

## **Amy Dodson: Make public education a priority**

**AMY DODSON** Guest columnist

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**S**chool may be out for summer, but our teachers, principals, school district leaders, and elected school boards are hard at work budgeting and preparing for the next school year.

As I travel the state, it's clear that our public schools are foundational to our larger communities. They educate our kids, are significant employers, and are a driving force for our economy now and into the future. This includes the vibrant tourism industry in our larger Waco and surrounding region and tremendous growth across McLennan County.

Over the years as a teacher, administrator, and advocate for our public schools, I have enjoyed spending time with parents, teachers, women's clubs, pastors, chambers of commerce leaders, and local government officials. There's tremendous pride in our public schools.

We work together, go to church together, cheer from the stands together on football fields under the Friday Night Lights, and celebrate and support our students at One Act Play and other academic competitions. Public schools are essential to our families and communities.

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But that enthusiasm and commitment for our students and local schools doesn't seem to extend into the state Capitol.

Texas presently ranks in the bottom ten nationwide for per-student funding, around \$4,000 per student below the national average, even though our state budget surplus continues to grow.

During one regular and four special sessions of the Texas Legislature, state leaders did not raise the basic allotment that funds our schools or give teachers a raise. The Legislature's failure to provide adequate state funding for our local schools and teachers last year means tough conversations this summer at the local, district level about cutting programs and staff, forgoing teacher raises, or running deficit budgets.

We must remind Texas lawmakers that money matters in public education, and our kids and teachers deserve the funding and support they need to succeed.

Our teachers and students deserve our support. They're doing great things even in these challenging financial times. Recent examples include Waco ISD, which recently recognized 44 WISD elementary teachers, and Copperas Cove ISD, which recognized 92 teachers for earning the state's Teacher Incentive Allotment for improving students' academic performance and closing the achievement gap. Connally ISD and Robinson ISD have also celebrated significant numbers of TIA teachers in the past school year.

These rapidly growing communities also are seeing an influx of new and young families. Investing in high-quality, full-day pre-K is critically important to putting young Waco area students on a path to lifelong learning and success.

Leaders in Austin should fully and fairly fund our students and teachers. Invest in our public school students. They're counting on us. They are, in every way, the future of Texas.

Amy Dodson is a senior regional advocacy director for Raise Your Hand Texas, a group that says it "supports public policy solutions that invest in our students, encourage innovation and autonomy, and improve college, military, and workforce readiness." Online: [raiseyourhandtexas.org](http://raiseyourhandtexas.org)