



# My five cents...

A monthly column from Sen. Robert Nichols  
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As students dust off their backpacks these last few weeks and head back to school, Fall is definitely in the air. If only our Texas temperatures would cooperate and bring a dose of Fall weather to go along.

Here are five things happening around your state this month:

## 1. **Smoking Age Raises to 21**

Beginning September 1st, young Texans will not be able to buy tobacco, cigarettes, or e-cigarettes until they turn 21. A bill passed in the 86th Legislature raised the smoking age from 18 to 21, but exempts active duty military. Military members will still be able to purchase tobacco products at age 18 or older.

According to a recent report published by the Texas Health and Human Services Commission, 16% of middle school and high school students have smoked at least one cigarette, and 9% of Texas students under the age of 18 have reported using e-cigarettes within the last 30 days. The authors of SB 21 have stated that this change will reduce the number of young people using tobacco, save lives, and ultimately save Texans billions of dollars in healthcare costs. When Governor Abbott signed this bill, Texas became the 16th state in the United States to raise the smoking age to 21.

## 2. **College Credits Transfer Ability**

Every year, students, parents, and the state spend almost a combined \$60 million on course credits that will not transfer between our state's colleges and universities. This session the Texas Legislature passed Senate Bill 25 to try and solve the problem of students wasting their time and money on non-transferrable courses.

Senate Bill 25 requires colleges and universities to lay out recommended course sequences for all of their majors, including which classes students should take and appropriate timelines for completing them. It also requires universities to disclose any non-transferrable credits to both the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and the Legislature no later than March 1 of each

year. This new law will make it easier for students to avoid taking courses that will not transfer to another college or university.

### **3. School District Grades**

As students head back to school this year, Texas schools and school districts have received report cards of their own. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) released this year's data on schools and school districts statewide grading them on an A - F system. These grades are based on student achievement on standardized testing and college readiness, school progress on improving scores on state tests, and closing the gaps by aiding students with special needs.

The A - F grading system was first implemented last year in lieu of the previous pass/fail ratings that school districts were given. The hope is that it gives parents across the State more information to choose the best options for their children. TEA has created a website for parents and community members to view their schools' ratings at: [www.TXschools.gov](http://www.TXschools.gov). This website can be utilized to look up your school district to find their performance score, as well as funding for the district, enrollment, and information about each individual campus.

### **4. Domestic Terrorism Task Force**

In response to the recent shooting in El Paso, Governor Abbott has launched a Domestic Terrorism Task Force to protect against statewide acts of extremism. The task force will be made up of federal, state, and local officials and will analyze current and emerging threats. The task force will meet quarterly and make recommendations on statewide security planning. The announcement of the Task Force came in response to Federal officials declaring the El Paso shooting as an act of domestic terrorism.

As part of the announcement, Governor Abbott also authorized the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) to start taking immediate action to combat domestic terrorism threats. The ultimate goal of the Task Force will be to keep Texans safe from hateful acts and extremist threats.

### **5. Beer to Go**

If you're planning a visit to one of our many Texas craft breweries this fall, a new law will allow you to buy and take home some of the local beer that you taste there. Starting September 1, Texans are able to purchase up to one case of craft beer to go from a brewery. Prior to this change in law, local breweries weren't able to sell their beer to take home due to Texas' complex alcohol laws. This change puts craft breweries on par with local wineries and distilleries who have been able to sell products to go.

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