

## Leaving the Safe Harbor

By The Honorable Florence Shapiro

*A ship in port is safe, but that's not what ships are built for.*  
–Grace Hopper

As a former public school teacher, and a mother of three grown children, all of whom attended public schools, I have a deep appreciation for public education. That appreciation only deepened this session as Chairman of the Senate Education Committee, where I was able to turn my passion into action. The state of public education in Texas has much in common with a ship in port.

As we leave the 78<sup>th</sup> legislative session we do so with the knowledge that 94 percent of our third graders are successful on the TAKS reading assessment and, with an influx of \$1.2 billion in new state aid, our districts are on safe financial footing. However, there is much work yet to be done. We must be careful not to choose the safe path, yet remain steadfast in our efforts for a new era of academic achievement, as well as a permanent solution to the state's broken school finance system.

If we desire true excellence from Texas students, any discussion of school finance reform must begin and end with academic achievement. If our financial investment in our schools does not produce better learning, then that money will have been wasted.

With that philosophy in mind and with new leadership in Austin, we looked at education this past session in ways never before — we began to shift the focus from an environment of simply “teaching” to the idea of “integrated learning” through technology, flexibility and innovative ideas; and it is my opinion that this new approach will increase educational opportunities for all Texas students. Our approach to education policy was to think “outside the box” and operate under the adage that education is not “one-size-fits-all”.

President George W. Bush once said, “Children respond to an atmosphere of high standards. Children love to learn. And they sense when we have faith in them.” I agree. I don't believe we expect enough of our students.

Our past efforts on improving schools have been very successful in defining educational goals and setting a rigorous accountability system. And, while we have seen excellent results through the measures put in place over the years for K-5, in my view, we are not holding our high schools accountable for similar academic performance.

This session, I set out to shift the focus to the upper grades through dropout prevention measures and alternative educational opportunities. The idea is to create a seamless system of K-16; ensuring that our high schools are at the level of achievement of the lower grades. We have an incredible task ahead of us that will require everyone's maximum effort. Texas will not truly have a great system of public education until Texas has great high schools.

This task will not be an easy one. We start at a point when only half of our eleventh grade students pass all assessments. I don't know whether I am more astonished at the results or more astonished that the general consensus is that the results were actually “pretty good.” We have raised the bar in Texas — appropriately in my opinion — and we need to find ways to clear it — one student at a time.

This session, we took giant steps in the direction of high school reform. I authored SB 1108, a key component of the Governor's education agenda, which is a far reaching plan that includes on-line diagnostics, personal graduation plans and individual instruction for those students struggling on the high school TAKS. There is a companion rider in the appropriations bill to fund this initiative with \$60 million over the biennium and it is my hope that major foundations will also become players in this effort. The legislature also passed SB 976 which directs the commissioner of education to create partnerships between high schools and junior and community colleges. This “middle college” concept provides an innovative approach to keeping high school students engaged and could be particularly helpful to students who would otherwise drop out of school. In addition, I look forward to the implementation of Representative Grusendorf's HB 411, the Governor's Science Initiative, and the mentoring initiative promoted by Lieutenant Governor Dewhurst and Senator Todd Staples in SB 16.

We must always understand that we cannot simply legislate success. To truly succeed, school and community leaders must embrace high school reform efforts. I stand shoulder to shoulder with colleagues, parents, teachers and administrators in the challenge to bring instructional excellence to our public schools.

We must demand increased rigor in an age of tight resources. High school subject areas are more complex than the elementary curriculum and the teacher shortages in high school present much greater challenges to superintendents and principals.

Winston Churchill once said, “Sometimes to do your best isn’t good enough, sometimes you need to do what is right.”

As a member of the Senate Finance Committee, I worked hard to ensure sufficient funding for public education. However, without a permanent solution to our school finance system we can expect a spirited debate, as any new school finance proposal is likely to include a restructuring of our taxing system. Money should not drive this discussion, however educational excellence should. Any review must begin with a thorough study of the educational components necessary to achieve our educational goals and hold schools accountable for both their success and failure.

Once those components are known, we must determine the cost of providing that level of education to our students. Then, and only then, we must identify the dollars with which to pay for it. Our state can do no less for our most important resource — our children.

Under conservative leadership, we will look at doing the business of educating our students and financing our schools in new, innovative ways. Our approach will include finding ways to eliminate mandates, implement systems of incentive and disincentives for schools, and focus the allocation of resources from administration to the classroom. On the state level, we must make the tough decisions to prioritize state spending on education. We will need to find ways to find savings in the state’s budget and in some cases choose funding education at a higher level over preserving funding for certain state programs that have not performed over the years.

A special session on school finance will allow us to cease the practice of balancing the state’s education budget on the backs of local taxpayers, while creating and enacting a plan that returns meaningful discretion to local communities.

Any school financing plan should include the following elements:

- Reducing the burden on local property taxpayers, significantly;
- Eliminating Robin Hood as we know it;
- Providing a stable revenue source for public education based upon a diversified tax base;
- Maintaining the gains in equity we have achieved;
- Ensuring local enrichment opportunities;
- Creating financial incentives for excellence and efficiency; and
- Increasing the state’s share of funding—it cost \$8 billion to cut local taxes in half, so we need at least \$8 billion in revenue to offset this source.

In the financing debate, we must remain focused on the ultimate goal; providing all Texas children the opportunity for educational excellence. If we do not aggressively pursue this course, a generation of Texans will suffer for our timidity and indecision. A great education leader once said, “We’ve got one thing in mind: An education system that’s responsive to the children, a system that educates every child, one that’s based upon sound fundamental curriculum, one that starts teaching children early in life and focuses on systems to work, one that heralds our teachers and makes sure they’ve got the necessary tools to teach, but one that says every child can learn. And in this great land called America, no child will be left behind.”

I believe with a fresh approach to public education today, the goal of educating all children is one that can be achieved. And with the teamwork among parents, teachers, legislators, taxpayers, and business and community leaders, we can leave our safe harbor in search of a brighter future for all Texas children.

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of the Senate Committee on Education.*