

Gov. Abbott's special session agenda put students, teachers first

Gov. Greg Abbott gave the people of Texas insight into his top priorities in his call for a special session and chief among them is a high-quality education for each Texas student. Halfway through the special session, little progress has been made, meaning these student-centered reforms may languish until 2019.

The special session call items Gov. Abbott wants passed include:

- teachers to be paid more with existing education system funding;

- families with children who have special needs to have more educational options;

- a commission to address the thorny issue of school finance;

- government entities to be prohibited from being used to collect public union dues.

All can be accomplished if legislators put students and teachers first. But education is big business in Texas. We have 5.3 million students and more school district employees than some of the world's biggest corporations.

With so many bureaucrats working in the education system, legislators both feel pressure to put a high priority on increasing funding to public education, which is already the largest item in the budget. The funding goes to the education

institutions themselves, where only half of the employees are teachers and only half of all funding gets directed into the classroom.

While money has been their focus, learning therapies and techniques have been put on the backburner. As a result, special needs students in Texas have been given a raw deal. An investigative series by the Houston Chronicle revealed the Texas Education Agency put a de facto limit on the percentage of special needs students in public schools. That resulted in thousands of students with special needs possibly being denied specialized services owed to them.

Most states identify around 13.5 percent of their students as having special needs; in Texas, that proportion is 8.5 percent.

Education Commissioner Mike Morath eliminated any limit but many families have expressed frustration that public school officials failed to do right by their children. It is only appropriate that these families have the opportunity to exercise their right to provide their children with the education some public schools had denied them.

The issue of education freedom for these families has become particularly

contentious. The education bureaucracy — particularly administrators — are leading the charge to oppose families having the decision rights for where their child goes to school, even families with the most vulnerable special needs population.

While families of special needs students deserve better, so do Texas teachers.

That's why Gov. Abbott called for an additional \$1,000 for teachers pay from within the current education-funding budget. Teacher salaries have increased by only 1 percent during a time when inflation-adjusted public education funding increased 17 percent.

Meanwhile, superintendent salaries have been increasing, particularly in larger school districts. Twenty-six school public school districts pay their superintendent over \$300,000 a year, and some provide a car and other expenses.

Gov. Abbott also calls for a commission to study school finance, which would get our school finance system out of the courts and could force legislators to prioritize spending on instruction and teacher pay.

Lastly, Gov. Abbott's call appropriately begs the question: Why should the government be in the business of collecting union dues? School

districts currently collect the union dues and use the funds to then lobby for interests that directly oppose much-needed reforms to the education system. Any individual should have the freedom to join a union; however, union members can pay their dues just like most of us pay for groups we join: by writing a check or paying online. When surveyed last session, union members agreed that public entities collecting union dues was a conflict of interest and should be prohibited.

These items on the governor's call have the potential to launch Texas to the forefront of educational freedom and teacher empowerment. Now it's up to Texas legislators to heed the call and put student interests first.

Peggy Venable is a former White House liaison for the U.S. Department of Education under President Ronald Reagan and is currently senior visiting fellow at the Center for Education Freedom at the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

**PEGGY
VENABLE**

*Center for Education Freedom at the
Texas Public Policy Foundation*

