, TASB staff presented legislative updates at the Summer Leadership Institute in San Antonio and Fort Worth. The Council of School Attorneys held an event July 14. Additional learning opportunities will be offered in the Online Learning Center and as part of the txEDCON23 TASA | TASB Convention scheduled for Sept. 29-Oct. 1 in Dallas.

For a high-level overview, Baskin recommends the newly published *2023 Legislative Summary and Analysis* with quick summaries of key legislation, available at no cost to members in the TASB Store.

Then, TASB Legal Services and TASB Policy Service collaborated to formulate updated legal framework policies and recommended local policy changes for TASB members. “We know everyone is eager

to work on revisions to their local policy manuals, but we work deliberately to be sure our recommendations are accurate and comprehensive,” said Kristi Clark, division director of TASB Policy Service.

Each stage of bill review, consultation, drafting, and production takes time and expertise that results in policy recommendations to help districts strike the right balance between compliance and local choice. Balancing these goals means TASB typically issues post-legislative policy recommendations in a Numbered Update in the fall. Because school districts need to know what to anticipate even before the policy update arrives, TASB Policy Service sent every district’s policy contact a memo with detailed notes about what to expect with the update and what steps the district may need to take in advance of the update.

Updating local policy

One example of high interest this year is a requirement for school boards to take a record vote within six months of Sept. 1 on whether to adopt a policy authorizing the employment of a chaplain or acceptance of a volunteer chaplain, Clark explained. The Policy Service memo includes a sample resolution that boards can use to meet this deadline.

Members have also had a lot of questions about library books under the READER Act. That new law requires the Texas State Library and Archives Commission, in consultation with the State Board of Education, to adopt standards for school library services. Until those standards are developed, TASB won’t have any updates to local policy, Clark said.

Of course, districts don’t have to wait for the update to align their practice



with new laws as soon as the laws become effective. Districts can rely on TASB-recommended language regarding Harmony with Law at BF(LOCAL), which states that “Newly enacted law is applicable when effective. No policy or regulation, or any portion thereof, shall be operative if it is found to be in conflict with applicable law.” This ensures that a district is in compliance with the law even if the policy manual is out of date in the window between a law’s effective date and adoption of new local policy provisions.

Once the policy recommendations are formulated, TASB lawyers turn their attention to relevant eSource documents that take a deeper dive into the implications of legislation, often using a Frequently Asked Question format.

Answering your questions

After every legislative session, both TASB Legal Services and TASB Policy Service get a lot of questions from members about what happened and how it will impact them. “Our goal is to put the new laws in context, answering questions that have arisen about the meaning and implications of the new statutes,” Baskin said. “Our FAQ documents try to give practical guidance to district decision-makers as they incorporate new laws into day-to-day operations.”

This year, for example, Legal Services is using TASB School Law eSource to share answers to questions about the new requirement that at least one armed security officer be present during regular school hours at each campus, unless the school board claims a good cause exception.

“Everyone is still trying to figure out the process for claiming an exception and what an alternative standard could be,” Baskin said. “We’ve answered the most common questions and suggested a resolution for boards that decide to seek a good cause exception.” The new FAQ can be found at tasb.org in the Services tab under Legal Services resources.

“Every legislative session presents new challenges and opportunities for our members,” Baskin said. “Our entire legal and policy team are working as quickly as possible to prioritize policy updates so that member school boards have the resources needed to make informed decisions.”★

Sylvia Wood is a staff writer for Texas Lone Star.

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TASB RISK FUND

Property Tax Relief Deal

Bills include expansion of homestead exemption

by Dax González

Gov. Greg Abbott signed House Bill 2 and Senate Bill 2, which set the stage for more than \$12 billion in property tax relief, assuming that Texans approve a constitutional amendment ballot item that would enact the cuts provided in the two bills.

After months of negotiations, a regular legislative session, and two special sessions, the Texas House and Senate agreed on a property tax relief deal that:

- Compresses school district tax rates by an average of 10.7 cents.
- Increases the school district homestead exemption on residential properties from \$40,000 to \$100,000.
- Prohibits a school district, municipality, or county that had an optional homestead exemption in tax year 2022 from repealing or reducing the optional exemption until 2028.
- Includes M&O and I&S hold harmless provisions for school districts.
- Caps non-homesteaded properties (both residential and commercial) with an appraised value of \$5 million or less at 20% from the previous year. This will be a three-year pilot program.
- Increases current franchise tax exemption eligibility from \$1 million to almost \$2.5 million.

The proposed property tax cuts leverage \$12.6 billion appropriated by state budget writers during the regular session and are in addition to more than \$5 billion to continue school tax rate compression established in 2019.

A third special session

Abbott's chief political strategist has

said the governor will likely call a special session on school choice in October, after the September impeachment trial of Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton.

"The governor, the team, and our allies continue to work on this," Dave Carney, Abbott's top political adviser, told *The Texas Tribune*. "We're getting closer every week. When we have the trial and everything else behind us, then the governor will call a special session, probably in October, and we'll get everything done."

Stakeholders expect additional school funding and education savings account vouchers to be included in the same bill to ease passage of vouchers,

a controversial issue that failed to pass during the regular session. When asked about coupling the issues in the same legislation, Senate Education Chair Brandon Creighton (R-Conroe) said, "I don't know if we did couple those together that it would be inappropriate. It's just about a strategy."

Delegate Assembly

TASB's Delegate Assembly, where members vote on the overall direction of the Association and its advocacy work, will be held Sept. 30 during the txEDCON23 TASA | TASB Convention in Dallas.

As Active Members, each local school board and regional education service center board has the exclusive right to appoint a delegate who will speak and vote for their board at Delegate Assembly. During the gathering, delegates discuss and vote on a variety of action items, including the education issues to be included in the TASB Advocacy Agenda. Registered delegates and alternates will receive an email with a link to these action items and other resources before the meeting.

For more information on Delegate Assembly, visit delegate.tasb.org. ★

Dax González is division director of TASB Governmental Relations.





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Legal Services

Special Ed Requirements

Guidelines for maintaining compliance

by Denise Carter

Attaining and maintaining compliance in special education requires Texas public school districts to cultivate a continuous improvement mindset, develop and follow clear operating procedures, and engage in an ongoing review of adherence to extensive expectations. But a recent announcement by the U.S. Department of Education could mean that there will be clearer guidance and fewer changes made in special education requirements in Texas.

The USDE informed the Texas Education Agency in June that it has completed its corrective actions for statewide non-compliance in special education, though it will continue to monitor the state as part of its overall oversight process.

Impact on districts

As a result of the lengthy review of TEA by the USDE, Texas public school districts face increased scrutiny through ongoing cyclical and/or targeted monitoring processes. These reviews mandate strict adherence to procedures with thorough supporting documentation. Additionally, districts must now update and submit special education operating procedures, evaluate students with suspected dyslexia through IDEA, and provide necessary dyslexia services through special education.

A significant increase in the number of students evaluated and found eligible for special education resulted from the statewide corrective action plan, and this number continues to grow.

According to TEA, between the 2016-17 and 2022-23 school years, the percentage of students receiving special education support grew from 8.9% to 12.7%. During the 2022-23 school year,

702,785 students received special education services.

The identification of more students with disabilities impacts services necessary to meet growing caseloads, intensifies the need for clearly documented operating procedures, and increases time spent on official documentation of services.

Failure to follow established procedures regarding proper documentation and provision of special education services may lead to parent complaints to TEA, requests for mediation, or filing for due process hearings.

Take action

What can districts do to address challenging requirements, ensure special education operating procedures cover necessary areas, and decrease chances of parent complaints or findings of noncompliance?

TEA relies on district documentation when responding to parent complaints and determining compliance with special education requirements. When districts create clear procedures, train all staff, and establish an ongoing review process as part of an overall system of alignment, they can increase adherence to procedures and appropriate planning, provision, and documentation of services for students with disabilities. Here are some guidelines:

- 1. Establish clear, comprehensive, user-friendly operating procedures.** Districts that receive federal funds in a specific area must establish operating procedures to address compliance with program requirements. For special education, TEA requires districts to upload these procedures. Three options exist for



districts to create their operating procedures. They may use templates available from TEA, develop their own, or purchase a commercial product such as those available to members of TASB Student Solutions.

2. Provide general special education training to all staff.

Districts often provide special education training only to special education teachers and related services providers. Cultivating a continuous improvement mindset requires that administrators, general education teachers, para-professionals, and support staff understand special education processes as well. Each staff member assigned special education duties should receive additional specific training related to their individual role and responsibilities.

3. Provide detailed training in ongoing areas of concern.

TASB Student Solutions analyzed Texas due process hearing data from the past seven years and identified the topics consistently litigated. These align with TEA's focus in the cyclical review process and include Free Appropriate Public Education, Individualized Education Program, Least Restrictive Environment, Procedural Safeguards; Child Find, parent participation, evaluation/re-evaluation, behavior, and placement. Districts will benefit from providing detailed training in each of these



areas. Increased knowledge can improve adherence to expectations.

4. Establish a process to systematically review documentation.

Texas Administrative Code § 89.1075 requires districts to maintain an eligibility folder, in addition to the cumulative folder, for each child receiving special education services, and delineates necessary components. TEA reviews a selection of these folders as part of their monitoring processes. Establishing a systematic, regularly scheduled review of folders can help districts identify and address internal areas of concern.

Continuous improvement

Meeting the extensive demands surrounding special education requires a continuous improvement mindset supported by clear procedures and adherence to expectations. Following these four recommendations can increase staff understanding and knowledge of special education processes, help districts improve compliance with special education requirements, avoid potential time-consuming and costly parent complaints, and ultimately allow staff more time to focus on student success. The experienced staff at TASB Student Solutions can answer questions and assist districts in all these areas. For more information, visit tasb.org/services/student-solutions.★

Denise Carter is manager of TASB Student Solutions.

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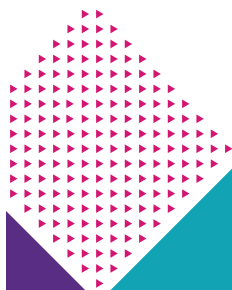
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Special Education Solutions



LTASB Class of 2024

Leadership TASB kicks off at txEDCON23

by Mary Ann Lopez

LEADERSHIP TASB

Editor's note: Leadership TASB is a unique board development program designed to take experienced board members to a new level of service and leadership by introducing them to a variety of issues, people, activities, and locations.

TASB is pleased to announce the 34 school board members selected to participate in the Leadership TASB Class of 2024.

A committee made up of Leadership TASB Alumni recommended the class members and presented the selections to

the Member Services Committee of the TASB Board for approval during its July meeting.

"We are excited to welcome the Leadership TASB Class of 2024," said Dan Troxell, TASB executive director. "Every year we hear from trustees who tell us how transformational Leadership TASB is for them. We cannot wait to see how each member of the Class of 2024 uses this experience to inform their board service as they continue making a difference in students' lives."

Leadership TASB was developed and designed for school board members by school board members in 1993 as part of TASB's ongoing commitment to provide

visionary leadership to Texas school boards. The program arose from a request from the TASB Board of Directors to increase trustee involvement and provide advanced educational training and leadership opportunities to the membership. Since then, Leadership TASB has developed into the premier school board training program in the state with more than 900 alumni trustees.

Each year, up to 36 experienced board members are selected based on demonstrated leadership in their local school district and communities. The trustees represent districts from across the state that vary in size and the student populations they serve. Debbie Gillespie, TASB board president is a Leadership TASB Class of 2014 graduate and a member of the LTASB Alumni Association.

"As an LTASB Alumni Association member, I want to congratulate and welcome all of the members of the Class of 2024," Gillespie said. "I hope this one-of-a-kind experience will expand your understanding of board governance while learning about the vast differences in district needs across the state. This program will not only help you enhance your leadership skills but also help you continue to serve the students and families in your communities."

The Leadership TASB Class of 2024



The TASB Board of Directors, past board presidents, and some TASB leaders gave a shout out to Leadership TASB during their summer board meeting in celebration of LTASB's 30th anniversary. Many current directors and past presidents are LTASB alumni, with those at the board meeting in Rockwall each receiving an iced cookie with the LTASB logo as a special treat.

program kicks off at txEDCON23 TASA | TASB Convention, being held Sept. 29-Oct. 1 in Dallas, and concludes in June 2024 at Summer Leadership Institute. The yearlong program will include educational visits to districts and communities across Texas.

The members of the Leadership TASB Class of 2024 are:

1. Brittany Bennett, S&S CISD
2. Stephanie Blanck, Georgetown ISD
3. Marvin Bobo, Lovejoy ISD
4. Jeri Chambers, Plano ISD
5. Felix Chavez, Hutto ISD
6. Laura Clark, Eanes ISD
7. Temeika Durden, Manor ISD
8. Camille Eckersley, Bluff Dale ISD
9. Katie Farias, Southside ISD
10. Russ Garner, Comal ISD
11. Lori Ann Flores-Garza, Robstown ISD
12. Paola Gonzalez Fusilier, Pasadena ISD
13. Cornelius Hambrick, LaPoynor ISD
14. Tammy Hawkins, Ector County ISD
15. Tricia Ikard, Maypearl ISD (TASB Director)
16. Eladio Jaimez, Harlingen CISD
17. A.D. Jenkins, Irving ISD
18. Yvonne Johnson, Shepherd ISD
19. Chris Kovatch, Orangefield ISD
20. Kea Lynn Lewis, Crosby ISD
21. Sandra Licon, San Elizario ISD
22. Natasha McDaniel, Spring ISD
23. Nicole Nolen, Gregory-Portland ISD
24. Gopal Ponangi, Frisco ISD
25. Lance Redmon, Katy ISD
26. Corinne Saldaña, Northside ISD
27. Alison Busse-Savage, Lyford CISD
28. Paul Shanklin, Aldine ISD
29. Kendall Smith, Lancaster ISD
30. Amy Thomas, Schertz-Cibolo-Universal City ISD
31. Barbara Townsend, Granbury ISD
32. Pam Watts, Midway ISD
33. AlexAndrea Zamarripa, Pecos-Barstow-Toyah ISD
34. Paul Zoch, Bridge City ISD★

Mary Ann Lopez is a staff writer for Texas Lone Star.

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SOTY Selections

Five superintendents are finalists for top honor

by Sylvia Wood

TASB has announced that five public school superintendents have been selected as state finalists for the annual Superintendent of the Year award, a program that has been recognizing exemplary school leaders since 1984.

“Our goal with the Superintendent of the Year program is to honor the outstanding talent we have leading our Texas public schools,” said TASB Executive Director Dan Troxell. “Serving as a superintendent is one of the toughest yet most rewarding jobs in the world, and we’re thrilled to be able to celebrate these accomplished and committed leaders who do so much for our students.”

The SOTY finalists were selected by a TASB committee of school board members who interviewed 19 regional nominees put forward by Education Service Centers across the state. The competition’s next stage takes place at the txEDCON23 TASA | TASB Convention, where the SOTY winner will be announced.

Meet the finalists



Martha Salazar-Zamora
Tomball ISD, Region 4

Salazar-Zamora has served as superintendent of Tomball ISD, a district near Houston with more than 19,000 students, located near Houston, since 2017 and has more than 36 years of education experience. At Tomball ISD, her accomplishments include implementation of Tomball Star Academy, the Two-Way Dual Language Academy, and the district’s first P-TECH focused on healthcare.



Wade Stanford
Westwood ISD, Region 7

Stanford joined Westwood ISD, a district of about 1,387 students in Palestine, as superintendent in 2016 and has more than 38 years of education experience. Under his leadership, Westwood ISD passed a bond program in 2021, the first in more than 40 years. His accom-

plishments also include establishing a mentorship program for first-year educators and increasing the district’s accountability score to a B.



Jim F. Chadwell
Eagle Mountain-Saginaw ISD, Region 11

Chadwell has served as superintendent of Eagle Mountain-Saginaw ISD in Tarrant County since 2010, and his education career spans nearly 30 years. At Eagle Mountain-Saginaw ISD, which has more than 23,000 students, his accomplishments include establishing a district police department, expanding

the EMS Education Foundation, and developing a community road safety initiative.



Sheri Blankenship
Hereford ISD, Region 16

Blankenship has served as superintendent of Hereford ISD in the Texas Panhandle since 2016. She has served the district of 3,840 students since 1996 in the roles of assistant superintendent, executive director of personnel, personnel director, curriculum director, assistant principal, and classroom teacher. Under Blankenship’s leadership, Hereford ISD in 2018 passed its first bond in more than 40 years.



Jose Rafael Lopez
Kermit ISD, Region 18

Lopez has served as superintendent of Kermit ISD in West Texas since 2019. Over his 23-year career as an education leader, Lopez has worked in four districts. At Kermit ISD, which has more than 1,200 students, Lopez improved its accountability rating to a B in 2022. He also developed a five-year strategic

plan and created new career pathway programs and curriculum supports to boost student achievement.★

Sylvia Wood is a staff writer for Texas Lone Star.

Leaving TRS-ActiveCare?

There are options when it comes to health benefits

Health benefits are a tangible way districts can demonstrate commitment to their employees' well-being. "Health insurance is one of the most important benefits districts provide to their employees," said Cole Hentschel, director of sales for First Public. "That's why selecting a provider is so important."

Some school districts across the state are choosing to leave TRS-ActiveCare, the health benefits provided by the Teacher Retirement System of Texas, after a change in state law in 2021 that allows school districts to opt out of the state health plan. The decision to stay with TRS-ActiveCare, another current provider, or chart a new path in health benefits is dependent on the unique circumstances of each district.

"What makes financial sense for one district may not make sense for another one," said Trent Toon, director of operations for First Public, which administers the TASB Benefits Cooperative that provides benefit services to participating Texas school districts. "It's important for districts to look at their claims and contribution data and do their homework."

Here are some things to consider if your district is thinking about going in a new direction with health insurance:

Look at the data

TRS is required to provide districts with their contribution/claims information, so districts should take a deep dive into that data and chart the trends. If contributions are greater than claims, there may be more cost-effective benefit solutions. If a district doesn't have the expertise to do this analysis in-house, there are third-party vendors and consultants, including some available through the TASB Benefits Co-op, who will provide that evaluation.

Data can be requested at no cost from TRS-ActiveCare by visiting the TRS website. Requesting data does not mean you've opted to leave TRS-ActiveCare.

Get employee feedback

Before making any decisions, survey employees about what they like or don't like about the current health plans, including available prescription coverage. Authentic employee feedback is essential before a decision is made.

Keep employees informed

Don't wait for the traditional open enrollment period to start letting employees know about possible changes to benefits. Many employees simply let their bene-

fit elections roll over each year without much thought. But if a district is moving out of TRS-ActiveCare, regular communication is essential to helping employees make informed choices.

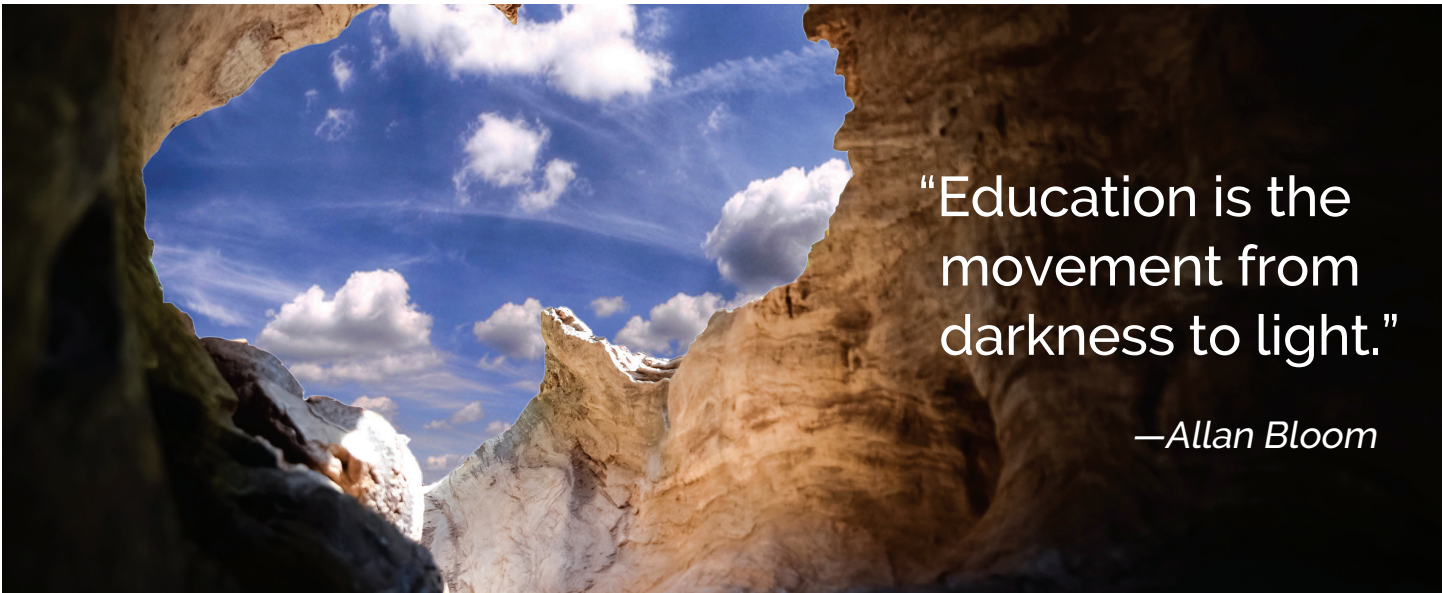
Be transparent about the costs

Regardless of whether a district stays in TRS-ActiveCare or decides to leave, employees should be aware of the rising costs of health insurance and how those expenses are shared among the state, the district, and the employee.

At a minimum, employers must contribute \$225 per month per employee to premiums, which includes a \$75 contribution from the state and \$150 from the district.

What's the best plan for your district?

Deciding to make a change to your district's health insurance can be a complicated decision. TASB Benefits Cooperative is here to help. Districts can contact Benefits Co-op with questions or to learn more about health benefit options by going to tasbbenefits.com. Additionally, TRS provides guidance for employers at trs.texas.gov under the Health Care Benefits tab.★



"Education is the movement from darkness to light."

—Allan Bloom

Honor Board

TASA announces five finalists for top award

Five school boards from across Texas have been selected as Honor School Boards as part of the Texas Association of School Administrators' School Board Awards for 2023.

Each year, the program recognizes outstanding Texas school boards for commitment and service that has made a positive impact on Texas public school students.

The five Honor Boards were selected by a committee of Texas school superintendents, chaired by Lake Dallas ISD Superintendent Kristin Brown, who was the superintendent of Lyford CISD last year, when the district's school board was named the 2022 Outstanding School Board upon her nomination.

The selection committee's decisions were based on criteria that include support for educational performance, support for educational improvement projects, commitment to a code of ethics, and maintenance of harmonious and supportive relationships among board members.

The five districts are finalists for the program's highest honor: 2023 Outstanding School Board. They will be interviewed Sept. 29 at the txEDCON23 TASA | TASB Convention in Dallas, where one board will be named Outstanding School Board the following day.

The five school boards selected as 2023 Texas Honor School Boards are:

Corsicana ISD Board of Trustees:

The School Board Awards Committee was impressed by the Corsicana ISD board's pursuit of their own professional learning, strong communication, community engagement, and their support of the district.

Superintendent Diane Frost said of the board in her nomination: "None of what we do for the children of this community would be possible without the leadership and guidance of the Corsicana ISD School Board. These men and women serve without compensation, giving of their time and their talents to support the mission and vision of CISD. They are

strong advocates for public education and work tirelessly to ensure that we have the resources, systems, and policies in place to ensure that every child's needs are met every day. In CISD, we are focused on Every Tiger. Every Day."

Crowley ISD Board of Trustees:

The School Board Awards Committee was impressed by the Crowley ISD board's focus on continuous improvement and innovation.

Superintendent Michael McFarland said of the board in his nomination: "Their unwavering commitment to the individual success of each and every student comes through on a daily basis in how they serve and support the efforts of the students, parents, educators, and community members of Crowley ISD. I have had the opportunity to closely observe the countless initiatives undertaken by the trustees in their pursuit of providing excellence in education for all. Their strategic vision, collaboration, and communication have resulted in significant improvements in academic achievement, financial solvency, overall student well-being, and community engagement."

Montgomery ISD Board of Trustees:

The School Board Awards Committee was impressed by the well-rounded program in Montgomery ISD with an emphasis on academics and how well the board members work together.

In his nomination of the board, former Montgomery ISD Superintendent Heath Morrison, who recently left the district to serve as the CEO of Teachers of Tomorrow, said: "Our trustees lead the district in its mission to partner with families and the community to grow and develop future generations of leaders and productive citizens by offering innovative academic programs responsive to every student's individual needs. ... They understand the tremendous responsibility that comes with this leadership role and are committed to modeling respect and understanding as they serve in this

capacity. The trustees also understand the faith and trust parents place in them each day to teach children, keep them safe, and support community needs."

Texas City ISD Board of Trustees:

The School Board Awards Committee was impressed by the Texas City ISD board's spirit of cooperation and focus on students.

Superintendent Melissa Duarte wrote in her nomination of the board: "As a team, the Texas City ISD Board offers a cultural and experience mix that provides the basis for making decisions that build on important community history while incorporating new ideas that stem from different points of view. This mix of perspectives strengthens the group's capacity to represent a growing and culturally diverse community in a district with a rich legacy."

Ysleta ISD Board of Trustees:

The School Board Awards Committee was impressed by the Ysleta ISD board's commitment to academic excellence and focus on continuous improvement.

Superintendent Xavier De La Torre wrote in his nomination of the board: "Since 2021, the diverse and rigorous educational programs made possible through the support of our board of trustees have not only led the way in the El Paso area, but across the state and nation, resulting in numerous honors and national accolades. ... School improvement and student success are at the forefront of every decision made by our board."

While this is the first time in the award program's history that the boards of Corsicana, Montgomery, and Texas City ISDs have been selected as statewide honor boards, Crowley ISD's board was chosen as an honor board in 2001, and Ysleta ISD's board was an honor board in both 2011 and 1973.★

School Safety Summit

Understanding new legislation part of TASB event

TASB's Risk Management Fund will host its first-ever School-Based Law Enforcement (SBLE) Residency Summit for eligible members in Austin on Nov. 15.

The summit is the culmination of a year-long effort to help members navigate risks and reinforce safety and security in the wake of school violence and, more recently, security-related legislation. Support for Fund members has included specialized resources and training opportunities throughout the year, including webinars, to promote safer learning and work environments for students and educators.

In November, the Fund will feature an in-person learning experience with speakers who represent a range of perspectives, including law enforcement and school districts. Sessions will give

attendees the tools they need to better understand their SBLE options, recognize associated risks, and identify budget implications.

"We are beyond excited to offer this event to Fund members," said Mary Barrett, associate executive director of TASB Risk Management Services. "They are looking to us to understand new risks related to their efforts to strengthen safety and security measures, and we truly believe this opportunity will assist."

The SBLE Summit will take place at TASB Headquarters for a limited number of registered participants. The Summit will include speakers and resources geared specifically to K-12 campuses and is open to current Fund members with liability or workers' compensation coverage with the Fund.



The topics covered will be of most interest to district risk managers, police chiefs or other school-based law enforcement personnel, superintendents, business managers and CFOs, as well as other administrators responsible for managing school safety.

The Summit is free for eligible members. For more information or to register, visit tasbrmf.org/sble.★

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Member Survey Highlights

Survey participants rate TASB's performance

TASB staff have shared the results of the 2023 TASB Member Survey. Participants in the survey rated the Association's performance on a five-star scale, with 1 star being poor and 5 stars being excellent. The Association received an overall average rating of 4.44.

For the first time, nearly 3,000 key school personnel — district staff who have a business relationship with TASB — were invited to participate in the survey, along with school board members, superintendents, and executive directors of Education Service Centers.

Participants also rated the Association on seven key satisfaction indicators: program/service cost, program/service quality, member support/customer service, training and conferences, improving perception of public education, advocating on behalf of members, and communications. All seven indicators received ratings above 4.0.

This year, the survey included a new measure of customer loyalty, called Net Promoter Score (NPS). Respondents rated the question "How likely is it that you would recommend TASB to a colleague?" Overall, TASB received an NPS of 63. Creators of NPS, Bain & Company, suggest a score above 50 is excellent.

In addition to rating TASB's performance, members shared comments regarding anticipated challenges and where TASB should focus future efforts. Top areas identified in the feedback included:

- Program feedback regarding specific training courses and programs at TASB
- Advocacy to address vouchers, charter schools, testing, and employee benefits
- Perceived politics in schools and current political climate

The TASB Member Survey was distributed to members in April 2023. The member input helps direct TASB's work on behalf of all members and is used by the TASB Board to plan for the future of the Association.★

Satisfaction Indicators	2023
Communications	4.45
Advocating on your behalf	4.38
Improving perception of public ed	4.21
Training and conferences	4.49
Member Support/Customer Services	4.45
Program/Service Cost	4.16
Program/Service Quality	4.39



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Special Ed 101

New course helps trustees understand the law

by Mary Ann Lopez

Board members know that a school district's priority is ensuring that all students get an exemplary education. For districts, providing services to students eligible for special education is not only critical to students' success, it's the law.

In Texas, more than 12% of students qualify for special education services and that number continues to increase. Trustees have significant influence in ensuring students in special education receive proper support. With new laws that directly impact special education, board members must have a clear understanding of the law and its impact.

Although school leaders may work to meet the many requirements of special education, litigation against school districts related to meeting the needs of students with disabilities continues to challenge districts, said Denise Carter, TASB's manager of Student Solutions.

To support trustees, the TASB Online Learning Center is offering a new course, Special Education 101 for Board Members. The on-demand course is \$30 for one credit hour, and takes about one hour to complete, but can be self-paced. SPED 101 dives into the key information that is relevant to board members.

"The special education process is complicated, which requires districts to have an in-depth understanding of its many parts and to focus on the details," Carter said. "We created this course to help new and experienced board members understand all the many requirements and obligations."

Unlike other educational programs, which are instituted from the top down, special education is individualized, which means every student's individual needs must be addressed. And districts have a legal obligation to provide supportive services to a student based on those needs as stated in their Individualized Education Program.

While it may be challenging to find staff who are qualified to teach students



in special education, districts that do not comply with the legal requirements can face significant repercussions, including litigation and negative student achievement outcomes.

Districts are required to educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment whenever possible, but the fact is most general education teachers — more than 80% — feel unprepared to support students with disabilities, according to the National Center for Learning Disabilities and Understood, two nonprofits that seek to make life better for students with disabilities. As a result, Carter said it's critically important that districts provide training opportunities, encourage collaboration, and equip their teachers and administrators with needed resources.

"Student and staff success depends on educated, supportive decision-makers to ensure appropriate program funding and compliance," she said.

Districts may also be required to provide compensatory services when it's determined that a student who should have been receiving supportive services didn't get them.

And even if a district thinks it has been compliant, if a dispute occurs that cannot be resolved through other means,

it's possible litigation can ensue. So, it is beneficial for board members to understand the available dispute resolution avenues, Carter said. While it's important for board members to keep open lines of communication with parents and community members, if the parent of a child with a disability has a grievance, a board member should remind them that although they understand the concerns, they cannot directly address the issue. Parents or guardians must be referred back to the campus administrator to resolve any disagreements.

"We want board members to feel confident and have a strong understanding of the special education process," Carter said. "The more they know, the easier it will be to ensure they are successfully serving all district families, including those with students in special education."

To learn more and take the on-demand course, register now for Special Education 101 for Board Members on TASB's Online Learning Center at onlinelearning.tasb.org. For more information, contact TASB Student Solutions at studentsolutions@tasb.org ★

Mary Ann Lopez is a staff writer for Texas Lone Star.

Bulletin Board

TASB Announces Board Bingo Winners

TASB is excited to announce the winners of TASB Board Bingo, which took place in June during Summer Leadership Institute in San Antonio and Fort Worth. Participants needed to find a TASB Director, introduce themselves, and get at least five signatures to be entered into the drawing for a free registration at SLI in 2024. The winners who were selected randomly include:

- Olivia Garcia-Rincones, Lyford CISD
- Jessica Garrett, Bushland ISD
- Tara Hoot, Rusk ISD
- Sonia Lopez, La Villa ISD
- Amber Pattarozzi, Evadale ISD

Board Bingo was designed to facilitate introductions between trustees and TASB leadership — Directors and Officers — who are elected to the TASB Board to serve all members on behalf of Texas public schoolchildren. The goal was to encourage conversation, build community, and remind trustees that everything TASB does is aligned with member needs, priorities, and goals.

“We want to congratulate everyone who participated in TASB Board Bingo. I hope trustees who took the time to play came away knowing more about our leadership and governance structure, which provides the Association with accountability, responsive decision-making, and financial oversight,” said Dan Troxell, TASB executive director.

TASB Mourns Loss of NEISD’s Terri Williams

TASB joins North East ISD in mourning the loss of Terri Williams, who died Aug. 6. She was 59. Williams was elected to the NEISD Board of Trustees in 2018 and was serving as vice president at the time of her death. In 2021, she was also elected to a three-year term on the TASB Board of Directors, representing TASB Region 20, Position E.

During her time on the TASB Board of Directors, Williams served on the Member Services Committee, which provides oversight of several key TASB programs, including the Superintendent of the Year Award and the new James B. Crow Innovation in Governance Award.

“Her time with us was far too short,” said TASB Executive Director Dan Troxell. “We appreciated her keen insights from her board service and as an experienced economic development professional. Above all, she was committed to prioritizing excellent student outcomes and will be deeply missed for all of her contributions on the TASB Board, her local NEISD board, and the greater San Antonio community.”

TEA Releases Spring STAAR Results for Several Grades

The Texas Education Agency has released spring 2023 State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness results for students in grades 3-8. The STAAR results include assessments in mathematics and reading-language arts in grades third-eighth, fifth and eighth grade science, and eighth grade social studies.

TEA said this year’s results show reading-language arts proficiency for students in grades third-eighth remains largely unchanged, continuing the level of academic recovery achieved in 2022 coming out of the pandemic. The pandemic’s effects still linger in math, but TEA said there are encouraging signs that the intensive support offered by Texas public school systems is working. Five of the six tested grade levels saw an increase in the percentage of students who met grade level, while results for Texas 6th graders mirrored 2022 results.

“Teachers across Texas continue to work with passion and skill to help students learn,” said Texas Education Commissioner Mike Morath. “This year’s results show the efforts of our educators continue to deliver improved results for students.”

A more detailed report can be found by going to tea.texas.gov, clicking on the news releases link, and finding the article titled TEA Releases Results for 2023 STAAR 3-8 Assessments.

We want to recognize school board members' extraordinary work in TLS!

If you have received any awards or honors, please send your news and photos to tls@tasb.org.

TSPRA Communicator Award

Public school advocate recipient of top honor

The Texas School Public Relations Association has named Brian Woods the 2023 TSPRA Key Communicator. Woods, a former superintendent who is now a deputy executive director at the Texas Association of School Administrators, was selected for his longtime commitment to promoting the values and importance of public education, TSPRA said in making the announcement.

Woods has long been actively engaged in advocating for policies and funding that benefit students and educators across the state. He is well known at the Texas Capitol for his advocacy efforts on behalf of Texas public schools, students, and staff, and he is often called upon by state officials to testify before legislators and the State Board of Education about the impact laws would have on districts across the state.

His ability to navigate the complexi-

ties of the legislative process and his courageous advocacy make him an invaluable asset to the future of public education in Texas, TSPRA said in its August announcement.

“Dr. Woods’ outspokenness on behalf of the students and educators of Texas sets him apart,” said TSPRA San Antonio Area Vice President Kim Cathey. “He fearlessly addresses critical issues, challenges the status quo, and champions positive change. His passion for ensuring that every child has access to quality education is evident in his tireless work.”

After serving for 31 years at Northside ISD in the San Antonio area, Woods decided to retire and immediately began serving full-time with TASA as deputy executive director of Advocacy in July.

TSPRA President Megan Overman will present Woods with the Key Communicator award at the txEDCON23 Con-



Photo courtesy of TSPRA

Brian Woods, a former superintendent and TASA’s new deputy executive director of advocacy, has been named recipient of the 2023 TSPRA Key Communicator award.

vention, Sept. 29–Oct. 1, in Dallas. Woods will also be honored by TSPRA during their annual conference in February 2024.★

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Texans Support Public Ed

Poll shows teacher pay, funding are top priorities

by Tiffany Dunne-Oldfield



Tiffany Dunne-Oldfield

Even though it's not much cooler here in Texas, September marks the official end of summer — a seasonal shift that signals a time to refocus on work and school. For those whose jobs involve K-12 public education, however, summer is often the busiest time of the year in preparation for the new school year and the millions of new and returning students who fill the classrooms.

Here at TASB, we also kept busy this summer with students at the forefront of our work. As Joy Baskin, my colleague and TASB's education counsel and associate executive director of Policy and Legal Services, is so aptly quoted in this issue, "The time between the end of the legislative session and the start of school seems to evaporate."

That was especially true this summer, which included two special sessions and the possibility of a third one this fall on school vouchers. Whether this special session takes place remains uncertain as I write this column. Yet no matter what happens, the entire team at TASB has been preparing for that discouraging prospect.

To start, we conducted another poll on behalf of our members to gauge views on vouchers, especially after a regular legislative session that included the biggest push to pass vouchers that I can remember.

What we learned is that Texans overwhelmingly want lawmakers to focus on school funding — not a voucher scheme. In fact, six out of every 10 Texans polled ranked increasing teacher salaries and additional funding for public schools as the most important issues right now for lawmakers. In contrast, only about one out of every 10 Texans thought vouchers should be a priority.

Our recent poll also reveals a downward trend in support for vouchers since we

polled Texans during the regular legislative session — showing a five percentage point decline from the 44% of respondents supporting vouchers in February. Now, just 39% support them. This strong decrease in support is especially encouraging given that pro-voucher proponents have been throwing enormous amounts of money at sophisticated marketing campaigns. It's also encouraging to know that the growing opposition to vouchers not only extends across party lines, but also among a majority of white, Hispanic, and Black respondents in both urban and rural communities.

Since the message couldn't be clearer, it's disappointing to consider that vouchers may resurface again this fall, at a time when all of us should be focused on the work at hand — namely supporting our 5.4 million public schoolchildren, their teachers, and their families by investing in our public schools.

Feedback on vouchers

As we prepare for the possibility of a special session, we also recently sent out an email to the more than 22,000 subscribers to Texans for Strong Public Schools, our public campaign in support of public ed that includes not only school board trustees but parents and other public ed advocates.

We asked folks to send us a note back on why they think vouchers are bad for the public schools in their communities and here's a sample of what we heard:

- Public schools are the backbone of communities across the state of Texas. They provide educational opportunities to all students and do not discriminate based on ability, income, or circumstances. Public schools serve ALL children. – Juan
- Sending taxpayer money to private

schools is a redundant program that is not efficient or conservative. – Ted

- The reality is that vouchers are absolutely NOT school choice. Private schools get to regulate who they admit and rightly so ... they're private! I don't begrudge this. What I begrudge is giving families money toward a school that can intentionally exclude students. Also, a voucher is not helpful to any family for whom the overall expense of private education is beyond their grasp. – Amy

These are real, unedited responses from Texans who care deeply about the future of their public schools. And gauging from all the emails we received from people, there's widespread agreement that our public schools are the heart of our Texas communities.

I'm fortunate to work at TASB with talented and creative people who developed a video over the summer with a zombie theme. The idea is that voucher schemes — no matter how many times they get voted down in the Texas Legislature — keep being resurrected by special interest groups with a financial stake in undermining and privatizing our public schools. To protect our schools and communities against that real threat, we must stay vigilant.

Now that summer is nearly over, we'll be sharing a lot of the work we did in the past few months in anticipation of a special session on vouchers, even as we hold out hope that lawmakers will simply listen to Texans and focus on the issues they care about most — teacher salaries and funding for public schools.★

Tiffany Dunne-Oldfield is deputy executive director of TASB.

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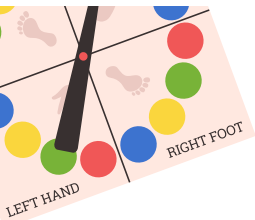
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