

The 140-day 85<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session is well underway. There are 150 members in the House of Representatives and 31 members in the Senate. The filing deadline for bills is March 10. The session's closing day is May 29. There are currently more than 1,000 bills related to public schools that have been filed to date – that number will grow.

### **February 21 Capitol Visit with Senator Craig Estes and Representative Phil King**

Joining me were Weatherford ISD Superintendent Dr. Jeffery Hanks, Santo ISD Superintendent Greg Gilbert, Weatherford ISD Trustee Jeff Geyer, Garland ISD Trustee Rick Lambert, and Denton ISD Trustee Charles Stafford. The conversations were gracious and inviting.

### **Good, Bad and Ugly News**

**Good News:** On the issue of school funding, both the House and the Senate have placed their initial budget versions on the table. Both have committed to funding student population growth. Over the last decade, the Texas student population has grown by about 80,000 new students each year – the equivalent to adding an entire Fort Worth ISD to the map of Texas annually. In addition to funding student growth, the House version includes an additional \$1.5 billion for public education if legislators can make improvements to the school finance system.

**Bad News:** Although the House version included \$1.5 billion, Senate leaders wanting to fix the broken system of school finance have included little to no new money for anything other than enrollment growth. In the end, both must agree. As of this letter, the political winds continue to shift with additional dollars evaporating. Attitudes are fluid, legislators waver, and nothing is guaranteed during the 140 days.

It is important to note that when considering student population growth and inflation, the state's funding portion has dropped by about \$795 per student since 2008. And, per the Legislative Budget Board, Texas is ranked near to the bottom in terms of funding public schools when compared to the nation.

**Ugly News:** Between the House and Senate, the appetite for vouchers is mixed. Although voucher bills have been filed on both sides, public school advocates are relying on the House to fend off voucher legislation. On the Senate side, Lt. Governor Dan Patrick continues to push for a voucher program in Texas.

### **Rep. Phil King (R-Weatherford)**

Regarding school funding, we appreciate Rep. King for supporting the additional \$1.5 billion dollars proposed by the House for public education. And, we applaud him for co-authoring HB 1333 – an ambitious bill that reduces the influence of the STAAR test in multiple ways. However, I wish he was more steadfast in his opposition to vouchers. There is a sentiment that the House might be forced to concede voucher legislation in return for Senate support for any additional public school funds – the

word “hostage” comes to mind. In truth, it is too early in the legislative process to see how this will unfold or whether a single dollar will be available. However, we must help educate and support our legislators on this vital issue.

**Sen. Craig Estes (R-Wichita Falls)**

Sen. Estes was clear to say he is willing to discuss the merits of vouchers – I took that to mean he is open to hearing about its disadvantages. Sen. Estes did ask a few questions. Among those, he asked about voucher successes in other states – we shared some of the failures currently taking place. With most of his school districts considered rural, I am sensing Sen. Estes believes the passage of a voucher bill would not significantly impact the schools in his district – another opportunity for us to educate our legislators.

**Community Engagement**

We appreciate Sen. Estes and Rep. King. Both encouraged us to continue the dialog. As a school board trustee, let me encourage you to participate in broader conversations about our local schools. Community participation is critical and will determine the future of public education. Contact your local trustee, superintendent, and/or school administration office with questions regarding public education issues you would like to learn more about.

Public schools are for the public good.

With much appreciation,

Bobby J Riques, Aledo ISD School Board Trustee