

Freshman state Rep. Angelia Orr's Democratic challenger in her first reelection bid said the Legislature's consideration of subsidies for private school tuition was the main trigger for launching his campaign.

In the Nov. 5 general election, Albert Hunter, a Meridian Independent School District trustee and retired educator, will face Orr, an Itasca Republican whose career also has included stints as a substitute teacher and Itasca ISD trustee. Both candidates are unopposed in their parties' primaries. Orr's House District 13 was created during redistricting in 2021 and includes a portion of McLennan County extending into East Waco, along with all of Bosque, Falls, Freestone, Hill and Limestone counties.

Orr during the regular Legislative session in April voted in opposition to the proposal for education savings accounts, otherwise known as private school vouchers. She then joined voucher supporters in voting to keep the proposal in a bill under consideration during the most recent special session last month, called by Gov. Greg Abbott in an attempt to get vouchers passed. She was one of just four Republicans who switched from voucher opposition in April to support in November, **according to The Texas Tribune.**

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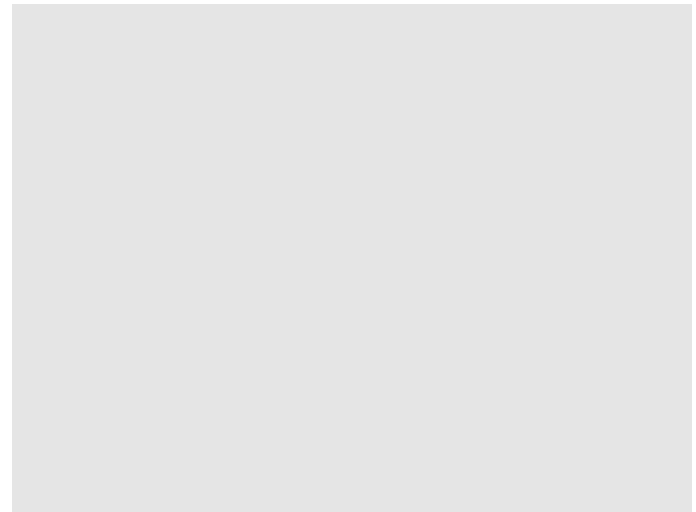
The proposal, which did not pass, would have established education savings accounts, which would set aside state money for eligible students to use toward private school tuition, about \$10,500 per student. To qualify, students would have to attend an accredited private school, of which there are only two in House District 13. It would also set aside \$1,000 for homeschooled students.

Orr said last week she changed her stance on the proposal because new guidelines were added that were not included in earlier stages. The plan remains a priority for Abbott.

Albert Hunter

Hunter was born and raised in Meridian and went to McLennan Community College before transferring and finishing off his college degree at Tarleton State University. He was a classroom teacher for 26 years and a tennis coach for 13 years.

Hunter said he taught math at Cleburne High School, La Vega High School, Morgan High School and Clifton High School over the years before retiring in 2012. He said since retiring, he has volunteered in various capacities and is involved in the Heart of Texas Council of Governments Area Agency on Aging and the Friends of Meridian Lake State Park board. He also is on the Meridian ISD board.



Hunter

Hunter said he believes private school vouchers would negatively impact rural school districts by incentivizing students to leave public schools for private schools, which would take funding away from public schools. Texas schools receive funding from the state based on average daily attendance, about \$6,160 per student, which is especially crucial to rural districts that might not have many students.

“It’s a domino effect, it’s kind of like a trickle down thing,” Hunter said. “In House District 13, the majority of the ISDs are very rural. The voucher system won’t directly affect them right now, because it’s a big city issue, but eventually it will. And any time a small town loses its school, you can count on that town dying.”

If elected, Hunter said he would push for more funding for public schools, especially rural school districts. Hunter said he plans to make the rounds during his campaign and meet with the county judge of each county represented in District 13 to better understand issues facing voters in the district.

He said one of the he plans to get input on is regulation of dairies in the Bosque River watershed, a topic he already is familiar with as a longtime Bosque County resident.

Waco officials raised alarm earlier this year over a proposal, House Bill 2827, that would have rolled back protections for the river that provides most the water in Lake Waco, McLennan County’s main drinking water source. Orr voted in favor of the proposal. It passed in the House over the opposition of Waco’s other representative, Rep. Charles “Doc” Anderson, but died in committee in the Senate.

When asked about his confidence in winning a district that went 77.5% Republican in 2022, Hunter said he believes the district has a large non-voting population. According to the Texas Secretary of State and McLennan County election numbers, only 44.7% of registered voters in House District 13 cast a ballot in 2022.

“I don’t believe it is so much a heavily Republican district, I believe is a non-voting district,” Hunter said. “Because I don’t think that they feel that their issues have a chance of being heard or addressed, so they don’t participate. And what I want to do is I want to let them know that I feel like I can address those issues. I know how

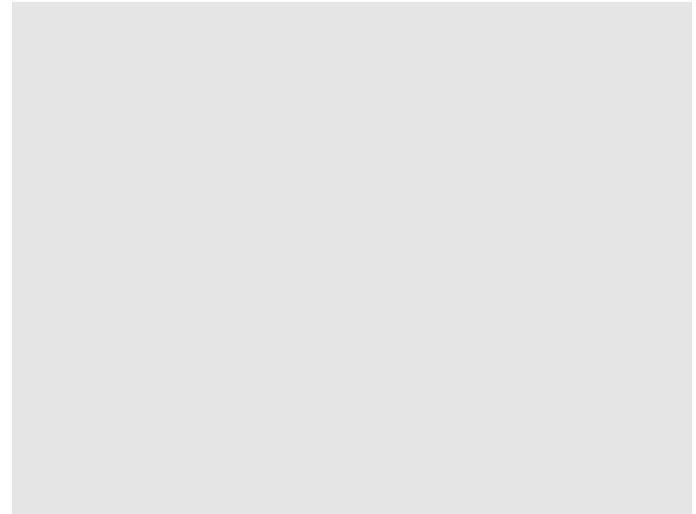
working together with good people around you can make it better. So I want to let them know that their voice will not go unheard.

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Angelia Orr

Orr is a small business owner and former substitute teacher who served as district clerk of Hill County from 2011 to 2019. Prior to her election as district clerk, she served two terms as secretary on the Itasca ISD school board. She is a graduate of Texas A&M University.

Orr was first elected to the newly created House District 13 in 2022, defeating Democrat Cedric Davis with 77.5% of the vote. The McLennan County portion of House District 13 includes Bellmead, East Waco and parts of Robinson, downtown Waco and some of the neighborhoods surrounding Baylor University.



Orr

Orr was initially against vouchers, but in November, she voted against an amendment to remove vouchers from the House's school funding bill, House Bill 1. Orr said the voucher proposal evolved over time to a point where she felt she could support it.

"I don't see it as an either or, or a mutually exclusive idea, as long as there are guidelines and accountability for those ESAs (education savings accounts)," Orr said. "In April, there were no guidelines or accountability. But now there are, and it says in the bill, that if you accept these funds, you've got to enroll in an accredited private school. And that private school has to be set up as a vendor with the state."

Orr also said she spoke to many constituents who said their children would be better served by a private school, though she said she still feels public schools are the best option for students. She also said she wanted to keep vouchers because of the money allocated for students who are homeschooled, of which there are many in her district.

Orr said she plans to continue pushing for increased public school funding, and said another reason she did not want to remove vouchers was because she knew it would kill the bill, meaning its broader provisions for more public school funding and teacher pay raises would not be passed. She said the bill included a total of almost \$40 million in increased funding for her district.

Other issues Orr said she plans to tackle are border security and human trafficking. She said with Interstate 35 running through McLennan and Hill counties, human smuggling has become a concern in the district.

Orr also said she wants to try and find a mutually beneficial solution to the Bosque water issue without having to pass new legislation. Orr said she feels the issue can be solved outside the Legislature by bringing both sides to the table to work out a solution.

She said she voted in favor of the legislation because she does not think the current permitting process is fair to dairy farmers in the watershed. The system was put in place by a 2001 state law supported by Waco city officials after the Environmental Protection Agency designated the river and watershed as “impaired” because of excessive phosphorus and algae fueled by dairy runoff.

“The dairies on the river north of Waco are the only dairies in the state that are under this specific permitting process,” Orr said. “They have to go through a very expensive process in order to get their permitting. I support small businesses, and dairies and ranchers are small businesses. And it didn’t seem to me that having a city government be able to put that kind of burden on a private business that was two counties away, did not seem like the right solution.

“I am committed to helping find the solution and being part of that solution. I think we can do both. I think we can have good clean water, and I think that the dairyman can follow a regular permitting process. I just think we need to get people to the table, all the stakeholders, and try to hammer out a solution before next session. A lot of things are better solved locally than they are at the state house.”

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By Matt Kyle

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