

Abbott highlights education issues in speech

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In his State of the State address, Gov. Greg Abbott highlighted “education freedom” and school safety among his priorities for the Texas Legislature.

Speaking from a venue in San Marcos on Feb. 16 rather than the Texas Capitol, Abbott identified seven emergency items for state lawmakers to act upon immediately.

The emergency items included creating state-funded education savings accounts parents can use for private schools, improving school safety and addressing the fentanyl crisis.

Cutting property taxes, ending COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, reforming bail policies and securing the border with Mexico rounded out the governor’s list of emergency items.

Normally, state lawmakers cannot pass legislation until after the 60th day of a legislative session. However, the governor has authority to designate emergency items that can be approved prior to that date, which is March 10 this year.

State-funded accounts for private schools

Abbott stressed a need to “empower parents”—both by giving them greater influence over curriculum and library content, and by enabling them to access state funds for private schools.

“Let’s be clear. Our schools are for education, not indoctrination,” Abbott said. “Schools should not be pushing a woke agenda—period.”

He also voiced support for “education freedom,” specifically access to taxpayer-funded education savings accounts for private school tuition or homeschooling costs.

A broad coalition of rural Republicans and urban Democrats repeatedly has rejected similar voucher-style programs for more than two decades.

Turning to the issue of school safety, Abbott called for lawmakers to enhance safety standards and provide more mental health professionals in public schools.

Response to voucher-style program

John Litzler, public policy director for the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission, affirmed the governor’s emphasis on school safety but called his support for taxpayer-funded education savings accounts “misguided.”

“Voucher programs would leave the poorest and most vulnerable Texas children in increasingly underfunded schools. The CLC is grateful for and proud of the schools that join in cooperative ministry with Texas Baptists. But no Texas resident should be compelled, through taxation, to provide for religious education to students,” Litzler said.

“Texas is behind the national average for public student funding by over \$4,000 per student. Texas is behind the national average for public school teacher salaries by over \$7,500 per teacher. The real emergency item for the Texas Legislature this session is properly funding public education, not diverting tax dollars to private schools.”

‘Egregious moral violation’

Charles Foster Johnson, executive director of Pastors for Texas Children, asserted Abbott’s support for a state-funded program to benefit private schools is based on the governor’s national political aspirations.

“So, he has tied up the entire legislature this session, at the cost of millions of tax dollars, in his own petty personal political agenda,” Johnson said.

In a public statement, Pastors for Texas Children said: “Using public tax dollars, taken from our 5.4 million Texas schoolchildren, to underwrite the private education of a few is an egregious moral violation.”

Furthermore, the organization said using “public funding to advance and establish religious programs in private schools” violates the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and separation of church and state.

“Pastors for Texas Children calls upon the Texas Legislature to stand firm for the true Texas conservative value of universal education for all Texas schoolchildren, provided and protected by the public, by defeating a private school voucher policy once again,” the organization stated.

In response to a surge in fentanyl deaths in Texas, the governor said, those cases should be prosecuted as murder. He also called for expanded access to Narcan, a drug that reduces overdoses.

Litzler applauded the emphasis on addressing the fentanyl issue.

“We share the governor’s concern on the fentanyl crisis in Texas and support all legislation that would cultivate a culture of life. Increasing the supply of Narcan is a life-saving and common-sense action step we support,” he said.