



News release

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Bay Area organizations travel to Austin to support education reform

by Kathryn Cooper
Bay Area Houston Economic Partnership

BAY AREA HOUSTON, TEXAS – Businesses and residents of Bay Area Houston have known for some time that a quality education is critical to the future of our children and the workforce that they will one day enter. Members of the Bay Area Houston Economic Partnership's Education & Workforce Development Committee and the Clear Lake Area Chamber of Commerce took that message with them when they visited 25 senators and representatives of the 81st Texas Legislature on Feb. 24.

Bob Mitchell, BAHEP president, stated, "It almost goes without saying that one of the most pressing issues facing Texas and the rest of the country today is education reform. Inaction in this regard will have negative and long-lasting economic effects."

According to the Texas Education Agency, the state had 4,671,493 students enrolled in public school during the 2007-2008 academic year in 20 regions composed of 1,200 districts and operating charter schools. The schools have been trying to make ends meet based on a formula approved by the Texas legislature in 2006. Those who went to Austin intended to make it clear that meeting 2009 costs of education and growing student enrollments using a three-year-old funding system is not working, and funding reform cannot wait until the next legislative session in 2011.

Public schools K-12: The need for change is now

BAHEP's Education & Workforce Development Committee has spent months preparing its 2009 legislative priorities in support of education. In regard to grades K-12, BAHEP endorses updating the current public school finance structure to recognize the increasing costs of insurance, transportation, utilities, and most importantly, putting quality teachers in the classroom.

Other legislative actions which BAHEP supports include: dedicate property tax revenues gained through increased property valuation to public education; provide flexibility for school districts to hold referendums prior to the adoption of their budgets; and fully fund all new legislative mandates.

Community colleges: The workhorse for higher education

Community colleges are expected to enroll over 70 percent of the new students entering Texas higher education. In 2007, community colleges trained 62 percent of all registered nurses, 84 percent of all first responders (including 1,300 fire fighters), 9,500 other health care professionals, and 2,700 technicians and mechanics.

Business leaders in area hospitals report that there is a continuing shortage of nurses, and they expect that problem to grow over the next couple of years.

BAHEP supports funding “critical fields” at a premium of 10 percent over and above the full formula funding rate established by the legislature. These critical fields include computer science, engineering, mathematics, physical science, nursing, allied health, life sciences, and teacher education and certification.

Universities: Facing significant challenges

Financial aid for students in the form of loans has increased significantly. This type of burden discourages students from attending college or continuing to stay in college until graduation.

BAHEP endorses these legislative actions for Texas universities: adopt the Texas Public General Academic Formula Advisory Committee’s recommendation of increasing base formula funding to cover the costs of inflation and enrollment growth; increase funding for TEXAS Grants to help insure the affordability of a college education; maintain tuition deregulation; and provide funding for Tuition Revenue Bonds for construction of classrooms and laboratories.

Public support encouraged

Members of the Bay Area Houston Economic Partnership and Clear Lake Area Chamber of Commerce have always been strong advocates for education in Texas. Harv Hartman, chairman of BAHEP’s Education & Workforce Development Committee, stated, “I feel that it was valuable to meet with these legislators face to face to convey our priorities. They were surprised that so many business people were concerned about support for education.”

BAHEP and the Clear Lake Area Chamber encourage other citizens in Bay Area Houston to contact their state representatives on behalf of education reform. One hundred voices in support of an issue on any given day in Austin will get attention; however, 100,000 constituents who make their voices heard in support of the same issue can certainly make a huge difference.



Some of the travelers meeting in Austin Feb. 24 on behalf of education reform, along with two Houston area legislators with whom they met, were (seated from left): Kathy Turner, chairman of the board, Clear Lake Area Chamber of Commerce, sales manager, Houston Chronicle; Robert Davee, trustee, Clear Creek Independent School District, partner, Mills Shirley LLP; Susie Allen, community liaison, Office of Harris County Precinct 2 Commissioner Sylvia R. Garcia. Standing from left: Richard Cole, director, External Affairs, AT&T; Bob Mitchell, president, Bay Area Houston Economic Partnership; Peter Wuenschel, executive director, Communities in Schools Bay Area; Dr. R. Bowen Loftin, vice president/CEO, Texas A&M University at Galveston; Cindy Harreld, president/CEO, Clear Lake Area Chamber of Commerce; Rep. John E. Davis (District 129); Rep. Larry Taylor (District 24); Dr. Leland Williams, superintendent, Dickinson Independent School District; Randall B. Ashby, Waldron & Schneider LLP; Dr. William (Bill) Lindemann, chancellor, San Jacinto College District. (Photo courtesy of Clear Lake Area Chamber of Commerce)



Additional travelers meeting in Austin Feb. 24 on behalf of education reform included Barry Beasley (2nd from left), director, External Affairs, AT&T, and Harv Hartman (far right), managing partner, Summit Management Group. They joined Dr. William (Bill) Lindemann (far left), chancellor, San Jacinto College District, and Bob Mitchell (2nd from right), president, Bay Area Houston Economic Partnership, who are also pictured in the group above. (Photo courtesy of Mary Alys Cherry, *The Bay Area Citizen*)

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Bay Area Houston Economic Partnership is a member-driven organization that provides the leadership to stimulate regional economic development and employment in southeast Texas. Its members include over 260 business partners encompassing 13 cities, Galveston and Harris counties, and the Port of Houston Authority. Visit www.bayareahouston.com.

Space Alliance Technology Outreach Program is administered by the Bay Area Houston Economic Partnership. It is a State of Texas funded initiative designed to transfer the knowledge and technology of the U.S. Space Program to small businesses to solve technical challenges they are unable to solve themselves. Visit www.spacetechnologies.com/bahep.