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TASA *Insights*

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With the 83<sup>rd</sup> Legislative Session well underway and the recent Midwinter Conference in our rear view mirror, I did something I ask my staff to do regularly – reflect. I find the practice both cathartic and rejuvenating – something from which we can all benefit as we sprint toward the finish line of another school year.

What occurred to me were some thoughts about the deep roots of education in this state and the vision for education in the future as set forth by our predecessors. It did not take me long to find many similarities between the arduous work of those past leaders (Lamar, Austin, and others) who paved the way for generations of future learners and educators, and the difficult journey toward educational reform we are on today.

When you consider its beginnings, the fact that education in Texas has undergone numerous transformations since the days of those small classes held in Spanish missions (1690's) is not news to us, in fact, it's been a staple in our history. From those first state-controlled elementary schools (1824), to raising the level of school standards (1949), to today's technology-infused 21<sup>st</sup> century education – we have always taken risks and made progress. The groundwork was laid thanks to leaders who believed that educating children was and should always be a purposeful priority in our state.

Our schools historically faced and overcame insurmountable odds: a shortage of funding; lack of supplies such as textbooks; frontier conditions; insufficiently trained educators; inadequate facilities; lack of equality; poor or no transportation; and more. Does this sound familiar? The movement persevered because leaders had vision – not for what education *was*, but for what it *could be*.

By the turn of the century, the Texas census recorded over half a million children attending schools in country school districts and another 342,000+ attending school in independent school districts across the state. The population was growing, becoming more culturally diverse, and experiencing an industrial revolution...a far cry from the small numbers learning by lamplight inside those mission spaces - a sure sign that we must again make adjustments in order to move forward.

While transportation and modernization have eliminated our frontier conditions, as educators, we still face more than a fistful of challenges: a shortage of funding and a lawsuit over adequacy; societal demands to stay abreast of ever-changing technology; finding ways to reach and engage every child in their learning; managing the negative effects (*on students and staff!*) of a testing system that's run amuck; decreased time for teacher training and resources; a lack of local control; increased yet unfunded state mandates; and the list goes on.

This unceasing journey to pursue the very best education for all children may look and sound more complex now – in 2013 – but we are still called upon by conscience and those educational pioneers of the past to again make education our purposeful priority and persevere. We can make meaningful educational reforms which will help us meet new societal challenges so our children and grandchildren will be well-equipped to experience personal success in their lifetime. That, my friends and colleagues, is exactly what we're doing - painstakingly paving the way – for children.

Think about it. Public education may never have had the poignancy it has right now. Conversations (in grocery checkout lines, at the bank, on the soccer field, in our places of worship) are often about our educational system and high stakes testing. The passion at the grassroots level is unmistakably on our side.

We are at a pivotal point in our history with the chance to change the course of public education in Texas and write the next chapter. Senate Bill 1557 has given us the opportunity to create a pilot of new standards, assessments, and accountability measures that will allow us to move away from the current rules and regulations that are strangling our *future* – the very children they were designed to serve. For the first time, this state’s educational frontline leadership (with the support of our TASA organization), has a seat at the design table.

We will not fail our children by adopting the federal model of brinkmanship – there’s too much at stake. Texas’ chance for real education reform is now and we must work as a cohesive unit in support of those efforts. We must seize this opportunity to improve our schools – it is our time and our responsibility to do so.