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## Speaker of the House Releases Interim Charges

Last month the Speaker of the Texas House of Representatives, Joe Straus, released the interim charges to all standing House committees. The interim charges highlight some of the major issues that the House will study and investigate in order to prepare for the upcoming legislative session, which will begin in January 2015. The initial charges that were released by the Speaker were based on requests made by all House Members. Over the course of the next several months, the Speaker will release additional charges and initiatives to highlight his own priorities.

Speaker Straus commented on the importance of this process saying, "One of the reasons that the 83rd Legislature was so successful was that we identified key priorities early and made important progress on those priorities before the opening gavel fell." Because of the interim charges prior to last session, the House was able to accomplish many priorities such as balancing the state budget, cutting taxes, reducing testing in public schools and addressing water infrastructure needs.

There are nine interim charges that have been passed down to the House Committee on Public Education. In the coming months, the committee will meet several times in order to consider these charges. Some of the charges include monitoring the implementation of House Bill 5 and recommendations for improvement; reviewing successful strategies and methods that have improved student achievement at chronically underperforming schools; and reviewing the broad scope and breadth of the current TEKS in the tested grades.

For a full list of all interim charges to date, please visit the Texas House of Representatives website [here](#). And to stay up to date with Public Education hearings, please visit the Committee's website [here](#).

## Upcoming Events

### Sunday, March 2nd

Texas Independence Day

### Tuesday, March 4th

Primary Election Day - find more information at [www.HarrisVotes.com](http://www.HarrisVotes.com)

### Wednesday, March 5th

Ash Wednesday - the first day of the Lenten Season

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## Permanent School Fund Hits Record High

The second largest educational endowment in the country, the Permanent School Fund, reached a record high value in 2013 and posted the highest return of any major state of Texas investment fund for the fiscal year. The state of Texas created the endowment in 1854 with a \$2 million investment, by December of last year the endowment topped \$29 billion in market value. In the fiscal year 2013, ending August 31st, the fund earned a total return of 10.16%. This was the highest return by any major State of Texas investment fund in the last fiscal year and as a result of recent strong returns, the Permanent School Fund was the best performing major state fund over the last three years.

The fund helps Texas schools and the state's citizens in two important ways. First, a distribution from the fund is made every year to help pay a portion of education costs in each school district. During the previous biennium, the fund distributed more than \$2 billion to the schools and since 1960 the fund has distributed more than \$23 billion. Secondly, the fund plays a very important role in guaranteeing bonds issued by local school districts. Soon this support will also be extended to the states charter schools. As a result of the fund maintaining a AAA bond rating, even during the global financial crisis, qualified school districts are able to pay lower interest rates when issuing bonds. Last year alone the fund's assets guaranteed \$55.2 billion in school district bonds, providing a cost savings to 810 public school districts.

More information on the Permanent School Fund can be found on the Texas Education Agency website, [here](#).

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## Managing Those High Winter Electric Bills

This winter has been extremely cold causing more energy use than usual. As a result, monthly electric bills have been higher than in past winters. Last month Entergy Texas recognized the increase in energy usage and the possible strains it could have on many people living in South East Texas, where the weather has been much more severe than normal. Entergy Texas wants to remind Texans that they are ready to assist by providing help to customers through Power to Care, a program that pays up to two energy bills per year for the elderly and/or disabled.

In addition to this program, customers who have a smart phone are encouraged to take advantage of the myAccount application. This phone app allows customers to manage their account and receive text message alerts and information.

More information on the Power to Care Program may be found [here](#). Additional information on the myAccount application can be found on the Entergy website [here](#).

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## IRS Free File

The IRS Free File service provides free access to leading tax preparation software, offering step-by-step help to prepare e-file federal tax returns online. This service is available because of a partnership between the IRS and the tax software industry. Through Free File, all taxpayers who made \$58,000 or less in 2013 are eligible to visit the IRS website, [here](#), to prepare and e-file their federal tax returns.

Free File is made possible through a public-private partnership between the IRS and the Free File Alliance, a non-profit coalition of leading tax software companies. Since its inception in 2003, the program has offered 70 percent of taxpayers free access to leading commercial tax preparation software from Free File Alliance member companies. Free File has already saved taxpayers an estimated \$1.2 billion in filing costs.

Free File also offers basic federal e-filing services with no income limitations. This basic e-filing service, called Free File Fillable Forms, allows taxpayers who are familiar with tax law and need no preparation assistance to complete and file their federal income tax electronically.

To learn more about the program and its details, please visit the Free File Alliance website [here](#).

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## Big News for Big Schools

In January, the University Interscholastic League (UIL) released the 2014-16 Football and Basketball District schedules, along with District Reclassification information. The Spring meet and other athletic district alignments for this season, will be released no later than April 15, 2014. With the continued growth of the public education system in Texas, the creation of the "6A" classification was adopted. High Schools with student enrollment at 2100 students or above will now be classified as 6A schools. This is the first time the state has expanded the school classification system in over thirty years. The new classification system is based on the amount of student enrollment and looks as follows:

### 2014-2015 & 2015-2016

- 6A- 2,100 & up
- 5A- 1,060-2,099
- 4A- 465-1,059
- 3A- 220-464
- 2A- 105-219
- 1A- 104.9 and below

There are several High Schools in District 127 that were reclassified because of the new system. Atascocita High School, Kingwood High School, and Summer Creek High School are now all classified at level "6A" and were all placed in the same competition district. In addition, Humble High School and Kingwood Park High School were both promoted to the "5A" classification range and placed in the same competition district.

The full Reclassification and Realignment packet, as well as, the upcoming football and basketball schedules can be found on the UIL website [here](#).

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## Advanced Placement Program Numbers on the Rise

Last week the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and the Commissioner of Education, Michael Williams, announced that participation in Advanced Placement Tests has more than doubled in the last decade. In a statement released by the Commissioner he stated, "Texas has made great strides in increasing AP access to a broader, more diverse group of students reflective of the changing demographics of our state. Our state ultimately benefits each year we see increased participation in the number of students participating and succeeding in the AP program."

In fact, the number of low-income graduates taking at least one AP Exam has more than quadrupled and the number of Hispanic/Latino graduates taking AP has nearly tripled over the last ten years. Along with this expansion, Texas has seen an increase in the number of qualifying AP Exam scores typically required for college credit. According to the College Board's 10th Annual AP Report to the Nation, Texas students in the graduating Class of 3013 again made a strong showing. The report showed that the number of Texas students who scored 3 or higher on an AP exam (52,167) in 2013 was greater than the number of all Texas high school students who took an AP exam in 2003 (48,500).

This is exciting news for Texas as research shows that students who succeed in rigorous course work, such as that offered by AP, are developing college level knowledge and skills while still in high school. These students are more likely than their peers to earn college degrees on time, which gives them an opportunity to save significant amounts of money.

The 10th Annual AP Report to the Nation and the state supplement for Texas are available on the College Board website, [here](#).

The latest statewide summary reports may be found on the TEA website [here](#).

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