

**January 7, 2013**

**From LISD Superintendent Bret Champion:**

As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago in my column, the voices of concerned parents and community members united under a common message can make a positive difference for public schools. With the 83rd Legislative Session just days away, this week I would like to lay out for you what the district has discussed as priorities for lawmakers as they consider public education this spring.

While Leander ISD is for student, school and system accountability, I believe modifications to the current system will enhance student success. On Friday, November 30, Texas Education Commissioner Michael Williams signed a waiver to defer the "15 percent rule," the requirement that a State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) end-of-course exam is to count as 15 percent of a student's final course grade, until the 2013-2014 school year. This waiver means that end-of-course exams will not impact Leander ISD students' final course grades for this year. The 15 percent rule could result in students falling further and further behind, and the lack of uniform state implementation of the rule could result in disparity on transcripts for students and may have unintended negative effects on college admission for some students. Based on these reasons, we believe that the Legislature should completely remove the 15 percent rule from the state accountability system.

Our accountability system, which includes the STAAR tests and end-of-course exams, has grown to be quite cumbersome for Texas public schools. Currently, our schoolchildren must sit for 29 required state exams between third grade and graduation. This impacts our most struggling students, who often must endure additional testing until they can pass a test that might be from a previous year's failure. In 2012-2013, districts have as many as 48 testing days on the calendar (68 are possible if summer testing opportunities are included). The number of testing days results in the loss of a significant amount of instructional time, further exacerbating the hardship struggling learners must endure. We support reducing the number of tests students are required to take over the course of their education, without reducing accountability to schools or districts.

Districts are tasked with focusing on the whole child with drastically reduced budgets. Academic concerns for teachers and schools include teaching an increasingly rigorous curriculum, successfully preparing students for the standardized exams and ensuring that they are college- and career-ready. And so we challenge the Legislature to appropriately invest in our future by returning schools to previous funding levels through general revenue, without the "one-size-fits-all" restrictions wrought by targeted grants.

Additionally, we support the Legislature eliminating or modifying the 50-cent test, which unnecessarily discriminates against fast-growth districts, including LISD. The 50-cent test was designed in the early 1990s to provide some limitation for debt tax rates. Since that time, the State's population has grown 21 percent: in LISD, it has grown 132 percent. Our student density per single-family household increased from .53 to .65 and from .18 to .31 per multi-family apartment between 2006 and 2012, meaning there is more demand for schools even without new residential construction. Fast-growth schools, as well as property-poor schools, are impeded from building with an artificial tax cap that does not recognize these important differences. The 50-cent test had the effect of reducing the limitation of debt issuance from 10 percent of taxable assessed valuation to 7 percent, according to an analysis conducted in 2011.

We also oppose directing public funds to schools that are not held to the same standards and mandates as public schools, including open enrollment, state accountability, teacher certification, etc. LISD has historically offered parents a great deal of choice in the campus they select for their children. In 2012 – 2013, for example, there were 1,538 students (out of 34,000 students) who were approved by the district to voluntarily transfer to another school in LISD. Transfer requests that were not approved related to campuses where additional students would have necessitated hiring additional teachers.

Join LISD and express your support for these Legislative priorities to your elected officials who represent the district in the Texas Legislature. Again, I invite you to check out the LISD Legislative and Finance webpage for information about the important issues public schools face this legislative session. Stay informed of the issues, get engaged in the process and support the students of LISD.

Happy New Year!