

Charles Kuffner

I'm speaking today with Lawrence Allen, who is running for State House in District 131. Lawrence, thank you very much for speaking with me today. Please tell me why you're running for this office.

Lawrence Allen

First of all, let me say, Charles, thank you again for the opportunity to interview with you today and to express my platform to your listeners. And certainly that question comes up every time. Why am I running for this office? Because I believe that we are in a time where we need good representation. I will be following my mother, who is the current state representative for House District 131. And I believe she's laid a excellent platform for me to continue in that state.

As you well know, Charles, I followed her to the State Board of Education and served there for 18 years. And I think this is the next step of service for my community. And so we have a lot that we want to accomplish, and I hope we can get into that as we go through the Q&A, but that's the reason. I think it's the next step in order to provide excellent service to my community and the constituents of House District 131.

Charles Kuffner

Okay. Yeah. And you did serve, as you said, in the State Board of Ed for a long time. What would you say over that time are the one or two accomplishments you're most proud of from that time?

Lawrence Allen

I have to say establishing the African American Studies course for the state of Texas was one that I'm extremely proud of. We would not be able to learn about some of the heroes and sheroes of that community if we had not done that. There's just not enough space in a course to put everybody in it. And so we were able to establish the African American Studies course. We were able to establish the Hispanic Studies course. And I think that was a cry from all over the state of Texas that we get that done.

And we were able to do that. And what was really, really beneficial was the diversification of the portfolio for the permanent school fund. When I went into the office, we had about \$18 billion in the fund. And when I came out of the office, it was over \$60 billion.

And that was attributed to the diversification and going into the real estate portion of it. And that brought it back \$2 billion in the biannual each year to the Textbook Allotment Fund for the students in the state of Texas.

Very, very proud of that. One last one. I got to put it in there real quick, Charles. It took a long time, but they asked me over and over if I could get Sikhism in the World Religions course recognized as the fifth largest religion in the world. And it seems small, but I was able to accomplish that. Just the mere mention of Sikhism as the fifth largest religion in the world was a personal accomplishment for myself and that community as they came year after year asking to be recognized.

Charles Kuffner

Okay. We can't talk about schools and education without talking about a couple of issues from the legislature and locally. And we have to start with the big issue from the last session, which was the passage of private school vouchers, something that had been Governor Abbott's goal for a long time.

And he had to oust a bunch of rural Republicans who weren't in support of it for the good reason that they don't have private schools in their districts in order to get enough votes to pass it. So right now there's like a billion dollars available. There's a lot of qualifications and conditions and a lot of unclarity, I think, about how this is going to work.

Although I do think it's safe to say that the intent over time is for this to grow and expand, whether you think that's a good thing or a bad thing. You know, the oversight seems to fall primarily under the, you know, partly under the Comptroller and partly under the TEA Commissioner. I would like to know from your perspective as a representative, you know, given that this thing exists, what will you, you know, what sorts of things would you want to do with it to modify it, change it, improve it, restrict it, whatever? What sorts of things do you want to do with this program as a State Representative?

Lawrence Allen

That's a very, very good question, Charles. First, we want to say the term we want to evaluate it, okay? We recognize that for my language it's kind of in the pilot program component for success, but we cannot allow it to get in the way of what is necessary for our public schools.

If we find that it is consistently or taking away some of the funding as we thought it would be, and it's now a detriment, this is the kind of conversation, if you would, or what we would have to say. We cannot rob Peter to pay Paul here. Can't do that.

If we're talking about children and their success, they need everything. All of them need what they should have to be successful. And so, we're going to evaluate it, and we're going to talk about the outcomes of the program instead of the general thoughts that went in before.

People were assuming it would be good, assuming it wouldn't be bad, but now we should have some data. We should be talking about data points. We should be talking about what was the benefit, how many students, and what communities did they come from.

Give me the data that talks about why this is a successful program, or it will point to why we should not continue to fund it. It should speak for itself now, but we have to ask for a strong evaluation, and we have to ask TEA to give us the data that indicates the test scores. If we're there yet, we may not be there after one year's implementation.

How many applications were approved, and what's the ethnic breakdown of those who received it. Was that intent, and go back to its original intent, I don't think that was clear, the statement. Was it to bring in more students into the private school, or was it to subsidize those that were already there?

We can see that now, so we can have concrete conversations, but we have to protect, my position is, to protect public schools, so that we're not having a reduction in funding for this program. I have to stay in

that spot, and at the same time, I have to be open enough to say, if this is not harming the public schools, then now what do we do to make sure it's effective for all children?

Charles Kuffner

I mean, one other aspect of this is that it doesn't seem like, or at least it's not clear yet how this is going to work, that the private schools who would be recipients of voucher money, sorry, educational savings account money, it's not clear that they will have to adhere to the same standards and oversight and accountability as the public schools and the charter schools. In fact, as I understand it, some of these private schools are just simply not accepting voucher money because they don't want that oversight. How do you want to approach that as a member of the legislature?

Lawrence Allen

If we look at the historical data points, our charter schools kind of started along that line, where they had some real flexibility in terms of their teacher certification components, what they would do in terms of testing in the state, but over time, you well know, it got closer and closer and closer until there was, there is no difference now in terms of the evaluation points in terms of charter schools and our traditional public schools. We see them all as public schools.

I would say to you that that's a component where taxpayers, if you would, those who are Texans would want to know what is the value of our investment. So there's no way that you can get around answering that question for Texans, if you would. If we are subsidizing or providing funds for private schools, we want to know how well those children are doing.

And so you will see some of the data points have to move to that position because you have to answer that question. And so I think that I would be advocating for that kind of data. We have a number of charter schools, not charter schools, but private schools that already take the state's exam, but it's not public information.

They do it for their own evaluation of their students to show their parents where they are and how well they're doing in comparison to some of the schools in their area, some of the high-performing public schools in their area. And so I think it would be a mandate. One that I would cry for is that strong, strong oversight over the private schools in the area of academic success.

And that's what I would be wanting to know. How are students, what are outcomes for students as it pertains to this new funding formula?

Charles Kuffner

We also have to talk about the ongoing TEA takeover of HISD. TEA has been busy taking over other districts in Fort Worth, Lake Worth, Connelly, Beaumont. There's a couple that they took over before HISD, all under the law passed a few years ago, pushed by Representative Dutton.

While there are clear criteria for what leads to a school or district, I should say, being taken over, and the commissioner sets what the terms are for getting out of takeover status, the mechanism for getting from

point A to point B doesn't seem to be clear. It mostly seems to be up to the superintendent that gets picked.

I assume that what will happen in some of these other districts will be based in part on the HISD experience, which I think we can both agree has had its share of detractors. We've had a couple of years to see what the takeover experience is like, what the results of this law have been. And I'd like to know, as a State Representative, what's your view of this? What do you think we should be doing as a legislature to provide more oversight, improve this process? What's your view on it?

Lawrence Allen

From my vantage point, I would say we don't have a success story yet. We don't have a success story where the state came in and became the entity for the takeover, and we found that that district moved to high achieving levels. I know sometimes we play with the numbers.

We actually play with the numbers in terms of expectations. And so, sitting on the State Board for 18 years, I recognize that we don't have a system in place where we have mandatory state takeover that has yielded the results that we would all be pleased with. So, I know we have to go back to some of our experts in the field and begin to take a look at a one-word change in that law.

And that law, that word was simply "may." And I would really like, as a sitting member at the time of the State Board, for that decision to be made amongst our State Board members and not our commissioner. Because when you have that conversation and it says, shall, the commissioner would always say, my hands are tied. My hands are tied.

And because of the three strikes or the five strikes or whatever we've gone through, it's mandatory that I implement this takeover. But if we just get that one word change and then a conversation for those who are elected by the citizens to talk to their colleagues on that board about the need for that campus or district to function in their area, I think it should be more of a State Board decision than a commissioner's decision. And those are the kinds of laws that I would try to just tweak. They're already there. They just need a change, a little tweak, a shell, and who's the deciding factor there.

And I think it would still have some school district closures. But I think that's a broader conversation when it's outside of the hands of the agency and into the hands of the citizens through their elected officials.

Charles Kuffner

Okay. I mean, a lot happened in this last legislative session. The Democrats and the minority had a reduced role overall in how the legislature operated. They were barred by new rules from being committee chairs, for example. And I think the Republicans, as long as they're in charge, are going to keep pushing to diminish the role of Democrats. Democrats did have some important decisions to make over the last year, starting with who to support or support anyone for speaker. They did support Dustin Burroughs. And not clear if got anything out of that, but that's a question to decide in 2027. Of course,

then there was also the quorum break around during the special session to slow down the redistricting process and maybe get California and other states off the sidelines to take some action.

So my question to you is, when you look back at the way that the Democratic caucus made use of what little power it had, the decisions they made, the way they fought, the way they tried to do what they could, how do you evaluate them? What would you do differently or not as a member of the legislature to, again, on the assumption that we're still going to be in the minority after this election, what would you, how would you approach that? And how do you evaluate how the previous legislature did?

Lawrence Allen

Well, in my own personal evaluation, I would be evaluating my mother and her actions. And so let me be careful in all that I say in this interview. And certainly I would be in agreement with bringing awareness to what was taking place in the legislature and what was going on with Governor Abbott and what we consider to be President Trump and the things that were taking place.

I totally disagree with that midterm redrawing of the lines and things of that nature. That was something that was, that's really devastating. And as we're looking at the results of it in terms of this next election for the Congressional District 18, it's really a mess. It's really a mess. Very sad. So I would have done anything I could to try to stop that, prolong it and get some additional action around it.

So I'm 100, I'm in 100% agreement with what the Democratic Party was backed into the corner to have to do. Okay. I don't think it was something that we would have sat around the table and said, is this the best thing for us to do right now?

But when you're backed into a corner, you have very little power, as you stated, to do otherwise. You have to bring others into the conversation so that some action can take place so others will know that we just totally disagree. And I think that was the message that went out across the country.

But it's just a strategy. It was a strategy to delay. And we knew at some point that it was going to pass because the numbers were there. But making people aware, because most people are not paying attention. They're just not paying attention until you scream out loud somewhere that there's an injustice. And so that's why I do agree with the strategy for that purpose.

It's fruitfulness. I don't know how well that's going to be in terms of what takes place in California. But people are pointing to it as though it is the catalyst for a lot of action that's taking place throughout the country. And so I would say it was a success. Because special session after special session after special session seemingly is not a successful model as well. So if I hadn't evaluated, if I was a member sitting, I would have been absent right along with the Democrats.

Charles Kuffner

Okay. Well, I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to evaluate the performance of your mother again, since you are running to succeed her in the legislature. I'm not going to ask you to evaluate her time in office. I think we can assume that you thought she was pretty successful. But how would you be like your mother, Representative Alma Allen, and how will you be not like her if you are elected?

Lawrence Allen

Now, that's a very good question. Because let me start out with the top part, because we have very similar conceptual resumes in life in the sense of being long term educators. And so I certainly want to follow in her footsteps, if you would, to be a champion and a hero and an advocate for public education.

That's where I know our similarities will be. Because we have that same similar walk from a school teacher, school administrator, you know, all those kinds of things in life, State Board of Education, big picture view of adding value. And when you're sitting in those committee meetings, you need to have a resume, not just a thought.

What platform are you speaking from, Mr. Allen, when you're bringing these various points to this committee? You need to have some form of resume behind you that says, hmm, I have some intimate relations with educational ideas. And I think that's where my mother and I would be very, very similar. So I definitely want to be a champion for education in the House of Representatives.

Where we might be different would be in some of the juvenile justice components, because I'm very, very interested in looking at the juvenile justice components. Because I think there has been a dearth of responsibility on our parents in terms of how long students are incarcerated. Yeah, I'm saying I'm calling them students, but young people are incarcerated when they're in the juvenile space and how soon they return to their home life. I think that long-term effects in juvenile facilities is just traumatizing and overwhelming. And so we have to really evaluate whether that's effective when we get these long sentences by juveniles. And I don't know if that would look like that's soft on crime or whatnot, but I just believe that the traumatic effect to the long-term incarceration of our juveniles is something they never get over.

Charles Kuffner

Okay. I mean, there's obviously a lot of issues we can talk about relating to the legislature, but a lot of the legislature does is issues of local importance, stuff that affects districts, neighborhoods, cities, counties. What are your top one or two priorities for things relating to your district that you would pursue as a member of the legislature?

Lawrence Allen

Well, Charles, I don't know how well you know the layout of the map of House District 131, but it runs along the Beltway. This runs around the Beltway from the Pasadena area, which is the Black Hawk Road, all the way over to Bellaire, Bellaire going down. And that's a very diverse community.

So what we find in that community, after the development of the 288 and the Beltway, is that we have 17 concrete crushing plants. And so I believe that is an environmental hazardous situation in our environment, and that we have to limit or cut out these concrete crushing plants to make sure that our citizens are not ill from things that may be in the air from so many of these concrete crushing plants in our area. One of the things that's also very, very important for House District 131 is that there is a large number of apartments going up and a large number of houses being built in the 131 district. And yet we

want to protect our senior citizens, if you would, from being overtaxed. And in the middle of 131 is the aging community. I call it the Hiram Clark area.

It's an aging community. And so you want to make sure that all of our senior citizens in our aging community get some kind of tax relief on their evaluation of their homes, because many of them probably bought those homes in the late 60s, early 70s, where their salaries are not comparable in retirement to the rapid growth and the home growth that the average home now is about \$350,000 in that community. And so they're experiencing an increase in their taxes.

Most of those individuals probably owned multiple homes because that was the method for economic growth back then to have rent houses and things of that nature. So you only can get that homestead exemption on one home. And so they're forced to sell their properties or move in with their children because now that home they have is now worth \$400,000 when they bought it for \$40,000 50 years ago.

So we want to make sure we protect our seniors as they age in the community where they're not taxed out of their homes. But we want to make sure there is additional housing for the next generation to remain in the community.

Charles Kuffner

Okay. A lot of things we've talked about will be easier to do if there's more Democrats in elected office, not just in the legislature, but in Congress, where hopefully we'll get a Democratic majority to at least provide some check on President Trump's powers.

In order to get more people elected, we've all got to do our part to do that. So what will you do as a candidate and as a person to help get Democrats elected up and down the ballot in Harris County and elsewhere in Texas?

Lawrence Allen

Well, thank you, Charles. One thing you know is that familiarity is where you have to lend your name, your face, your recognition. Serving in the Houston Independent School District and working with thousands and thousands of young people over the last 35, 36 years of my life, that I have relationships or I'm identifiable by a number of people that are outside of the 131 district. And so when you are trying to support other candidates and bring people into that space for elections, you need to also be recognizable beyond your space. And I think I am.

Sad to say or not to say, when I was serving on the State Board of Education, I was at one time the only African American serving at a point. And for whatever reason, every African American in the state thought they should call my house, call my number, because they wanted to offer up some idea. And so I think that my position and my person is bigger than the district itself. And it would lend itself to other candidates to help them get elected in that space.

I don't know. I think there's a lot of voter apathy out there. I don't want to say I have the silver bullet that's going to change everything.

I just know I can find those that believe in Lawrence Allen and they will help us in that space and move to elect others that I would recommend. I just believe that would happen. And so each one get one. I think I can bring another one to the poll in just about every precinct in my old State Board district, which is nearly the entire city of Houston.

Charles Kuffner

Okay. Well, in order to get to November, you got to get through March. There's a number of people running for the seat - five, I think. And so when people go to vote to nominate the next state representative for House District 131, why should they vote for you and not one of the other people running?

Lawrence Allen

Well, I think you will find that Lawrence Allen is clearly the most qualified in terms of experience. You'll find that Lawrence Allen is probably the call it most prepared. It is the next step for me. It's not a big step for me. It's the next step for me.

I believe that when you are a legislature recognizing that your salary is \$7,200 a year, that you have to be prepared and put all your affairs in order so you can truly focus on the task at hand when you're in Austin and also understand the level of constituent services that are required of you.

And I think I have a seat, a front row seat to that for the last 20 years of my life. And so I'm mentally, physically, and financially prepared to serve the constituents of House District 131. Also, I think, as I said before, that I bring many, many relationships with me to this seat, whether it be fraternity members or whether it be professional organizations that I have intertwined with throughout the years.

Because when you are sitting there, you need great advisors. You need people that can give you additional information because you're not an expert in every subject. You need to be able to talk to people from throughout the state and throughout your district in order to make good decisions.

And so I think I bring a team approach, I bring a listening ear, and I bring a very willing spirit to represent the district and not use this term, what someone say, just lead, just follow me. No, it's not about follow me. I'm going to take the lead position, but we are going together.

Charles Kuffner

All right. Lawrence Allen, thank you very much for speaking with me today.

Lawrence Allen

Thank you, Charles, so much again for doing what you do. For all of us who seek to be in political office, you offer a service that's invaluable.

Charles Kuffner

All right, well, thank you.