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Education Candidate Forum Recap - Part I (of IV Parts)

During a recent candidate forum in Mesquite, Texas, I answered questions about public education on topics including school finance, school choice, and accountability. In case you missed the forum, here's Part 1 of a three-part recap on answers I gave to several key questions:

Senator Hall Statement: The education of our children is one of the most important responsibilities we have as adults. In order to return to its leadership in this area, Texas must move its education system away from a focus on institutions and administration, and toward better quality education, recognizing that the student is the most important person involved in K-12 education, and the teacher is the most important employee.

Question: *For years there has been debate regarding the lack of funding for Texas public education. The last legislative session there were many reform efforts, including House Bill 21. However, all of these measures fell short after a failure to compromise. How can you, as our state senator, ensure us that you will bring about education funding reform? Will you be willing to compromise to improve the funding for our local schools?*

Senator Hall: I am always willing to give concession on policy – never on principles. No compromise is needed. The current formula is broken beyond repair and we have to fix it. The trends over the past twenty years do not support the statement that there is a lack of funding for education.

The current school finance system we have in Texas is really too complex and complicated to be useful. It is unfair in that similarly situated students in different districts do not qualify for the same funding. The formulas need to be simplified, the mandates on how the money can be spent need to go away, and the system needs to be equitable, for the students.

Perhaps one of the most important things we need to look at is our source of revenue for school funding. We have relied on property taxes because they are a consistent, easily collected form of revenue.

However, when they were originally tapped as the source for education funding, the state had a lot of property and not much else. A low tax on property was considered a dependable source of income. No one envisioned the appraisal increases we have seen in the past 20 years that would price homeowners out of their homes.

Interestingly enough, according to the 2016 Snapshot, since 2006, Mesquite's property value per student has actually decreased and their property tax rate has dropped from 1.762 cents to 1.41 cents, but due to an increase in state share, Mesquite has a higher expenditure per pupil. State share went from 50 to 66 percent.

In the 85th and special sessions, no House member showed any interest in reforming school finance. I was one of the Senate leaders who insisted that HB 21 include the Education Funding Reform Commission. The current formula is broken beyond repair and I am hopeful that come next session we will have a totally new approach to public school funding.

Question: *This past year, the taxable assessed values of local property increased in Mesquite by 10 percent which was a total of \$7.7 million this year. However, Mesquite ISD did not receive this increased funding because the state absorbed the additional revenue. What are your ideas or thoughts on transforming public education funding so that school districts receive the local property growth?*

Senator Hall: Actually, I would prefer a system where the taxpayer gets the benefits of the increased appraisal of their property, not the government. That is one of the reasons that the property tax is such a poor choice for funding education.

There is an assumption on the part of government that the increase in value should go to – pick a side – state or local government. I am working to move away from our dependence on property tax to fund any part of government.

Property ownership and property rights are fundamental to the principles of liberty envisioned by our founding fathers. So long as we have to pay a property tax, we do not own the property. We are just renting it from the government. I have great hopes that the Commission on School Finance, that I helped pass in HB 21, will move to a more student-equitable and dependable revenue stream for education.

