



Texans for
Positive
Economic Policy

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Susan Combs Funds Texas Smart Schools Initiative

Big Data platform helps parents, teachers and legislators identify top performing schools

Austin, TX – Today, Former Texas Comptroller Susan Combs announced the launch of the Texas Smart Schools Initiative, a data integration platform that empowers Texas parents and educators to identify schools that are getting the “best bang for the buck” when it comes to spending and student performance. With expenses underwritten by funds remaining from Combs’ various political campaigns, the data is offered to all, free of charge.

“Public education is one of the largest items in the state budget, so Texans need to know where their dollars are getting the highest return in terms of student performance,” said Combs, a longtime transparency advocate. “With this platform, parents can find out which schools are beating expectations and educators can find peers whose success makes them worth emulating. It’s truly an initiative that lends itself to the common good.”

The program has its roots in the Financial Allocation Study for Texas (FAST), a program created by the 81st Texas Legislature, which directed then-Comptroller Combs to “identify school districts and campuses that use resource allocation practices that contribute to high academic achievement and cost-effective operations.” The resulting site and its innovative “FAST Tracker” tool proved useful to constituents across the state.

Texas Smart Schools, considered “FAST 2.0” by some observers, is the next generation of the concept, leveraging more complex data and enhanced processing to paint an even clearer picture of where educators and students are truly performing at the top of their class.

Administered at Texas A&M University under the leadership of Lori Taylor, Director of the Mosbacher Institute for Trade, Economics and Public Policy, the program will not only offer educators a view of their top-performing peers, but also details of accompanying best practices that can be applied in their own schools.

“The key to understanding and improving schools and school districts is being able to make fair and helpful comparisons among them,” said Taylor. “TXSmartSchools.org uses recognized statistical methods to create better, more apples-to-apples, comparison measures for spending and academic growth. We see this an essential tool for educators who are seeking to learn from the best practices of similarly situated schools.”

Leaders in business, government and education have been uniformly positive in their assessment of

the new platform. Their reactions include:

“This instrument will be incredibly helpful in advancing the academic performance of Texas students; something our state needs if we are to remain economically competitive.” **Bill Hammond, Texas Association of Business**

“Texas Smart Schools’ rating methodology provides a fair evaluation of districts’ financial and academic performance. The rating system allows parents to compare their child’s school to others across the state; helps citizens to understand how schools spend their tax dollars; and enables local leaders to learn from their peers in other districts.” **Josh McGee, vice president of public accountability at the Laura and John Arnold Foundation.**

“I like it! The new use of propensity score matching within strata is very compelling and the list of cost factors seems right. In the end, the methodology employed here represents an appropriate application of modern, accepted methods that have been applied in a broad range of settings... Nicely done!” **Amy Schwartz, Ph.D., The Maxwell School, Syracuse University**

“Like its predecessor FAST, The TXSmartSchools system is a national innovation that should be copied by other states. This analysis is looking at just the right thing—what we are getting for spending on schools.” **Eric Hanushek, Ph.D., Hoover Institution, Stanford University**

“I am convinced that the peer groups will in fact be ‘fiscal peers’ and that these groups will be useful for the ongoing analysis—and that school districts and school campuses will be getting a ‘fair shake.’” **Shawna Grosskopf, Ph.D., Oregon State University**

Persons interested in exploring the Texas Smart Schools Initiative and learning about the schools in their area, can visit www.TXSmartSchools.com

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ABOUT TEXANS FOR POSITIVE ECONOMIC POLICY

Texans for Positive Economic Policy (TPEP) is devoted to telling the Texas story of success and promoting the building blocks of the state’s exceptional economic performance over the past two decades. They include keeping taxes low, limiting the size of government, ensuring regulations are fair and sensible, and reducing frivolous lawsuits. Benefits of those precepts include a top ranking in job creation and exports and a highly regarded economic climate.

ABOUT THE MOSBACHER INSTITUTE

The Mosbacher Institute for Trade, Economics, and Public Policy was founded in October 2009 upon the request of President George H.W. Bush to honor Robert A. Mosbacher, Sr., who served as secretary of commerce from 1989 to 1992. Our stakeholders are the Bush School, its faculty and students, Texas A&M University, the George H.W. Bush Presidential Library, and our donors, along with business leaders, visiting experts, and public policymakers.