

Tuesday, January 12, 2016



## A New Bill of Rights

Thomas Ratliff has a flare for using humor to make serious and insightful points. A case in point is the letter the SBOE Vice Chair issued this week with a heading that read "Public School Parent Bill of Rights." The document was released in response to Gov. Greg Abbott's call for a constitutional convention with a number of objectives designed to restore state's rights. In his communiqué, Ratliff notes that "Imitation is the most sincere form of flattery," adding that he hoped the governor would take his suggestions in that vein. Ratliff went on to applaud Abbott's desire "to maintain a separation of powers and uphold the conservative principle of government closest to the people is the most accountable to the people." And he proceeds to imitate the governor's proposal with a list that mirrors his concepts on behalf of parent and school district rights. If you haven't seen the list, [check it out here](#), and pass it along.

## Spotlight on Region 10 Schools

Frisco ISD has solved the mystery of which schools will get to play on opening day at the new 12,000 seat dome often referred to as a smaller version of the Cowboys' AT&T Stadium. The Ford Center at The Star, a joint venture involving the district, city and Dallas Cowboys, has been described by FISD athletic director David Kuykendall as "something no kid could ever imagine playing in." And that's why the decision was made to have all eight Frisco schools that will have varsity teams this fall play each other in a quadruple header on the first Saturday of the football season. The downside is that the Frisco schools will open with a district game instead of getting three weeks of non-district matches to smooth out the rough edges. But as Kuykendall puts it, "We're only going to have one time when we can all play in there the first time." [Read more here](#).

Three Sherman ISD schools have awarded [ExxonMobil Education Alliance Grants to help augment and enrich math and science instruction](#). Recipients included Wakefield Elementary School, Dillingham Intermediate School, and Sherman High School. The grants of \$500 for each school were

made possible by funding from the ExxonMobil Corporation through Douglass Distributing, a local SISD Partner in Education. The awards are part of a program making funds available to schools in communities across the country served by Exxon or Mobil stations. The company has a long history of supporting educational programs that focus on improvements in math and science from pre-school to higher education.

A [free after school program](#) got underway this week for students at Finley-Oates Elementary School in the Bonham ISD. The initiative, scheduled Monday through Friday from 3:30 until 5:15 p.m., will provide homework help, enrichment, and food for all students who attend. The program is sponsored by [Della's House of Giving](#), a national organization whose mission is to reduce hunger and increase literacy rates among children.

## Scanning the News

A Corpus Christi newspaper is calling attention to what many consider a loophole in the tax code which has allowed companies to save millions of dollars in property tax statewide through lawsuits that many appraisal districts say they can't afford to fight. [The Caller Times spotlights the impact on schools of the practice](#), including a recent out of court settlement with Valero that cost the Corpus Christi ISD \$11.9 million in back taxes. A 1997 amendment to the property tax code allows property owners to successfully file litigation to reduce the taxable value of their property to a median of a list of comparable properties. Nueces County tax officials say Valero has made a business model out of systematically going to court. The company's property in that county is now valued at half of what it was before litigation. Valero has filed suits seeking to lower the taxable value of pipelines, convenience stores and refineries in a number of locales.

The Pennsylvania School Boards Association has sued the state's Democratic governor, the Republican-controlled legislature, the treasurer and education secretary [for failing to timely fund public schools during a months-long budget impasse](#). Pennsylvania has not had a state budget since June 2015, and through December school districts [had borrowed \\$900 million to help stay afloat](#). Some were even contemplating keeping their doors closed after the winter break because they were on the verge of running out of money. [The lawsuit](#) claims that state officials violated both the Pennsylvania and U.S. constitutions in their "refusal and failure to pay state and federal funds to public school districts as required by law." PSBA wants the court to compel the state to pay the school districts funds they are owed and award damages to help districts recover unnecessary costs they incurred during the budget impasse.

Although states and local districts will have more flexibility under the new Every Student Succeeds Act, [testing won't be going away and neither will the requirement that all schools test at least 95% of their students](#). Under NCLB, schools that didn't meet the participation target were considered automatic failures. Now, under ESSA, states must figure low testing participation into school ratings, but just how to do that is totally up to them. And states can continue to have laws affirming parents' right to opt their students out of tests. The U.S. Department of Education recently sent state school chiefs a [letter](#) reminding them about the need to address opt-outs in their accountability systems, and included a list of suggested actions they could take in response to low participation rates.

## Items of Interest

Over the past couple of decades, schools have cut recess time to make room for tests and test prep. But kindergartners and first-graders at an Eagle Mountain-Saginaw ISD elementary school are getting much more time on the playground than most public school kids get anywhere in the country. Eagle Mountain Elementary School is part of a project with the school day modeled after the Finnish school system, which consistently scores at or near the top in international education rankings. TCU kinesiologist Debbie Rhea designed the project after a visit in which she discovered Finnish students get much more recess. This year the school started tripling recess time, from 20 minutes to an hour. The program also focuses on character development --things like empathy and positive behavior.

Eagle Mountain teachers say they've seen a huge transformation in their students who they say are way ahead of schedule. [Read more.](#)

When theorists and pundits analyze America's educational system, they usually focus on urban centers, but [rural school systems make up more than half of the nation's operating school districts](#), according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Like many of their urban peers, children there fight to overcome scant funding, generational poverty, rampant malnutrition, and limited job prospects. Indeed, 301 rural counties (compared to 52 non-rural ones) in the country suffer from "persistent poverty," meaning poverty rates have exceeded 20% in every census since 1980. Compared to students in urban or suburban schools, [students in rural areas and small towns are less likely to attend college](#). Meanwhile, many rural districts are working to overcome these and other challenges. Read this recent *The Atlantic* online article [about how one rural Tennessee school is battling the odds](#).

The folks at *Edutopia* have recommended some tech ideas for schools to try in 2016. Here are three of their best: (1) Tips for using a free video broadcasting tool to spark inquiry in students and engage parents - [Using Periscope to Connect Classrooms to the World](#); (2) Is the sky the limit? Lessons in math, science, and current-event debates are a start - [7 Ways to Use Drones in Our Schools](#); and (3) Four ways to improve student learning with an app that turns your smartphone into a walkie-talkie - [Voxer Versatility: New Ways to Communicate](#).

## Looking Ahead

The beginning of a new year is a good time to pause and take a look at your district's social media strategies and tactics and see where you can improve. A great place to start is with the latest post on NSPRA's Social School Public Relations blog. In it Delaina McCormack shares a few of the 2016 social media resolutions for Virginia's Alexandria City Public Schools where she is a PR specialist. McCormack also offers some other good social media strategies to consider, along with several tips for the staff responsible for doing the work. [Check it out here.](#)



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