

Charles Kuffner

I'm speaking today with Staci Childs, who is running for the vacant seat in House District 131 in the legislature. Staci, thank you for speaking with me today. Please tell me why you want to run for this office.

Staci Childs

Yes, thank you for having me, Charles. I am so excited to be running for HD 131. We have someone that has dedicated her life to public education, which is Dr. Alma Allen. She has laid the groundwork and has fought for strong public schools. And I have done the same on the SBOE and want to amplify that work as a member of the state house. The reason why is because I feel like there are certain students that I've noticed over my time being on the State Board of Education that constantly get overlooked.

And those students are black and brown students and students from rural areas and students who go to failing campuses. We are always inundated as State Board of Education members with data that is disaggregated by at-risk youth, by race, by class, socioeconomic status. And I often have asked repeatedly for the past few years, what are we doing to help these particular students? And I always get little to no information, right?

So this prompted me to figure out a way that we can help these students specifically and urgently. This past legislative session, I was able to approach members of the state Senate and the state house to ask for funding for a targeted intervention program for students who go to the failing campuses across the state, and we were successful.

I was told that a legislative appropriation or a rider is like the hardest thing you can do during session, hardest thing you can do during election. We were successful to get three and a half million dollars for the five lowest performing campuses across the state. These campuses, one of which is in Houston, will get this funding as early as February.

This showed me and taught me that if I can do this as a member of the State Board of Education, I need the ability to be able to make law and make legislation so that more campuses can benefit from this work.

Charles Kuffner

Okay, you have been a member of the state board of ed, as you say, you were elected in, what was it? 2018, 2020, I don't remember now.

Staci Childs

Actually, I was elected in 2022 and I started January 1st of 23.

Charles Kuffner

Okay, so in that time, and you've already listed one pretty major accomplishment, but other than that, what would you say has been what you're most proud of from your time on the State Board of Ed?

Staci Childs

Sure, besides that, I would say that making sure that we can tell students the truth as to where we come from as a nation, as a United States, as people that live in Texas is very important to me and it has been very important to my constituents so much so that a few months after being elected, I was one of the people that was extremely influential in forcing an irresponsible potential vendor from coming into the state, that name being Prager U. I know Prager U was very controversial. They're probably still making money nationwide for putting inaccurate versions of history in front of children.

And in 2023, they were attempting to do that in Texas. And because of my advocacy, along with other Democrats on the State Board of Education, they stopped trying to come. I know that we are now knee deep in the high quality instructional materials and review and appraisal process as members of the SBOE.

And part of that is for the state to create its own set of materials. Well, the state rolled out its materials last year for the first time, that being Blue Bonnet. And I know that the English language arts component was very controversial because the amount of Christian references did not represent the nuance and the diversity of all of the religions and races and experiences of the students in Texas.

So I worked, although I ended up voting against it before I gave my vote, I worked and I provided over 200 changes. I think a little over a hundred of them were accepted where now students who are exposed to blue bonnet will see the truth about black people and black history and about native people in this country and indigenous people. And if it wasn't for that work, who knows what they would have been reading, right? So I feel very passionate about that.

And just being an advocate to try to teach people what the State Board of Education is. I'll tell you that I had little to no followers when I was elected to the State Board of Education. And now in the two and a half years that I've been there, I've gained a lot of followers, not just because my name is Staci Childs, but because I've tried to use my platform to teach people about what the SBOE does. A lot of my constituents said, I know you're elected, but what do you do? I don't know what the SBOE is. How does that impact my life? How does that impact my child? And because of how I use social media to try to explain to people what the SBOE is, we have a more informed electorate and I feel very proud of that.

Charles Kuffner

Okay. Let's talk about a couple of education matters since that's both your area and a big deal in the legislature. The last legislative session, of course, last regular legislative session, of course, featured the passage of private school vouchers.

They call them what? Education Saving Accounts or whatever marketing they've slapped on it, but we both know what they are. This was a long time goal for conservative Republicans and Governor Abbott had to oust a number of Republican legislators in rural areas who had been long opposed to vouchers because they're like, we don't have private schools in our area, so I don't see how this helps me.

But he was able to overcome that and it passed through both chambers and got signed and like a billion dollars or something is going to be available in some way to some limited number of people.

Staci Childs

Yeah, it's like 30,000, I think the minimum is 30,000 kids up to 100,000 kids, which is like, I don't know what percentage of 5.5 million kids that is.

Charles Kuffner

It's small. Yeah. I mean, obviously this is going to evolve in various ways over time, likely to grow. There's some oversight on it in the Comptroller's Office. This is a huge subject. I guess, broadly speaking, what sorts of things, on the assumption that we won't have the ability to repeal this thing in the next session, what sorts of things would you advocate for as a legislator to change it, mitigate it, make it better, less harmful, however you wanna phrase it?

Staci Childs

Well, I'll say as an elected person in general, I think that, again, more of my constituents need to understand what ESAs are. So I don't know if the strategy is to continue to fight against them in general because they're here. So I think we need to explain to people what ESAs are and if possible, if you wanna apply because your child could benefit from it, sure.

But what I am most passionate about is to create some sort of accountability system for these schools that are gonna benefit from the amount of ESA public dollars that are gonna come into their schools in their admissions process. I have read so many articles in the past few months where I see that private schools are now blocking or closing their admissions applications in advance of these ESAs coming down the pipeline because they still have complete autonomy on who comes into their school. That's unfair.

So you mean to tell me that these ESAs are for every student, no matter race, creed, where you come from, and now these private schools still have complete autonomy on who they accept? That's not fair. So if they're gonna get these public dollars, we need to create some guardrails or some legislation such that they cannot discriminate.

And so that if they have different sorts of students that are coming into or applying to these schools, that these students are protected, their experiences are valued and appreciated when they come into these campuses and they're not just looked at as a dollar amount.

Charles Kuffner

I mean, in the previous legislative session in 2023, Governor Abbott essentially vetoed extra funding, an increase in funding for public schools because he didn't get vouchers passed. We did get an increase in funding for public schools in this last session. It's fair, I think, to say that it's not enough, that due to inflation and other matters, the public schools are not as well-funded as they were eight or 10 years ago.

What realistically do you think can be done and what will you fight for as a legislator in terms of public education funding?

Staci Childs

Well, for one, and I don't know if we're 42nd or 43rd in the nation, I can't remember 2025 statistics, but we are still at the bottom of the list nationwide in terms of the basic allotment and how much we give per pupil. I feel like the basic allotment and how much we're giving per student in Texas can just improve, and that's just period.

Secondly, I feel like we hear a lot of rhetoric around the teacher pipeline. Oh, we need more teachers, we need more teachers. Actually, there are a lot of people that are interested in education. There are a lot of people that come into education because they're curious, but we expect so much of them and we give them absolutely no support.

So you will see me when elected trying to create legislation to make sure the ed prep programs are actually preparing teachers and that we are making sure that teachers feel supported and they actually have professional development that they can use in year zero through five because the attrition rates for teachers is at an all time low in the state of Texas and it doesn't make sense.

I'll say in Houston ISD, I think 43% of the teachers are in year one. They have no experience. Well, what happens to those teachers in years two and three? Why are they not persisting? Is it just because they don't like kids? Of course not. These teachers come into the workforce knowing how much they're gonna make, knowing that they're gonna have to work with students and they're still dedicating a portion of their lives to serving these students. Well, we need to meet them where they are if we're gonna have such high expectations for them.

Charles Kuffner

And you bring up HISD and of course that leads into the question of the state takeover. The TEA has been busy taking over other districts lately too. Fort Worth, Lake Worth, Connelly, Beaumont, in addition to HISD and two more before it.

A law from a few years ago, spearheaded by representative Harold Dutton is what has led to this. In addition to there being some legitimate issues with student outcomes in these districts. I'm not gonna recap the history of controversy over the HISD takeover and how it has been played out here, but it occurs to me as I've been reading about what's gonna happen in Fort Worth and these other places is, there's a law that governs when a district is subject to takeover and the education commissioner can set the terms for what the district needs to happen to get out of it.

But there doesn't seem to be a whole lot of standards, guidelines, mandates, whatever you wanna call it for how that happens. Like Fort Worth's experience could be completely different than Houston's and driven by whoever gets named as their superintendent. This is all a long winded way of saying, what's your view of the takeover situation in general, the law that governs it, and what would you do as a state representative to improve, ameliorate something with it?

Staci Childs

Yeah, so we were told that there are three things that districts need to do to get out of takeover status. This is what we were told in 2023 and it feels like we've been gas lit ever since, right? So the first thing is you need to become compliant with special ed services, the board needs to be functional and the superintendent needs to be functioning at a good rate.

Everything we've been hearing about Houston ISD since 2023 is so much improvement, so much improvement, no more F campuses, right? So if that is the case two years in, what is the need for a takeover two years in?

So we're told that the takeover process is supposed to last four years. That's what we're told now, that it's supposed to be a influx of elected board members and then pushing out of the appointed board members in a staggered way so that the elected board can take full control at the end of the takeover, which I guess Houston ISD that's slated to happen in June of 2027. We weren't told this in 2023. This wasn't explained to the people, this wasn't explained to anybody, but it seems like all of this power and this knowledge and this discretion lies in the hands of the commissioner.

When elected, we need to really evaluate how much discretion lies with the Commissioner of Education because it seems confusing, it seems misleading and it seems unfair that a district that was already doing well in 2023, the reason why we were taking over in the first place had become mooted at the time we were taking over is doing even better two years in, but because of technicalities upon the sole discretion of the commissioner, we still have to sit under the state's control for two more years.

There's just too much discretion. And that's only one of the myriad of ways the commissioner has, in my opinion, too much discretion that should lie in the hands of the people.

Charles Kuffner

Yeah, I mean, there's also the question of the appointed superintendent getting his hands in schools that weren't anywhere remotely close to being part of the reason for the takeover. I mean, there's so, anyway, we could talk about education stuff all day, but there's- Fixing the stuff that wasn't broken. Right.

Staci Childs

That wasn't broken, yeah.

Charles Kuffner

But there are some other issues to talk about. You know, it is clear at this point in time that as long as Democrats are in the minority in the legislature, or at least certainly as long as they're at a relatively low number of members, we basically have little to no influence. The next speaker is likely to, you know, continue to not only deny Democrats being chairs of committees, but, you know, the Republicans are pushing for even more depowering, if you will, of elected Democrats.

Now, one thing we can do about that is elect more Democrats, but, you know, in these past sessions, especially in the special session for redistricting, Democrats, you know, found limited numbers of ways to exert influence. What's your assessment of how Democrats used their influence in the last session, starting with the decision to back the current speaker and continuing through, you know, the walkout that eventually ended? What, give me a grade on how Democrats did this last year.

Staci Childs

I'll grade them at an A minus, B plus. I'd say it's hard, because to be a good statesman, I feel like you need to work across the aisle. You have to work across the aisle. With it being 88-62 in the House this past session, if for Democrats to get anything passed, you're gonna need some sort of bipartisan support to make anything happen, just numbers wise.

But staying true to your convictions is why the people elect you and why I think you have the power that you have. So I appreciate what Democrats did. I appreciate that many of them held true to their convictions. I feel like it probably was really expensive. I'm just trying to put myself in the shoes of a representative. It probably was expensive. It probably was hard. It probably was scary.

And while maybe it seemed like on social media they were having a lot of buzz and stuff, what does that support really look like when you're living that life? So I don't fault them for maybe ending it when it needed to end, but I feel like if we could have been even more united, maybe even more could have been done. I'm the type of person where I don't take no for an answer.

And I feel like if all of us stand on that and not take no for an answer, and we're more unified, especially if we already have a lesser amount, then I think more can get done. I feel like that's something that is different between Democrats and Republicans. And sure, we see a dichotomy between the Republican Party now too, but generally speaking, it seems like if one person says go, they all are just like falling in line. I'm not suggesting that Democrats should do that, but I do think we can be even more unified. But I give them an A-minus. I think they did well.

Charles Kuffner

On the assumption that Democrats aren't gonna sweep into triumvirate power in the state of Texas next year, that'd be great, but I don't think it's gonna happen. What realistically should be the goals for Democrats in the legislature? And for you personally, what sorts of things do you think are realistic to do and what do you want to do?

Staci Child

Yeah. I think it's realistic for education to still be in the forefront, for us to figure out how we're going to continue to advocate for teachers, advocate for the basic allotment to improve, to take away some of the autonomy and discretion that the commissioner has to make sure that people are involved in education. I feel like there's some of the reason why I ran for SBOE all those years ago is because if we don't get a handle on education, you will see the problems in education play out in the criminal justice system.

What I see every day working as an attorney, court appointed in Harris County. So I think we need to keep education in the forefront. We need to come together and figure out a way that we bind together around healthcare, especially with healthcare getting ready to change even more dramatically next year.

And we need to stick together. I know that we're not a monolith as a democratic party, but I feel like we need to be united on things and nothing, no Republican, no amount of money, no semblance of comfort should deter us from being a united front.

Charles Kuffner

You are running for the seat currently held, as you said, by Representative Alma Allen, who has held that seat since 2005, I believe. How do you assess her time in office and how would you be like her or not like her in the legislature?

Staci Childs

Man, Dr. Allen is really, really smart. I have a lot of respect for her. I've been studying what she's done. She values, because she was a teacher herself, she values the work of teachers. And it seems like she has put teachers at the forefront of everything she's done, advocating to make sure that when it comes to like teacher retirement or health benefits or insurance benefits that teachers get what they, the best bang for their buck, being that they're giving their lives to students. So I would like to be like her in that way, making sure that teachers know that they're appreciated and that we respect the craft.

I feel like I want to be even more vocal on public education. I think Representative Allen was vocal, but I want to be even more vocal because like I just told you, if we don't get a handle on education, problems with education pan out in the criminal justice system. And I think that's where Dr. Allen and I differ a bit and where I might have a different lens. I see education with such urgency because I see the problems in K-12 panning out in my job. So hopefully when elected, I could get on the education committee and the criminal justice committee so I can let people know, hey, if we don't get a handle on curriculum, on instructional materials, right? On things that kids and parents and teachers want to see and need in the classroom, this is what's gonna happen in a few years, right? So I have a lot of respect for Dr. Allen. I have a lot of respect for the 20 years that she served. I think public education has been a big deal.

I'd say one final thing that I differ on Dr. Allen on is, and I don't know her complete record on school choice, but I would say for years, I have been a Democrat that may have been looked at as an outlier because I've been a proponent of ed reform and school choice but now as we see what's happening with ISD after ISD being, for lack of a better word, seized by the state, I feel it now more than ever, the time for public ISDs, traditional school systems and public charters to work together to bring the best outcomes for students. There is not a one size fit all approach to education and I feel like with public ISDs and with public charters, they both can be held accountable to the same standards, to the same policies. All the students that go to those schools have to take the same STAAR test and I feel like if we keep working in silos and against each other, we're gonna continue to do a disservice to students and I will be a champion for ed reform as long as I can be because I see the outcomes and I see it impacting students in a great way.

Charles Kuffner

Okay. All these things we've talked about depend greatly on the number of Democrats serving in the legislature and at a national level, the number of Democrats serving in Congress and the Senate. It's really all hands on deck in 2026 and if you've observed our legislative caucus, some of them were more committed to that than others in past elections.

So I'm asking you as a candidate and as a person, what are you gonna do to help Democrats get elected up and down the ballot in Harris County and in Texas in 2026?

Staci Childs

Well, the first thing is become deputized, right? A lot of people don't realize if you become deputized with Harris County, you can register people to vote. So I became deputized last year and I will make sure that my training is up to date this year so that I can register voters myself and when you become deputized, they send you voter registration forms and I remember last year, I was going to very non-traditional places to make sure that people knew about the election that was coming up and I made sure that people were registered to vote.

In my heart, Mr. Charles and in my mind, I know that Texas is blue, but it doesn't reflect that way in elections because people who vote Democrat or likely to vote Democrat just feel so ostracized and so distant from the process. That's why I care a lot about social media because I'm trying to let people know, hey, this is gonna impact you whether you vote or not, come over here, come get registered to vote so that you can have a impact on how this changes your life.

So you can count on the fact that I will be deputized again, I will be registering folks to vote myself, I will let them know not just about my campaign, but all down ballot races because in my opinion, the further you go down the ballot, the closer it touches your life. Local elections like change lives and they change lives dramatically. So I will, as an educator at heart, I will make sure that people know that.

Charles Kuffner

All right, well, there's five total people running for the nomination for House District 131 and I think it's fair to say that whoever wins the nomination is gonna get elected in November. When people go to vote in March to elect the next representative in House District 131, why should they vote for you and not one of the other people running?

Staci Childs

Sure, because my life's work has been to give to the city of Houston what it has given to me. 13 years ago, I was 25, I moved to Houston from Atlanta during the hardest time of my life, not being able to find work due to the recession and I got my first big girl job as a fifth grade teacher in Houston ISD. And I told myself, because Houston took a chance on me, I will always make sure I give back to it what it did for me.

I've spent my entire time here in Houston serving the people. First as a teacher, retiring from education as Teacher of the Year in 2019, I'm moving to criminal defense work, I'm court appointed in Harris County.

I see the people in District 131, I see the people in Houston and I'm serving them and I see what they go through. And in fact, some of the things that they go through, being the youngest candidate in the race, being that I'm still fortifying myself and in my career, I'm going through it too. So I am not someone that is not living what the people are living, right?

So you vote for me because I've already dedicated myself to service. I've already been elected and in two years, I've been able to do things that a lot of people haven't been able to do in 20 to 30 years. So I approach life and I approach service with an urgency because I realize that we're dealing with people's very real lives and I take it very serious. And I hope that that is why people would vote for me because they know they have a servant leader, they know they have a champion and it's not just because I'm giving lip service, the proof is in the pudding.

Charles Kuffner

All right, Staci Childs, thank you very much for speaking with me today.

Staci Childs

Yeah.