

Texas Counseling Association Annual Conference General Session  
Remarks by Senator Eddie Lucio, Jr., accepting TCA's Presidential Award  
Thursday, November 21, 2013

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Thank you so much to all the members of the Texas Counseling Association for this tremendous honor. In particular, thank you to TCA Executive Director Jan Friese, both for your efforts putting this conference together, and, more importantly, for all your time spent working with me on behalf of school counselors.

In my more than 30 years in public office, I have been a passionate advocate for Texas counselors. I've seen first-hand the essential role school counselors play in ensuring students' success throughout public education and beyond. Throughout my career, I've also had an opportunity to advocate for licensed professional counselors, who, along with school counselors, also play an important role in ensuring our most at-risk students have the support they need.

A strong, comprehensive school counseling program can have a dramatic effect on improving academic performance and reducing dropout rates. Students with frequent access to counselors are more likely to perform well on exams, have increased on-task behavior, and have significantly reduced disruptive behaviors.

Perhaps most importantly, access to quality counseling increases students' chances of pursuing some sort of post-secondary education. If students feel safe in their schools, know their education is relevant to their future, have confidence in their abilities and self-worth, and have career, college, and financial aid information made readily available, they're almost certainly assured to seek higher education.

The value of quality counseling is even more important now that Texas has begun overhauling its high school graduation requirements. This Legislative Session I was the co-author of legislation in the Senate which ultimately passed as House Bill 5. The bill enables students to pursue different academic goals through special endorsements on their high school diplomas. These endorsements include Business and Industry; Arts and Humanities; STEM; Public Service; and Multidisciplinary studies.

The goal of this legislation is to give students more flexibility in selecting their courses of study, while at the same time ensuring all students leave high school both college and workforce ready. But I don't need to tell this crowd that simply taking the correct high school courses won't ensure college success. Rather, a competent counselor needs to guide our students as they plan their future college and career goals. With so much changing in public education, one thing should be clear: effective counseling is now even more crucial to academic success.

As the Vice Chair of the Senate Education Committee, I had the privilege of authoring several important pieces of legislation benefiting counselors. These bills include some highly technical bills, for example, a bill to clean up the Texas Education Code so that it makes consistent references to school counselors. Another bill aligns licensed professional counselors' certification exam with national norms.

I was also able to pass a bill which adds licensed professional counselors to the list of certified professionals school districts may hire. The additional resources provided by Licensed Professional Counselors are especially critical in districts with high student-to-school counselor ratios, and in rural and small school districts, like those found in my region of the state.

Finally, I was proud to sponsor a bill which ensures that counselors renewing their licenses get the most up-to-date information on assisting students with graduation plans, implementing dropout prevention strategies, and preparing for college applications and financial aid. Rulemaking for this bill is underway at the State Board for Educator Certification.

Despite all the tremendous success we had this Session, more needs to be done. Notably, I'm sorry to report, not all of my bills supporting schools counselors passed this session. For example, I filed a bill which would require districts employ at least one counselor for every 300 students. This would bring Texas closer to the student-to-counselor ratio recommended by the American School Counselor Association.

Another bill would have enacted a ten percent limit on the amount of time counselors spend on non-counselor duties, for example, administering tests. Now, under House Bill 5, we lowered the number of End-of-Course exams from 15 to 5, and also limited the number of benchmark tests schools may administer to two a year. But still, we hear reports that implementation of this provision of the bill, the one related to benchmark tests, has been spotty. I think it's fair to say that, by and large, Texas counselors are still stretched too thin. Students should not be denied a counselor's services because those counselors are too busy administering tests!

Similarly, parents and students should be allowed to know if a school counselor isn't available to them. In fact, I suspect most parents expect counselors to be available in times of crisis. Tragically, they might be wrong. This Session, I successfully passed out of the Senate a bill which would require schools, through a simple notice, let parents know if a full-time school counselor is not on their child's campus. Devastatingly, this common-sense bill, which would have had no cost to school districts, got voted down in the House.

To say I'm disappointed that these bills didn't pass would be an understatement. But please know that I have not given up this fight! This is not the first time these bills have been filed, and it won't be the last. That these bills were heard in the Senate at all is already a major victory! Consider this: for the first time, we are able to put a dollar figure on how much Texas under-funds public schools' counseling programs; it would cost more than \$700 million to ensure schools have an appropriate student-to-counselor ratio. Also, according to your TCA advocates in the Capitol, for the first time your organization entered into meaningful conversations with groups representing Texas school districts to lessen the non-counseling duties forced on counselors.

Finally, we now know exactly which members voted against my counselor notification bill. I have no doubt, next Session, TCA members will be standing there with me doing what they do best: educating and guiding these members to make the best decisions for Texas public school children.

On that note, I need to thank all professional counselors that took time out of their days and away from their schools to testify in support of legislation this Session. It's only through the hard work of committed advocates that we effect change in the state Capitol. TCA members, I encourage each of you to stay active in your communities. I hope to see some of you testifying before the Legislature when they reconvene next Session. This great state needs bright educated minds like those gathered here.

So, thank you again to the Texas Counseling Association. Let me conclude by sharing one of my favorite adages from Mother Teresa. I'll paraphrase: If we are to find peace, we need to remember that we belong to each other, that every man, woman, and child is our brother and sister.

These are words I try to live by. It's a message that drives my legislative career. And I advocate every session for professional counselors because I know these are words you live by too! Counseling is a vocation. The people gathered in this room want to make a difference in people's lives, regardless of background, color, income, party, or creed.

I am so humbled and honored to be recognized tonight by a group of people I admire so much. I pledge to keep advocating for you, so you can continue to support the children of Texas.