

Lucio Applauded For Stance On Vaccines

Austin, TX – Senator Eddie Lucio (D-Brownsville), was mentioned in an opinion editorial for his position supporting science-based evidence relating to public health and preventable diseases.

Opinion: The Legislature's lack of political courage on vaccines should scare us all*

The Texas Legislature finished its work for 2019, and our senators and representatives have returned home to their districts. The people of Texas can now evaluate their performance. Will new laws boost the state's economy and improve its schools? Did legislators work to protect us against future natural disasters and keep Texas communities healthy and safe? The people of Texas will give the final grade to the 2019 Texas Legislature.

Texas lawmakers made real progress on big-ticket issues like public school finance. However, on some key issues, like health care, much was left undone or completely ignored. Case in point: The Texas Legislature chose to sit on its hands in the face of a growing measles epidemic.

I have worked at the Texas Capitol advocating for improved vaccination laws for three legislative sessions. I have participated in sessions that have been labeled everything from “culture war” to “Kumbaya.” Issues that once seemed impossible to pass are mainstream now. In 2015, Pre-K was a socialist plot in the eyes of many. In 2019, the newly-signed school finance bill adds hundreds of millions of dollars for Pre-K. Politics often change.

One issue has unfortunately not changed in my five years immersed in Texas politics. Almost nobody at the Texas Capitol wants to take action on immunizations. Even legislators who support immunizations do not want to deal with a firestorm of opposition and borderline harassment from anti-vaccine activists. Simply put, only the bravest legislators will deal with the after-effect of filing pro-immunization bills.

The Texas Legislature has heroes who support and promote the power of immunizations. Senators Nathan Johnson, Eddie Lucio, Jr., Beverly Powell, Kel Seliger and Judith Zaffirini stand out as champions. Representatives Michelle Beckley, Sarah Davis, Bobby Guerra, Donna Howard, Dr. J. D. Sheffield, John Turner, and Gene Wu all have publicly fought for vaccines. In 2019, some of these legislators scored small victories for vaccines and won against apathy and political fear.

Our tolerance for vaccine-preventable diseases and the death, suffering, and misery that come with those diseases is growing. The legislature is sending a clear message that for the sake of politics, some Texans are expendable. Re-election is more important than stopping the spread of measles, whooping cough, or cancer.

The 86th Legislative Session was a missed opportunity to improve vaccine policies. In the face of the worst measles outbreak in the country in over 25 years, the Texas Legislature did nothing to promote better access to school vaccination rates. In the face of whooping cough on the floor of the Texas House of Representatives, the legislature did nothing. Confronted with doctors, scientists, and the biggest pro-vaccine rally in Texas history, the Texas Legislature prioritized not upsetting anti-vaccine activists over protecting the public's health.

The Texas Legislature's lack of political courage on vaccines should scare all Texans, especially because most Texas voters support strong vaccination laws. Polling shows Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives, all support vaccines. It is a nonpartisan issue: Democratic and Republican legislators stand up for vaccines. Support crosses racial/ethnic lines and regional lines. Texas Senators and Representatives who supported vaccines in 2019 come from the border, the big city, and the state's least populated counties.

Regardless of broad support for vaccines, the Texas Legislature failed to meet its obligation to protect Texans from vaccine-preventable diseases. It is time Texans demanded more from our policymakers. It is time for Texans to fight for common sense and reason.

* Lakshmanan, Rekha. "Opinion: The Legislature's lack of political courage on vaccines should scare us all." *Austin American-Statesman*, 19 July 2019, <https://www.statesman.com/opinion/20190719/opinion-legislatures-lack-of-political-courage-on-vaccines-should-scare-us-all>