Great leaders for great schools

Davis, Van de Putte
Candidates fire up convention

Takeover attempt in Dallas
Contracts, class size at risk

Prekindergarten for all or a few?
It’s a key issue in the gubernatorial race
It’s been a wonderful journey

It has been an honor to serve as your TSTA president for the past six years. It has been a wonderful journey, seeing the progress our locals have made in terms of membership growth, building leadership capacity, and making a difference for our public schools and students.

We have used the power of issue organizing to impact important state and local issues that matter to our members. Last year, we convinced the Legislature to restore most of the funding cut from public school budgets in 2011, and many of our locals put that funding to work for our members. We succeeded in reducing the number of high-stakes standardized tests. And we have elected school board members who work with our locals on pay and employment issues.

The key to strengthening our clout in Austin and with school boards is our focus on issue organizing. Many of our locals — from Austin to Lubbock to Donna and many more — have provided examples of great organizing. We have made strides these past six years to foster an organizing culture. That’s why NEA leaders see TSTA as a great investment for the future of NEA. Perhaps most importantly, organizing is a great investment in the future of Texas public schools.

During my presidency, TSTA has made changes to engage local leaders in supporting and guiding the work of their fellow leaders in the development of local plans. By helping each other design local plans through a constructive compliance process, we develop stronger local associations.

TSTA must continue to be forward-thinking and visionary, and TSTA’s foundation is the local association, where we must build strong relationships between local and campus leaders and insure financial integrity to sustain our success. We must have that foundation to be the most influential organization for public school employees and public school policy.

Effective leaders understand that leadership is strongest when it is shared. Whatever the issue, we must give our members opportunities to be heard. The work that many of you have been doing truly pays off when you engage individually with your members and have them engage with each other.

Building the TSTA leadership bench is also critical to sustaining TSTA’s success. Recruiting potential leaders has been a priority of mine, and it must remain a priority. The leadership curriculum that TSTA created during the past six years has trained individuals who will be leaders for many years to come, and every leader must share the responsibility to mentor and train the next generation of TSTA leadership.

We have prepared more than 350 new TSTA leaders through our regional trainings. For all our hard work, I say Bravo and thank you. We can truly view the future positively when we bring new talent and energy into our association.

The past six years have been a great journey, as we have faced both opportunities and difficult challenges together. I look at those years as the beginning of TSTA’s journey and look forward to seeing you take the next steps, as TSTA members doing your part to prepare another generation to lead our state to a vibrant future.

—Rita Haecker, TSTA President

Of course, a great deal of important work remains to be done. We still have too much high-stakes testing, and privatization interests are scheming to convert neighborhood schools into profit centers. But because of you, TSTA is well-positioned to lead the fight to strengthen our public schools.

MEMBERSHIP AWARDS: David Ring, president of Lubbock Education Association, accepts awards for membership growth from TSTA Vice President Noel Candelaria, NEA Secretary-Treasurer Becky Pringle, and TSTA President Rita Haecker. Read more about the awards presented at the state convention on page 8.

Contents

4 UPRIGHT
Senators Wendy Davis and Leticia Van de Putte address the TSTA House of Delegates in April and awards are presented; elections are held for new TSTA/NEA officers; and the filing deadline for NEA director place 2 is announced.

10 A GOOD START FOR OUR YOUNGEST TEXANS
The two major party candidates for governor offer markedly different visions for the future of education in Texas, starting with the very beginning of a child’s introduction to a classroom, pre-kindergarten.

12 HOSTILE TAKEOVER ATTEMPT IN DALLAS ISD
A group attempts to convert Dallas ISD into a home-rule charter school district with a new governance structure that could abolish all employee contractual and grievance rights, ignore the minimum salary schedule, and repeal important learning standards, including class size limits.

14 FOUR RIGHTS YOU MAY NOT KNOW YOU HAVE
These rights give students a safe environment and teachers the time to prepare for class: assault leave, removal of students, duty-free lunch, and planning and preparation time.

16 LITERACY ACTIVISM
Georgina Perez starts a grassroots effort to collect and distribute free books to children who live in impoverished rural areas and colonias where libraries often do not exist.

18 ADVOCACY IN ACTION
Education support professionals and students hold statewide conferences; ESP of the Year Bobbie Cunningham offers students hope and motivation; the national Road Across America road trip begins in Texas; woman learn leadership skills in San Antonio; the University of Houston at Clear Lake student advisor offers tips on building your chapter; retired members hold meetings and elections; more.

26 INQUIRY: PERHAPS THE MOST POWERFUL TOOLS FOR REFORM
Questioning is an integral part of the practice of teaching, but not so much a part of today’s profession of teaching.

What’s Inside

Vol. 33, No. 4 Summer 2014

TSTA Advocate is an official quarterly publication of the Texas State Teachers Association, affiliate of the National Education Association.

How to contact us: Call 877-ASK-TSTA, visit www.tsta.org, or write us at TSTA, 316 West 12th Street, Austin, Texas 78701. Please send address changes to the attention of Membership Records or membershiprecords@tsta.org.

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‘You are my heroes,’ Davis tells TSTA delegates

By their enthusiastic welcome, delegates to the TSTA Convention in San Marcos showed Wendy Davis and Leticia Van de Putte that they appreciate the work both have done on behalf of public schools, students, and educators and their determination to do more as governor and lieutenant governor, respectively.

The feelings clearly were mutual. “Everyday heroes. That’s who you are,” Davis said to the more than 500 teachers, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, and other school employees in the crowd on April 12. “You are my heroes.”

Davis said she will continue to turn to educators on matters that concern schools. “My education vision is informed by the people in this room. You are the experts on education in this state,” she said.

To much applause and chants of “Wendy, Wendy,” Davis said she was “proud” to have filibustered against the $5.4 billion in school budget cuts in 2011. She and Van de Putte, both state senators, were instrumental in getting much of that funding restored last year and will continue advocating for public schools in higher office. Both candidates are endorsed by TSTA.

Davis contrasted her plan to provide pre-kindergarten for all eligible children to Republican gubernatorial candidate Greg Abbott’s proposal to create a limited pre-K program that could force 4-year-olds to take standardized tests (see related story, page 10).

“Four-year-olds should be coloring with crayons, not filling in bubbles with number two pencils,” she said to a standing ovation.

Davis also discussed her plan for encouraging the best and the brightest students to become teachers, and she called for better teacher pay.

“With an economy as strong as Texas’, we should at least be paying our teachers the national average,” she said. Teacher pay in Texas now lags about $7,000 below the average.

Van de Putte, whose family members include several teachers, criticized Republican leaders for seeking to privatize public education and “rob our schools of precious resources.”

“Teaching is what will keep Texas strong,” she said. And she thanked teachers “for every time you dug into your pockets for school supplies or field trip money for those (students) who didn’t have it.”

“We heard our parents,” Van de Putte said, referring to a new state law, which she and Davis helped to pass, that reduces the number of end-of-course exams high school students must take to graduate. But, she warned, the fight against too much standardized testing isn’t over, particularly with Abbott now suggesting testing for pre-K students.

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“For 4-year-olds? Really?” she said.
At the April state convention, President Rita Haeccker recounted her successes during six years as TSTA’s leader, including the recruitment of more than 30,000 new members and establishing a “pipeline” for training and developing upcoming leaders.

“Our members join us to create a better world for themselves and their students,” she said. “That is our vision, and that is the work that is the focus of our time, our energy, and our resources.”

Following the speech, TSTA staff surprised Haeccker with a moving video tribute that was narrated by her longtime friend Sen. Leticia Van de Putte, whose sister, Annabelle Garcia, taught next door to Haeccker for several years.

The video included heartfelt messages from the top NEA leaders with whom she has worked to advance TSTA and NEA goals. Haeccker currently serves as a member of the NEA Leadership Design Team, which is led by NEA Secretary-Treasurer Becky Pringle.

In voting held during the convention, Noel Candelaria was elected TSTA president and Ovidia Molina, vice president. They begin three-year terms on July 15. Linda Estrada was elected to the NEA Board of Directors for a three-year term that begins Sept. 1.

Candelaria, who has been TSTA vice president since July 2011, previously was president of the Ysleta Teachers Association and a special education teacher in Ysleta ISD.

He said he is “ready to lead the members of TSTA, organize all educators who teach our five million students, and urge our students’ parents to join us in helping to shape a quality public education system in Texas.”

Linda Estrada is a member of the TSTA Board of Directors and Advisory Committee, chair of the TSTA ESP Committee, and president of Donna TSTA/NEA. She is a campus secretary at Runn Elementary School in Donna ISD.

“Life has taught me to never give up… to speak up for myself, to stand up for what is right, and to help others,” Molina said in her campaign statement. “I will work diligently to advance our great association.”

Linda Estrada is a member of the TSTA Advisory Board and a member of the NEA Leadership Design Team, which is led by NEA Secretary-Treasurer Becky Pringle.

NOTICE OF FILING DEADLINE FOR NEA DIRECTOR

Nominations are open for NEA director for Texas place 2. The successful candidate will serve a three-year term on the NEA Board of Directors beginning Sept. 1, 2015, and will be a voting member of the TSTA Board of Directors for a three-year term beginning July 15, 2015.

The election for NEA director for Texas place 2 will be held at the April 2015 House of Delegates. Filing forms are available online at tsta.org under “TSTA Elections” in the Members Only area. Candidates may file for office no later than Sept. 15. For additional information, contact TSTA’s Center for Executive and Governance at 316 West 12th Street, Suite 510, Austin, Texas 78701, or 877-ASK-TSTA, ext. 1514 or 1510.

BRIEFING: TIME TO SWITCH TO HOME EMAIL?

If you are receiving the Briefing electronic newsletter through your school email and would like to continue hearing from us during the summer, please email your name and home email address to Claire Moore at clairem@tsta.org.

OFFICIAL ELECTION RESULTS

Elections were held on April 12 at the TSTA House of Delegates in San Marcos.

Noel Candelaria of the Ysleta Teachers Association and Dale Kaiser of NEA-Dallas ran for TSTA president and first alternate NEA director. Candelaria was elected to a three-year term beginning July 15.

Ovidia Molina of Alief TSTA/NEA and Rae Nwosu of Education Austin ran for TSTA vice president and second alternate NEA director. Molina was elected to a three-year term beginning July 15.

Linda Estrada of Donna TSTA/NEA and Barbara Davis-Staley of Tyler Education Association ran for NEA director place 3. Estrada was elected to a three-year term beginning Sept. 1.

Ivette Gonzalez of the Ysleta Teachers Association ran unopposed for the administrator-at-large position on the TSTA Board of Directors. She begins a two-year term on July 15.

TSTA/NEA officers change this summer

At the April state convention, President Rita Haeccker recounted her successes during six years as TSTA’s leader, including the recruitment of more than 30,000 new members and establishing a “pipeline” for training and developing upcoming leaders.

“Our members join us to create a better world for themselves and their students in our public school system,” she said. “That is our vision, and that is the work that is the focus of our time, our energy, and our resources.”

Following the speech, TSTA staff surprised Haeccker with a moving video...
Honoring the best

It’s a tradition at the TSTA convention to honor a top teacher and education support professional; acknowledge excellent work by the media; and recognize outstanding efforts in social justice, communication, membership, and political action fundraising.

This year, Monica Washington, the Texarkana English teacher who was named Texas Teacher of the Year, won the Ermalee Boice Instructional Advocacy Award. The Winter 2013 Advocate included a cover story on her; it can be found online at www.tsta.org/sites/default/files/preview.pdf.

The Ronnie Ray ESP Advocate of the Year Award went to Bobbie Cunningham, a custodian at Cypress Springs High School in Cypress Fairbanks ISD (see page 19).

Social Justice Awards were presented to:

• El Paso Teachers Association for its two-day community forum to discuss problems in the district and work on solutions;
• Education Austin for a wide range of projects, including efforts to stop charters, keep a school open, and support immigrant students; and
• Ruben Cortez, a member of the State Board of Education who has worked to stop vouchers and privatization.

TSTA’s Pride in Communications Awards recognize outstanding communication efforts by local or regional associations.

Edgewood Classroom Teachers Association won the award for best newsletter; Cy Fair TSTA/NEA won best website; and Lubbock Educators Association won best electronic newsletter.

Membership Awards were presented to Laredo United, Southwest Educators Association, Alice Local Association, NEA-Dallas, and Pecos-Varstow-Toyah (one award each); Lubbock Educators Association (two awards); Edinburg Local Association, Del Valle Education Association, New Caney Local Association, and Socorro Education Association (three awards); and Phan-San Juan-Alamo TSTA Professional Association (four awards).

Winning Iggy Awards for political action fundraising during the convention were Region 1B (most new continuing contributors), Region 2G (most upgrades), and Region 3D (greatest increase in contributions).

School Bell Awards, for outstanding work by the media in covering education issues, were presented to Alex Hinjojosa, Andrew Kreighbaum, and Robert Moore, El Paso Times; Mark Wiggins, KVUE-TV, Austin; Terrence Stutz, The Dallas Morning News; Morgan Smith, Texas Tribune; Natalie Gross, Lubbock Avalanche-Journal; Ericka Mellon, Houston Chronicle; O. Ricardo Pimentel, San Antonio Express-News; and Sandra Sanchez, The Monitor.
Does pre-kindergarten really matter?

The two major party candidates for governor offer markedly different visions for the future of education in Texas, starting with the very beginning of a child’s introduction to a classroom.

Republican nominee Greg Abbott has proposed a plan that would provide limited funding for a few half-day pre-kindergarten programs that agree to submit to state assessments of their effectiveness two times a year. The Abbott campaign suggested standardized testing for 4-year-olds as one assessment option, then tried to back away from that possibility in the face of a strong, hostile reaction. But Abbott stopped short of ruling it out entirely.

Recognizing the importance of early education to a child’s academic success, Democratic nominee Wendy Davis, by contrast, has called for universal access to full-day pre-K and an expansion of early childhood reading programs. Davis’ plan would include not only the lowest income children but also children from families that make more than 185 percent of the federal poverty level. They would pay for pre-K based on a sliding income scale.

“Every child in Texas deserves that fair shot, that good start,” Davis told a cheering TSTA House of Delegates in San Marcos on April 12.

TSTA has applauded Davis’ plan, which also is supported by Leticia Van de Putte, the Democratic nominee for lieutenant governor. TSTA has endorsed both Davis and Van de Putte in their races for the state’s top two offices.

“I know, without question, that early childhood education and pre-kindergarten programs provide a foundation that shapes a child’s career in school and in life,” said TSTA President Rita Haecker, a former first grade teacher.

Research has shown consistently that pre-kindergarten really does make a difference. Full-day pre-K has a greater impact than half-day. And pre-K is especially promising in closing the achievement gap for Hispanic and African American children, according to a brief issued by the National Education Policy Center on the academic and financial benefits of universal preschool programs.

“Wendy Davis has offered a “Great Start’ education plan that recognizes every child is worth his or her weight in gold,” Haecker said.

Abbott, meanwhile, has proposed a selective, so-called “gold standard” plan that would exclude thousands of students while making school districts that want to receive additional pre-K funding jump through two assessment hoops each year. And Abbott’s plan would be limited to half-day programs.

The pre-K plan released by Abbott suggested three options for assessing pre-K students. First on the list were “normal referenced standardized tests,” followed by observations and children’s work examples.

Davis, who — along with many parents — opposes excessive standardized testing, sharply criticized the idea of “subjecting 4-year-olds to another intrusive, state-mandated requirement.”

Haecker and other education leaders held a news conference in Austin to attack the idea of testing 4-year-olds and to take Abbott to task for suggesting pre-K programs allowed to operate without new state assessments were a “waste” of money.

“If you’re serious about pre-K and ‘waste,’ stop going to court to defend the $200 million cut from pre-K programs and settle the school finance lawsuit,” Haecker challenged the attorney general.

Abbott’s office continues to defend in court the state’s inadequate and unfair school finance system, including $5.4 billion the legislative majority cut from school budgets in 2011. Those cuts included $200 million to pre-K programs, and Abbott’s pre-K plan would provide less funding than the cuts he has defended.

Michelle Cardenas, a TSTA member and pre-K teacher at Hillcrest Elementary School in Del Valle ISD, knows first-hand the benefits of early childhood education. As soon as children enter the first grade, she said, “You can see the difference in kids who were in pre-K and those who weren’t.”

After a year in pre-K, she said, children “have started reading, they know their letters, they know their numbers. Many of the kids who didn’t go to pre-K can’t even hold a pencil correctly.”

More than 90 percent of her students, Cardenas said, are from low socioeconomic backgrounds, the same as a growing majority of public school students statewide. She considered Abbott’s remark about “waste” in pre-K programs an “insult.”

“There’s so much we do to help the kids improve their lives,” she said. “People think that all we do at pre-K is play, but that’s not true….We help give kids the great start they need.”

Clay Robison is TSTA’s Public Affairs Specialist.
Hostile takeover attempt in Dallas ISD

By Clay Robison, Public Affairs Specialist

Names, as most people in the educational community already know, can be deceiving. This is particularly true in the continuing effort to privatize Texas public schools under the guise of so-called “education reform.”

On the March 4 primary election day, people representing a group called “Support Our Public Schools” showed up at polling places in Dallas, urging voters to sign petitions to “improve” schools in Dallas ISD.

“What’s more, one of the group’s big financial backers is John Arnold, a former Enron trader, hedge fund manager, and Houston billionaire who also wants to abolish the defined-benefits pension plans that teachers and other public employees have earned. He wants to replace them with risky, 401(k)-style investment plans that, in a bad economy, could evaporate on the eve of a teacher’s planned retirement.

The conversion of a school district into a home-rule charter district is allowed under a 1995 state law that has never been used. Such a change requires the approval of a district’s voters, but hardly any DISD voters knew “Support Our Public Schools” even existed until Dallas Mayor Mike Rawlings announced he was supporting the home-rule goal. The mayor, who had been meeting privately with members of the group, told The Dallas Morning News that the effort was all about giving Dallas schools “flexibility,” including a longer instruction year.

It turns out, though, that Dallas ISD already can lengthen the school day or the school year under existing law. Some years ago, the district created a number of year-round schools but gave up on that idea after little noticeable improvement in overall student performance.

What the mayor calls “flexibility” under a home-rule charter would allow additional changes, including many that could be harmful to taxpayers, school employees, and the classroom learning environment. Depending on how a charter is written, these changes could include:

• Replacement of the elected DISD school board with an appointed governing board, which could be weighted to advance the interests of school privatization advocates.
• Elimination of employee contract rights, including due process and procedures for nonrenewals.
• Elimination of teacher planning and preparation time and duty-free lunch.
• Wiping out the state salary schedule.
• Elimination of class size limits, except for campuses rated “academically unacceptable.”
• “Freedom” to ignore state student discipline and parental rights requirements.

To get the home-rule issue on the November ballot in Dallas, “Support Our Public Schools” must collect about 25,000 signatures or 5 percent of the DISD’s registered voters. If the petition drive is successful, the Dallas ISD board would have to appoint a charter review commission of 15 members to draft a proposed charter, spelling out how the district would be governed and operated. The state education commissioner also would have to approve the charter before it is placed on the ballot.

The results of the petition drive had not been announced when this issue of the Advocate went to press.

But the surprise announcement of the charter effort and the mayor’s endorsement of the proposal were greeted with a lot of anger from educators, parents, taxpayers, and other community leaders in Dallas, all of whom were taken by surprise and, like TSTA, immediately suspicious of the group’s motives. Some city council and school board members pushed back, and Dallas ISD Superintendent Mike Miles said such a radical transformation wasn’t necessary to improve the district.

When concerned citizens began questioning Mayor Rawlings about the effort at a community meeting, he walked out. The mayor later apologized for the handling of the charter idea. But supporters of the proposed radical change still had not fully explained what they wanted to do, why they had not consulted beforehand with the real education experts — teachers — and why they felt the need to be sneaky about advancing an idea with huge implications for students, educators, and taxpayers.

TSTA Public Affairs Director Ed Martin called the home rule campaign a “front to let a Houston billionaire named John Arnold and the mayor take over neighborhood schools and impose a system that hands them over to profit-driven charter operators.”

The people behind this effort, he added, “are openly hostile to those who teach and work every day to educate young people and provide them a safe and healthy learning environment.”

Martin said the pro-charter group has shown no interest in the three key factors that research has consistently shown to improve student performance:

• universal full-day pre-kindergarten for all children
• smaller class sizes
• guaranteeing a qualified teacher for every child and classroom

In 2011, the legislative majority cut $108.4 million from Dallas ISD and $5.4 billion from school districts statewide. The cuts resulted in teachers losing their jobs, the closing of 11 Dallas ISD schools, and thousands of DISD students being placed in overcrowded classrooms.

“Where were Mayor Rawlings, John Arnold, and the other leaders of ‘Support Our Public Schools’ when the budget cuts came down?” asked NEA-Dallas President Angela Davis. “Instead of demanding that state legislators give our public schools the real support they need — an adequate and fair funding system — they are promoting radical, unproven changes that would undermine the learning environment for Dallas children.”
Four rights you may not even know you have

By Elizabeth Poole, TSTA General Counsel

Whether you are a seasoned professional or new to the classroom, you may be unaware that you have the following rights:

ASSAULT LEAVE
The Texas Education Code makes clear that any employee of a school district who is physically assaulted while performing his or her duties is entitled to up to two years of paid leave to recuperate from all physical injuries sustained as a result of the assault. An employee who believes he or she is entitled to assault leave must be proactive in requesting that his or her absence from work be considered assault leave. Upon receipt of the request, the district is obligated to place the employee on assault leave. However, the district has the right to investigate the incident and determine if assault leave is appropriate.

A person is physically assaulted if the person who caused the injury could be prosecuted for assault. That means that he or she acted intentionally, knowingly, or recklessly. It is considered an assault under the Texas Education Code even if the person causing the injury could not be prosecuted for assault because of age or mental incapacity.

Leave taken pursuant to assault leave cannot be deducted from the employee’s accrued personal leave, and the district is required to coordinate with any workers’ compensation benefits that the employee receives so that the employee is receiving 100 percent of his or her rate of pay.

REMOVAL OF A STUDENT FROM CLASS OR THE BUS
Teachers and bus drivers have the authority to remove unruly students from their classroom or bus. A teacher may send a student to the principal’s office to maintain effective discipline in the classroom. Similarly, a school bus driver transporting students to or from school or a school-sponsored activity may send a student to the principal’s office to maintain effective discipline on the bus.

In both cases, the principal is required to respond by disciplining the student in accordance with the district’s student code of conduct. A teacher has the right to seek permanent removal of a student from class or from the school if the student has been documented by the teacher and is interfering with the teacher’s ability to communicate effectively with the other students in the class or with the ability of the student’s classmates to learn. A student may also be removed following a one-time event that the teacher determines is “unruly, disruptive, or abusive.” If a student’s behavior is keeping his or her classmates from learning and is interfering with the teacher’s ability to teach, it may be necessary to seek the removal of the student. In order to make the removal happen, the teacher should provide the principal with documentation of the incident(s), and then ask that the student be removed in accordance with the Texas Education Code.

A student cannot be returned to class unless the teacher consents or the campus’s Placement Review Committee determines that returning the student is the best or only alternative. The Placement Review Committee is a three-person committee that is made up of two people chosen by campus faculty and one person appointed by the principal. The teacher who is seeking the removal of the student cannot serve on the committee.

DUTY-FREE LUNCH
Classroom teachers and full-time librarians are entitled to a 30-minute lunch period free from all duties and responsibilities connected with the instruction and supervision of students. A district cannot require the teacher or librarian to remain on school property during his or her lunch break. There are only a few exceptions to the right to a duty-free lunch. If the district is experiencing a personnel shortage, extreme economic conditions, or an unavoidable or unforeseen circumstance, the district may require a classroom teacher or librarian to supervise students during lunch. Even then, the district may only require this lunch duty one day a week.

Statewide testing is not unforeseen! When it comes to testing, it’s best to plan ahead. Teachers and librarians should collaborate with administration to create a testing schedule that protects their right to a duty-free lunch.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION TIME
Within each two-week period, a classroom teacher is entitled to at least 450 minutes of time for instructional preparation, which includes planning, parent-teacher conferences, and time to evaluate students’ work. Frequently, teachers are given one 45-minute period every day, but it is also acceptable for planning and preparation periods to occur less frequently but for a longer length of time, e.g., 90 minutes every other day.

A district cannot schedule the planning period before or after school, or cobble together 45 minutes out of several smaller breaks during the day, because the law requires that a planning period may not be less than 45 minutes long, and it must be scheduled during the instructional day.

Planning and preparation time is reserved for the teacher, and he or she may not be required to participate in any other activity. That means a district cannot require a teacher to participate in team meetings or ARDs during time that is designated for planning and preparation. A teacher can always agree to participate in meetings, but should not be pressured into doing so.

The TSTA legal services department hopes that your school district respects your right to a safe work environment and allows you the time you need to fully prepare for your students; however, if you feel that your rights are being violated, you can discuss your concerns with your local association or with the TSTA Help Center by calling our toll-free number, 877-ASK-TSTA.
El Paso program Tú Libro gives books to children not served by libraries

By Ramón Rentería, El Paso Times

Some children call Georgina C. Perez the libro lady.

At 39, Perez — an eighth-grade language arts teacher at Riverside Middle School — is emerging as a literacy folk hero of sorts.

Perez is the founder and inspiration behind Tú Libro, a grassroots effort to collect and distribute free books to children across El Paso County, especially in outlying rural areas and colonias where libraries often do not exist.

“The city just pissed me off,” Perez said. “How do you tell little kids, ‘No, you can’t take this book home because of your address?’”

Perez figured the city’s decision is counterproductive to what teachers are doing to try to improve high school dropout rates and low literacy levels in a region that also has struggled historically with high poverty rates.

“Do we really need to be taking literature?” she said.

So, Perez launched Tú Libro to promote literacy, especially in outlying areas where some families do not have a home library. Tú Libro also serves as a platform to advocate for including Mexican-American literature and culture in public schools.

Ana Reza is the program director for Books Are Gems, an El Paso nonprofit organization that gives free books to children, teachers, home-school parents, and others. She has been setting aside books for Tú Libro.

“She’s doing literacy activism, so it just seemed like a natural fit for us,” Reza said.

Perez became a literacy activist in recent years when she started working with Chicano author Dagoberto Gilb and other educators urging Texas to include Mexican-American literature and culture in the public school curriculum.

A website, TuLibro915.com, promotes the cause and tells people where they can donate or drop off books. Her garage is rapidly filling up with boxes overflowing with donated books.

“People sometimes don’t realize what’s happening to kids because of a lack of libraries in their communities,” she said. “If you love to read, you’ll love education. And if you love education, you become an active participant in the world that you live in.”

Perez’s idea is that children who receive a free book can either keep it or share it with a cousin or friend. She often urges people to buy or donate books or money or collect books to help support literacy in rural areas.

Jaime Abeleytia, in charge of El Paso County’s constituent services and outreach in Precinct 3, said he’s trying to set up some Tú Libro book giveaways in the Lower Valley.

Nancy Hill, associate library director for technical services at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), often donates surplus or no longer needed books to the Tú Libro campaign.

“Being a library in an educational institution, we feel literacy is of primary importance. And we’ll support reading efforts wherever we can,” Hill said.

“Reading is important throughout life.”

Dennis Bixel-Márquez, the director of Chicano studies at UTEP, has set up a Tú Libro collection box near the program’s offices.

“The colonias have a young population that generally does not have the same level of access to books and audio visual materials that the urban population has,” he said. “There’s other efforts going on, but I don’t think there’s anything like Georgina has undertaken. It’s a very laudable effort and we’re glad to support it.”

Perez grew up in a large extended family in El Paso’s Lower Valley, where she spent much time with her father and maternal grandmother after her parents divorced. She said her father — Joe Perez, a former Texaco refinery worker now in the railroad industry — served as an inspiration.

“My dad has always been labor and union and helping people that need help and fighting for people who don’t have a voice,” she said. “If you had more than enough, then you had an obligation and responsibility to help others. Growing up, it was just a way of life.”

Perez acknowledged that she was not a model student until Mike Martinez, her high school principal, urged her to change her attitude. She graduated in 1982 from Eastwood.

“Before him, my dream was to not get in a fight before the end of the school day,” she said. “Even with all the love at home, I was still insecure and had low self-esteem and was getting in trouble.”

In high school, Perez always argued that she and other Mexican-American students could not relate to the literature they were being taught.

So, Perez keeps advocating on behalf of children and books, keeps asking anyone who will listen to support the cause.

“All I’m doing is taking books to kids,” she said. “Knowledge is the one thing that no one can take away from you.”

Georgina Perez is a member of the Ysleta Teachers Association. Reprinted with permission from the El Paso Times.
ESP OF THE YEAR OFFERS STUDENTS HOPE AND MOTIVATION

“It has been awesome being a custodian,” said Bobbie Cunningham — or, as she is better known at Cypress Springs High School, “Miss Bobbie.”

“I just love the interaction with the children. It boosts me up,” she said. “I hear ‘Miss Bobbie’ all day long. ‘Good morning, Miss Bobbie.’ ‘How are you doing, Miss Bobbie?’ ‘Miss Bobbie, we heard about your award!’ All day long!”

She starts each day by greeting students as they arrive for class and making coffee for the staff. “They look forward to the little things I do for them,” she said.

“Power is built through relationships, and strong relationships are built upon shared values. Our values inspire us to lead the fight for positive changes in our schools and for our members,” she said.

“Our working environment is our students’ learning environment. When we improve one, we improve both. In doing so, we will create a great public school for every child in Texas,” Haecker said.

Cunningham’s nurturing personality draws students to her. During the 2013-14 Seniors’ Awards Night, a former student spoke about the difference she made in his life, describing her as “a beacon of light that gives hope and motivation coupled with the truth to the Cypress Springs High School family.”

“The children that have passed my way in the past 17 years… I can’t even begin to tell you the stories,” Cunningham said, but there is one young man that she said stands out in her memory.

“he had written a poem about his father, and it was 6:30 in the morning and he asked me to listen to it,” she said. “he was talking from his heart — it was a broken family — and I just started crying.”

Cunningham apologized, but he shook his head. “Let me stop you and tell you right now: you can’t hide who you are. It’s okay to cry,” he told her.

“The more I think about that — you can’t hide who you are — you can’t,” she said. “It’s impossible. The more you try to cover up, the more it’s going to come out.”

Since that day, she has shared his words with other students and staff who are going through a difficult time, to encourage them to be proud of who they are.

Cunningham, who has worked for Cypress-Fairbanks ISD since 1985, received the association’s top honor for ESPs, the Ronnie Ray ESP Advocate of the Year Award, at the TSTA Convention in April.

She has always been a union member and advocate for worker rights, starting in Alabama, where she worked in the medical field. When she moved to Texas, she looked for a new union home.

“When I heard about the TSTA, I said, ‘Wow, I’ve got to join that,’” Cunningham said. “I found out the TSTA really helps all employees, not just the teachers (but) everybody…and I just got in it because I knew it was something I needed to do to help serve better.”

Did you know?
The TSTA ESP of the Year is Texas’ nominee for NEA ESP of the Year. Get the details at www.nea.org/home/46497.htm and www.tsta.org/news-center/awards-grants#esp.
Read Across America starts in Texas

NEA chose Texas to kick off its national “Cat-a-van” tour for Read Across America. NEA’s award-winning literacy program is celebrated across the nation on or near the March 2 birthday of Dr. Seuss (whose “The Cat in the Hat” was the inspiration for the tour’s name).

The Texas tour — carrying an ever-changing roster of NEA leaders, TSTA President Rita Haecker, and Vice President Noel Candelaria — started at Rivas Elementary in Donna on the last week of February.

Other stops included Jefferson Elementary in Edinburg; Milton and Muller Elementaries in Laredo; Metz Elementary in Austin; and Hillcrest Elementary in Del Valle.

At each stop the celebration was slightly different, but most included guests reading to students, an appearance by Thing 1 and Thing 2, presentation of a $500 check to the school’s library, and a pledge by the children to read and brush their teeth — because this year’s tour was sponsored by Renaissance Dental (www.renai-
sancedental.com).
Students urged to stand up for public schools

We are inspired by banquet speakers but we seldom put what they say into action, NEA Student Program Chair David Tjaden said at the TSTA Student Program Convention March 21-23 in Austin.

He urged the student leaders to use the training and information they received at the convention to “engage students on your campuses, build a stronger program, and build a stronger voice for future educators.”

“We have the opportunity to say that no longer are we going to let corporate interests or a politician’s agenda... tell us our schools are failing,” Tjaden said. “We are professionals, and we deserve to start being paid like it; and we deserve to start getting autonomy over our classrooms and our schools, because, darn it, we are great teachers.”

While at the convention, the student leaders were trained in legal rights, team building, classroom management, and technology in the classroom.

They also elected new officers to one-year terms that begin July 15:

- Katie Bruno, University of Houston at Clear Lake (UHCL), state president
- Kaitlin Nickolas, UHCL, state vice president
- Shelby Murphy, Lamar University, state secretary
- Shannen Miller, Texas A&M University, District 2 president
- Evelyn Flores, UHCL, District 3 president
- Nicole Griffin, Texas Wesleyan University, District 4 president
- Effy Stockton, Texas Tech University, District 5 president
- Brenda Vidana, University of Texas at El Paso, District 6 president

Speakers for the event were Tjaden, TSTA President Rita Haecker, and Vice President Noel Candelaria. Awards were presented at the Saturday night banquet:

- Local excellence: UHCL
- Student leader: Katie Bruno, UHCL
- Local advisor: Dr. Jana Willis, UHCL
- Scrapbook (large local): UHCL
- Scrapbook (small local): San Jacinto College
- Newsletter: Texas A&M University
- T-shirt: UHCL
- Project: UHCL

For more information on the Student Program, see http://tsta.org/for-members/affiliates/tsta-student-program.

CLEAR LAKE SHINES AT STATE MEET

“This is the largest group we’ve had in awhile, and I think it’s because the kids are all engaged,” Dr. Jana Willis said of the student chapter at the University of Houston at Clear Lake (UHCL).

The chapter’s energy was evident at the TSTA Student Program’s state convention in Austin, where UHCL swept the awards program, taking six top prizes including local excellence.

Willis was named outstanding local advisor, and Katie Bruno, outstanding local student leader. UHCL members won three state positions, as well: Bruno, state president; Kaitlin Nickolas, state vice president; and Evelyn Flores, District 3 president.

Willis said holding meetings that students actually want to attend has helped build the chapter. “We make sure every meeting includes professional development, which they have to have for most of their methods classes and to put in their portfolios,” she said.

Although the college has an outstanding faculty, “The kids have all seen them, so there’s not that draw,” Willis said, so she brings in outside speakers from neighboring school districts.

For example, the human resources person from Pearland explained how to write a resume, what to expect from a job fair, and how the hiring process works. Another speaker held a “make-and-take” session in which students created decorations for the classroom.

This year’s breakout sessions at the district convention included working with gifted and talented, how to handle students actually want to be,” Willis said.

They were so inspired by Outreach to Teach, the annual event in which delegates renovate an area school, that they replicated it on a smaller scale in two classrooms at Lawhon Elementary in Pearland ISD and two classrooms at Longfellow Elementary in Alvin ISD.

Last summer, the chapter sent two members, Nickolas and Bruno (shown above in the front row, right end), to the NEA Representative Assembly.

“They got so excited about seeing people from all over the United States who were like them, who were really passionate about education and wanted to be the kind of teachers they want to be,” Willis said.

Villains created bulletin boards, decorated walls and doors, hung curtains for a reading area, built stools — and raised $1,000 to buy the materials.

The interaction with practicing teachers was invaluable, Willis said.

“It’s good for them to see what first year teachers are struggling with,” she said. In one of the classrooms the students worked on, the teacher quit mid-year and her intern became the teacher. The intern had just graduated in December, so she was very close in age to the UHCL students.

“They’re realizing they’re almost teachers now,” Willis said. “This is what their world is going to be like.”
Retired members have been busy!

In the news: One of the hot issues now is TRS Care health insurance. On Feb. 3, several TSTA-Retired members attended an Austin Teacher Retirement System subcommittee meeting on the issue. This is a continuous battle for retired as well as active TSTA members, and TSTA-Retired encourages all educators to follow the debate and take action when needed. You can learn more on our Facebook page, https://www.facebook.com/TSTAR.NEAR, and the TRS website, www.trs.state.tx.us.

NEA-Retired National Organizing Conference: On March 25-27, approximately 300 retired members from all over the United States attended the NEA-Retired National Organizing Conference, which was hosted by TSTA-Retired at the Westin Galleria in Houston.

Meetings and elections: On Feb. 24, TSTA-R staff member Gerald Haschke and President Louise Watkins held an organizing meeting in San Antonio to bring together members from several retired locals. The meeting was successful, and those present elected regional officers for the next two years — Barbara Franklin as president of Region 1B and Patricia Budak as president of Regions 2D-E. They will represent their regions on the TSTA-R Board of Directors.

Elections for state TSTA-R treasurer and secretary also were held this spring: Katherine Miano was reelected secretary, and Diane Wilkerson was elected treasurer.

Three delegates will represent TSTA-R in Denver at the NEA-Retired national meeting: Louise Watkins, Johnetta Williams, and Bobbie Duncan.

Twenty-four elected delegates attended the state TSTA convention April 11-12 in San Marcos. Many retirees came in early for the TSTA-R Annual Meeting, which began on April 8; they participated in workshops, one by TSTA staff member Mark Maldonado on how retired members can become more involved in the association, especially in such areas as politics, and another by Antonio Galindo of NEA Member Benefits on how your membership can save you money (see www.neamb.com to learn more).

Quilt fundraiser: Once again, the major fundraiser for the year was a quilt raffle, and it was a huge success. The quilt was an exceptionally gorgeous one, and ticket sales went extremely well. The quilt, which sported a Texas theme, was given away at the end of the TSTA convention to one of our own retired members, Lois Stephens of Longview. The quilt raffle would not have been as successful without the hard work of the chair of the fundraising committee, Johnetta Williams.

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The engines of intellect

What would you think if I told you questioning is an integral part of the practice of teaching, but not so much a part of today’s profession of teaching?

By Bryan Weatherford, Teaching and Learning Specialist

The importance of effective questioning in the learning process is well researched. Teachers are schooled in how to frame questions, how to respond to questions, how to interpret questions, and how to use them as an instructional strategy to assess learning. Teachers also understand the significance of students asking and answering questions, especially ones that demonstrate a deeper level of thinking and a higher degree of understanding.

Equally important, however, are the questions teachers ask in the context of their profession outside of the classroom — the questions they ask of decision-makers, supervisors, and one another. Innovation guru Clayton Christensen has observed that questioning is often seen as “inefficient” by those who are anxious because they feel they don’t have time to question what they are doing. Still others fear questioning could jeopardize their job security, should the act of raising a questioning could jeopardize their job security, should the act of raising a question.”

Indeed, learning is risk-taking, and the questions teachers ask should have a profound impact on what is happening in their classrooms. In his book “Beyond the Obvious,” Phil McKinney writes that we make the erroneous assumption that the person who has the answer is smarter than the one who asks the questions. Questions, not answers, spawn innovation. Questions, not answers, move us to a deeper level of knowledge. And questions, not answers, help us find solutions. Getting to the right answer begins by asking the right questions.

The desire to ask questions shows a higher level of thought than answering the question, because it demonstrates an acceptance and awareness that our own knowledge is not complete. Here are a few questions — some obvious and some not so obvious — that teachers should ask as part of their professional practice.

• Why are we doing this? Clarity and understanding minimize confusion, engender commitment, foster accountability, and emphasize results.
• Why are we not doing better? The answer to this question is not “We just need to work harder.” The answer to this question begins with an honest understanding of what challenges one faces and a frank dialogue about that with all stakeholders.
• What’s trending in public education and best practices for the classroom? Teachers must develop an awareness of what is changing in their profession and the content they teach so they are transformative rather than reactive in their practices.
• How do we transform our school culture to tap into the creativity and imagination of all stakeholders? The word “transform” is a scary word in an environment as hierarchical as our public schools, and the question itself challenges the current paradigm where teachers are seen more as widgets and less as thinkers.
• Why am I suddenly the villain? There is a propensity to “blame the teacher” when our schools don’t perform, because the lion’s share of the work in our public schools is done by the teacher. Polling shows the public holds teachers in high regard, but “accountability” measures tend to blame teachers, even though accountability is a two-way street — you can’t teach in the 21st century without the resources needed to reach and teach today’s students.
• Why don’t we value teachers? This question touches on both the tangible and intangible “value.” From a tangible perspective, the average salary for a Texas teacher was $50,967, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (May 2013), compared to an average salary of $80,895 for those in Texas with a job requiring a bachelor’s degree. From an intangible perspective, teachers are least likely to feel that their input has value in their workplace according to “The State of America’s Schools: The Path to Winning Again in Education.”
• What about my own children? Teachers have families, yet too often the mandates placed on them to meet, plan, train, and tutor take teachers away from their own families. We want parents engaged in their children’s education, and we must also allow teachers the time to be engaged with their own children’s education.

In education, demographics shift, funding fluctuates, requirements and mandates create additional burdens — all to the point that change is a constant. Across this sea of change, inquiry is perhaps the most powerful tool for reform and transformation that we possess because it forces us to do the one thing we want our students to do: THINK. Rather than fear it or dismiss it, we need to embrace the art of questioning and let it work for us.

Bryan Weatherford is TSTA’s Teaching and Learning Specialist.
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- We are fighting efforts to base teacher evaluation and pay on standardized test scores.
- TSTA’s “Fair Share” health insurance campaign stopped a mid-year premium increase while demanding that the state and local school districts pay their fair share of the rising cost of health insurance.
- Through our “Respect” campaign, we are working for due process and a salary schedule for all school employees.
- TSTA protected the Teacher Retirement System “defined benefit” retirement plan and won the first cost-of-living adjustment for retirees in 12 years.
- Our “Stop the Cuts” campaign helped restore over $3.4 billion in state school funding cuts, and TSTA locals de
- TSTA defeated vouchers and is fighting corporate charter takeover of neighborhood schools.
- We are fighting efforts to base teacher evaluation and pay on standardized test scores.
- From your school and your community to your school board and the capitol, TSTA locals are organizing

TSTA: Power in Numbers
“I think we’ll see this period as a turning point — a turning point that gave parents and kids and working families hope, because TSTA stepped up to lead and the voices of education would not be silenced. And for that, we say, ‘Thank you, Rita.’”

— Sen. Leticia Van de Putte, speaking in a video tribute to outgoing TSTA President Rita Haecker