

# A Note from Tanya Larkin, Pampa ISD Superintendent

## A Lesson on School Finance

I recently testified to the Special Commission on School Finance in Austin, Texas and it was a learning experience to say the least. When I was approached about testifying, I was very excited to get the chance to explain how inadequate state funding and unfunded mandates had crippled the flow of resources, time, and energy in public schools today. I provided specific examples of strict spending requirements and restrictions that have led to our inability to be efficient with every dollar. You see, you probably don't know this, but we have money in different funding codes that can ONLY be spent in certain ways and we do not have the authority or permission to make those decisions at the local level. This is very frustrating for our staff and the administration. I provided examples of how compliance driven activities such as redundant postings, mailings, and paper-rich reporting systems cost our district almost \$20,000 annually and the entire state millions of dollars each year. I went on to provide multiple examples of restrictions and mandates that both cripple and burden the local districts' budgets. I ended my testimony with a suggestion to provide reductions in costs, specifically fixed costs such as utilities. Did you know that utilities cost the district over \$700,000 last year. Please know that we have reduced our energy demands by upgrading many of our systems like lighting, heating, and cooling units, and we are doing everything we can to be efficient with these resources. Our data shows that we have significantly reduced our energy demands. I recommended that lawmakers incentivize rate reductions for public schools. This idea seemed to spark some interest with the committee.

Overall, the experience was both inspiring and disappointing all at the same time. Let me explain. I was inspired to see that there were genuinely interested members of both the House and the Senate who wanted to learn more about how education works and the barriers we are facing, specifically with school funding. I was disappointed in the fact that the politics that so often accompany this sort of work was alive and well. Alas, the Commission has been charged with providing a report of the findings from the testimonies and panel discussions along with some recommendations for lawmakers to consider in the upcoming legislative session. I am cautiously optimistic in my belief that my testimony and the comments of the others to this commission will make a difference. But, we have to try every way that we can to activate change in school funding, flexibility, and local control. Voting is always one way to stay engaged!—I digress.



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