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Legislators and educators: How to bridge disconnect

Both sides could do more to create a true partnership

By SARAH WINKLER

The 80th regular session of the Texas Legislature is concluding soon, and communication between the education community and legislators has improved significantly. However, I believe that a disconnect still exists, not only between public education and the Legislature, but also between educators, legislators and our community.

Why do well-intentioned individuals struggle to understand each other? There are several reasons, beginning with our mind-sets and world views, which are sometimes very different.

Educators feel that some legislators do not have a true picture of our challenges since they see schools as they existed 20 or 30 years ago. The demographics of our school population have radically changed. We are serving more economically disadvantaged and limited-English proficient students, and many need special programs and services. Additional resources are needed to serve these students effectively.

In addition, it often appears that legislation is filed to address a problem that exists in only one district. Unfortunately, once a bill is passed, every public school in the state is affected. This "one size fits all" approach has produced many unfunded mandates that do not directly contribute to student success in every public school.

Lastly, educators sometimes feel that lawmakers have preconceived ideas about public schools — including a belief that sufficient funds are available and that districts spend too much on administration and operations.

On the other hand, trustees, superintendents and the rest of the education community are so passionate about public schools that we have "tunnel vision." We fail to realize that we are advocating a single issue, while legislators must balance concerns about other important matters such as health care, the criminal justice system, higher education and state parks.

We too have preconceived ideas about legislators and assume that they are unwilling to listen to our concerns. Too often, we forget how important it is to communicate effectively with our critics, our community and our taxpayers. We may complain that legislators don't understand our problems, but we don't try hard enough to provide information that might bridge that gap. It is not enough to let our representatives know that we are for or against proposals. We must provide data and arguments that support our positions. In addition, we sometimes make the mistake of thinking that we must speak only to elected officials and ignore other vital contacts such as legislative aides.

A problem many educators and legislators share is a failure to put partisan politics aside. Many lawmakers and members of the public education community make assumptions based solely on party affiliation.

So, how do we bridge the gap and find solutions that will lead to a better working relationship?

First, the public education community and legislators must put preconceived ideas and partisan politics aside, and approach each other with an open attitude. Strong relationships are built through two-way communication and respect. More legislators should communicate with school districts and ask for information before passing legislation.

However, school officials should not wait to hear from their representatives and senators. We must contact our legislators and their aides frequently to build relationships and open lines of communication. We should share our challenges and provide financial and student performance data to demonstrate our efforts to resolve problems. This process would make it much more likely that legislators would be receptive to listening to our concerns and asking us for information to assist in the decision-making process.

School districts also need to disseminate more information to our communities. Parents, community members and area businesses all have a personal stake in public education because it involves two vital concerns — their children and tax dollars. An informed electorate could advocate for public education, and their involvement would show legislators that we truly represent the views of our community.

Legislators should regularly visit our schools not only to see our challenges first hand, but also to celebrate our accomplishments. It is important that we meet with our representatives before the legislative session begins to discuss issues that affect our districts. Town hall meetings — where the community, legislators and school officials share concerns, issues and information — would help all parties begin to build trust and better relationships. School visits would provide a context for understanding public concerns.

I do believe that legislators and the public education community can reconnect to create a true partnership based on mutual respect. Many legislators work diligently to communicate with their local school districts regularly and visit campuses, just as many trustees and superintendents have built strong relationships with their representatives.

However, until more legislators and members of the education community make similar efforts, we still have barriers to overcome. Let's sit down, put our differences aside and work together to provide the best education possible for the future leaders of this state.

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