



We can all remember a teacher who made an impact on our lives. Many of us even have an educator in our immediate or extended family. For me, that was my mother who taught in Graham for many years. Growing up, I learned the value of an excellent public school system, and gained an appreciation for public school employees.

Today, over 136,000 retirees earn less than \$1,000 per month in annuities, while another 101,000 earn between \$1,000 and \$2,000. This brings the monthly average among all retirees to just \$2,118. Annuitants of the Teacher Retirement System of Texas (TRS) have been waiting for years for a cost of living adjustment (COLA) in order to keep up with rising costs of basic necessities. The last COLA granted to retired teachers was in 2013 and only for those retiring prior to September 1, 2004.

In Texas, the responsibility for TRS falls directly to the legislature. The state is tasked with making decisions regarding benefits for TRS retirees while maintaining the actuarial soundness of the pension fund. Until recently, TRS was woefully underfunded. Fortunately, there have been dramatic improvements in the last two legislative sessions. During the 86th legislative session, SB 12 provided for gradual contribution increases from the state, public education employees, and active employees to make the pension fund actuarially sound. In the recently concluded 87th legislative session, SB 1 included \$5.9 billion for TRS. This was an increase of \$900 million over the previous biennium due to the combined impact of SB 12 and anticipated payroll growth.

During session, I served on the House Committee on Pensions, Investments, and Financial Services, which oversees legislation impacting TRS. I authored HB 3507, also known as “the 13th Check Bill,” which would grant TRS retirees a one-time supplemental payment equal to the lesser of their annuity or \$2,400. In a state where too many Texas retirees live on food stamps, government assistance, or paycheck to paycheck, this payment could be the difference maker for thousands of Texans. However, despite public and political support, this bill never made it to the house floor due to budgetary concerns.

In May of 2021, Texas Comptroller Glenn Hegar estimated the legislature would have \$115.65 billion available for general purpose spending in the 2022-23 biennium. For the special session beginning in July, a new revenue estimate showed an increase of \$7.37 billion in the state's budget. According to the comptroller, this dramatic increase is based on surging revenue collections, savings from state agency budget reductions during the recent regular session, and the replacement of eligible appropriations with federal funds. Consequently, we are now in a much better position in the special session to benefit our retirees.

After the regular session, I spoke with many TRS retirees and promised them I would not quit working for their interest. I wrote a letter to the Governor, signed by many members of the Texas House, asking him to place the 13th Check legislation on the special session call. Fortunately, Governor Abbott supported assisting our retired teachers and added the 13th check to the agenda. On day one of the special session, my office filed HB 85 to provide our teachers with that 13th check and continue the work we started in the regular session.

The stars have almost aligned to give our retired teachers their well-deserved 13th check. Even the most financially conservative representative could not argue against this with the recent revenue estimate increase. The only thing separating retired teachers and other school employees from this money is the absence of a quorum in the Texas House. We need all Texas legislators back in Austin to complete this important work. Retirees already struggling to make ends meet should not have to wait two more years to receive financial support from the legislature. Our teachers deserve better!