



TEXAS EDUCATION AGENCY

1701 North Congress Ave. ★ Austin, Texas 78701-1494 ★ 512/463-9734 ★ FAX: 512/463-9838 ★ <http://www.tea.state.tx.us>

Shirley J. Neeley, Ed.D.
Commissioner

June 20, 2007

Dear TEA Employees and Friends,

My goodness, what a great experience I have had serving as your commissioner for 3.5 years! Thank you, thank you, thank you for your patience with me as I transitioned from superintendent to commissioner. You have heard me say many times that being the commissioner is easier than being a superintendent any day of the week and I still mean that sincerely. You are the reason my job was such a memorable experience, one that I truly looked forward to every day, because of your talents, experience and commitment to excellence!

I am so proud of what we've accomplished in our 3.5 years together. Nothing would have been possible without your institutional knowledge, expertise and team work. You have taught me so much; for that I am eternally grateful! You are some of the hardest working folks I have ever known! I wish the general public and all Texas educators could see the work you do, day in and day out, to make our schools run so effectively and efficiently. In all sincerity, you are the unsung heroes of public education policy.

While we have accomplished many things we can all be proud of, there is still much work to do. I will continue to pray for you each and every day, as I have done since Day One. Some of you may recall when I conducted my first staff meeting in January of 2004, and I told you guys how I start each day with my Methodist Upper Room Devotional, Guideposts, Lutheran Devotional, the chapter in Proverbs that corresponds to the day's date, my continual annual reading of whatever chapter I am on in The Bible, then closing out my devotional period with my daily prayer. I mention this now because I want to remind you to keep your priorities in order and not let the job or work at TEA consume your life.

Thank you for putting up with my corny, folksy, school house ways. I know my high energy level and loud, expressive constant chattering got on some people's nerves. You have all been so kind and gracious to me; thank you! I am so sorry for this sudden departure; I certainly thought we would have much more time together. I will miss each and every one of you greatly. God bless you!

Sincerely,

Shirley J. Neeley

"Good, Better, Best-never let it rest-until your good is better-and your better is BEST!"

PARTING THOUGHTS

From the day I accepted the job, my goal was to serve five years as Commissioner, as long as I was doing a good job and keeping the main thing the main thing: the 4.6 million children we so proudly serve! On Friday, June 15, 2007, I was informed by Governor Perry's staff that he is ready for new leadership at TEA. I will resign effective July 1, 2007. By stepping down immediately, this will give Governor Perry time to select a new commissioner, hopefully by August 1st, when Texas school districts traditionally begin their new school year.

I can compare my situation to that of a superintendent when a school board decides to take no action or not extend their contract. Anyway you look at it, the message is clear: when it is time to go, it is time to go.

Many of my speeches these past three and a half years have had the phrase "the stars are aligned" – a phrase that I have often used to lead into the message I was delivering. As I reflect on the action I must take, the stars are aligned for departure from public service, at least for a while. As I depart, I would like to share with you my thoughts on these important areas:

- I have been blessed to work with a wonderful staff at TEA! We have built a very strong team that is ready, willing and eager to implement HB 1 and bills from the 80th Legislative Session. We have worked hard to become a kinder, gentler, more customer friendly state agency.
- Staff and I have worked hard to build a true Team of Sixteen among the fifteen SBOE members and the commissioner. I honestly consider each of our SBOE members my friends as well as my colleagues. I am also so proud of our SBEC staff and Board! TEA and SBEC have developed a great and lasting partnership. It has been an honor to be part of this process.
- Texas is leading other states in our country in the P-16 initiatives! Dr. Raymund Paredes, Commissioner of Education and my dear friend, and I came on board within six months of each other in 2004. We are proud of the strides we have made getting our two agencies to work hand-in-hand, side by side as true partners in P-16. Our P-16 mission for creating a college going culture for all children and guaranteeing every Texas high school graduate that they will be college/career/work ready when they graduate from our high schools is clearly important work that will continue.
- Through a collaborative effort of many hard working folks, i.e. the Commissioner's Task Force on Test Integrity, the District Assessment Advisory Committee and the TEA Technical Advisory Board, we have developed new and improved test security measures to ensure honesty and integrity among students and educators.
- We have an outstanding Inspector General and team of professional investigators that have done a superb job establishing a protocol to use for on-site investigations on campuses and in classrooms, should cheating allegations occur.
- While some may speculate that my departure as commissioner is based on the negative media clips regarding the entire testing integrity issue, nothing is farther from the truth. There will never be a 100% guarantee that cheating in some shape, form or fashion will not occur, but I believe with all my heart that Texas has taken a very bold stance that is second to none. To do this right and make sure every decision was research based and vetted by important stakeholder groups, I clearly believe the outcome was worth the time and effort.

- I have worked very closely with the Executive Directors of the twenty Education Service Centers (ESCs). I stand in awe of their leadership and commitment to excellence. Our partnership has been one of strength, success and keeping the main thing the main thing! The ESCs in Texas are indeed the pulse beat of our public schools and they truly exemplify “service above self” on a daily basis!
- The Executive Directors of our professional education associations have been truly remarkable. I have thoroughly enjoyed our regular meetings and commitment to “no surprises” and keeping one another “in the loop.” I believe this relationship has served the public schools of Texas very well!
- Two-a-days during back to school convocations, invited visits to many, many school districts, schools and classrooms, have truly been a highlight of my tenure as your commissioner! I have accepted and scheduled many invitations from now through next year. I ask those of you with scheduled commitments from me to give our new commissioner an opportunity to get settled and decide what schedule will work best for them.
- Public school politics may train one to some degree for politics at the state level, but I have continued to learn until my last day on the job. Staff and I worked hard to build a positive, professional image of TEA and the commissioner on both sides of the aisles in both houses. I am proud to call so many of our legislators and their staff members my friends! Their jobs and countless long hours of work are many times thankless. We must always remember we elect them and they deserve our support and respect.
- Right after I moved to Austin to become commissioner, I met a wonderful man who loves the school business as much as I do with a proud and distinguished 35 year career as a school architect. Bill and I were married on May 18, 2007. We look forward to having more time together riding our Harleys, ranching and traveling.
- When my melanoma returned on May 24, 2007, after a 22 year cancer free life, I quickly revisited my priorities in life, as we all should do more often, not when forced to do so by cancer or something as devastating. I am very humbled and blessed to report that the surgery on June 11, 2007, to remove the melanoma appears to be successful. Let this be a strong reminder to take all precautions to protect your skin from exposure to the sun and wear a strong sun block at all times.
- I have truly missed my family in Houston: my 80 year old awesome, dynamic, “wind beneath my wings” Mother, Lena Williamson; my wonderful, best friend daughter, Brandy; my terrific, hard working son-in-law, Joey and three of the most precious grandsons in the world: Zachary, Conner and Cole – along with a host of other wonderful relatives and friends. I look forward to having more time to spend with them!
- Finally, I have greatly enjoyed working and getting to know some of the strongest, most dedicated, most compassionate superintendents, board members, teachers, administrators and support personnel in the entire world through my continuous travel across our great state. These hard working men and women are true heroes and miracle workers in my book!

It would be uncharacteristic of me to not address the challenges that still need serious, focused attention:

- We must do whatever it takes to make sure that NO child drops out of school – ever! We must work with all stakeholders as a team toward “on time” high school graduation, with the skills necessary to enter any post secondary institution, the world of work or the military.

- We must continue our efforts and mission to do whatever it takes to make teaching the noble profession it truly is. I will always believe that every Texas educator, regardless of their role, is serving our nation through education!
- We must work collaboratively and sequentially as we develop our end of course exams and make sure we follow the curriculum alignment process so that our work will meet the expectations of every stakeholder group and prepare our students for global competition.
- We must be diligent and sincere by putting our money where our mouth is in leading this nation in teacher salaries and incentives for a job well done, especially for those teachers making remarkable achievement gains with economically disadvantaged children.
- We are getting closer and closer to funding full day pre-kindergarten for all children. We must continue our pursuit of quality early childhood programs.
- Like it or not, it is time to require all children to read, write and speak fluently in English and Spanish followed closely by Chinese or another global foreign language.
- Finally, we cannot continue adding more and more mandates in the same amount of days using our ancient agrarian calendar. For Texas to compete fairly with other countries, we need a level playing field that extends the school day AND school year far beyond the 185 days, not only with more time on task when needed, but also providing for accelerated programs and internships with business, industry, high tech career pathways and higher education.

So you see, my friends and colleagues, the stars are once again aligned. This time they are aligned for one of the most important changes in my life. I proudly, but sadly depart with great excitement and anticipation of a more relaxed, carefree lifestyle! I need time to refresh and reflect before I pursue new opportunities. Thank you for your friendship, your support and your commitment to making the public schools of Texas not only good, but better and better until we are the BEST public school system in the nation! God bless you!