

A Day With Friends: Texas Leaders Unite to Celebrate and Strengthen Public Education

Friends of Texas Public Schools hosts The Summit and Friend of the Year Dinner, honoring leadership in Texas public education.

AUSTIN, TX, UNITED STATES, October 7, 2025 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Friends of Texas Public Schools (FOTPS) is proud to announce the 2025 Friend of the Year honorees, a distinguished group of leaders whose work exemplifies courage, collaboration, and commitment to strengthening Texas public education.

This year's celebration will span an entire "Day With Friends" on Wednesday, November 12, at Baylor University's McLane Stadium in Waco, featuring "The Summit: A Shared Voice for Texas Public Education" from 11:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., followed by the Friend of the Year Dinner that evening starting at 5:00 p.m.

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Friends of Texas Public Schools is about unity and purpose, bringing every voice to the table to strengthen public trust and advocacy for Texas public schools.”

Leigh Anne Pearson, Executive Director, Friends of Texas Public Schools

The Summit will convene educators, district leaders, advocacy partners, and business voices from across the state to align on shared messages that strengthen public confidence and advocacy for Texas public schools. Confirmed participants include leaders from TASB, Raise Your Hand Texas, ATPE, TxPTA, TASBO, TEPSA, and other statewide education and advocacy organizations.

“The Summit represents the next evolution of our work,” said Leigh Anne Pearson, Executive Director of Friends of Texas Public Schools. “It’s about bringing educators, advocates, and business leaders together to ensure the



conversation about Texas public schools is informed, aligned, and constructive. The Friend of the Year Dinner then allows us to honor those who exemplify that shared mission through leadership, innovation, and service.”

The Friend of the Year Dinner, held at the Baylor Club inside McLane Stadium, will recognize six honorees who have made lasting contributions to public education in Texas. The evening will feature a Wild, Wild West theme with an inspiring program celebrating leadership across classrooms, communities, and the Capitol.



The 2025 Friend of the Year Award Recipients are:

Ambassador of the Year: Dr. Cissy Reynolds-Perez, Superintendent Emeritus, Kingsville ISD
Friend of the Year Award: Texas Pioneer Foundation, represented by Fred Markham and Michelle Coburn

Founders' Distinguished Service Awards: The Honorable Dade Phelan (HD-21), The Honorable Gary VanDeaver (HD-1), and The Honorable James Talarico (HD-50),

Dr. Cissy Reynolds-Perez is a 39-year educator and former superintendent of Kingsville ISD. She co-founded the Suicide Prevention Task Force with Chairman Todd Hunter, helping secure legislation to designate September as Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Month and guide the state's plan for prevention. As superintendent, she led a coalition of more than 120 districts serving 2.6 million students to advocate for fair testing and accountability measures. Her motto, "Teamwork works," continues to define her leadership.

Fred Markham is the President and CEO of the Texas Pioneer Foundation, a private, independent foundation that makes grants for educational purposes, including post-secondary education, support for public school foundations, literacy, and life skills. Michelle Coburn is the Executive Director of Texas Pioneer Foundation and the Director of the Texas Education Foundation Network (TEFN), a charitable activity of the Texas Pioneer Foundation, which works with over 300 local education foundations across Texas to provide networking opportunities, sharing of best practices, and training and resources to foundations.

Representative Dade Phelan (HD-21) is the former Speaker of the Texas House (2021–2025). As

Speaker, he prioritized K-12 school safety and youth mental health, helping advance House Bill 3 (2023) and sustaining interim work on youth health and safety. He has been recognized by the Texas Association of Community Schools as a “Most Valuable Legislator.”

Representative Gary VanDeaver (HD-1) is a former vocational agriculture teacher, principal, and superintendent, as well as a longtime advocate for public education. Rep. VanDeaver authored House Bill 8 (2023), the widely praised overhaul of Texas’ community college finance system that ties funding to student outcomes, and he has been a leading rural voice in protecting neighborhood public schools and taxpayer dollars.

Representative James Talarico (HD-50) is a former public school teacher and education non-profit leader who was first elected to the Texas House of Representatives in 2018. Rep. Talarico served on the House Public Education Committee. He was named one of the Top 10 Best Legislators by Texas Monthly magazine for his accomplishments. During his three terms in office, Rep. Talarico has passed legislation to establish the first-ever cap on pre-K class sizes in Texas, equip schools with Narcan to combat teen overdoses, improve the quality and affordability of childcare, and provide incarcerated minors with the opportunity to graduate with a high school diploma.

Read full bios and reflections from this year’s honorees at www.fotps.org/post/2025-award-recipients

Tickets for both The Summit and the Friend of the Year Dinner are available now at www.fotps.org/events

About Friends of Texas Public Schools

Friends of Texas Public Schools is a statewide, nonpartisan nonprofit dedicated to rebuilding public confidence in Texas public education. We elevate authentic stories from classrooms, connect communities and business leaders with schools, and advocate for practical, people-centered solutions that help students and educators thrive. Learn more at www.fotps.org

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