TENACIOUS AND COMMITTED: PORTRAIT OF A PUBLIC ED ADVOCATE

How TASB’s 2021 Advocate of the Year, Coppell ISD’s Tracy Fisher, Champions Texas Public Schools

by Sylvia Wood

Tracy Fisher is a self-described military brat, whose father’s service gave her the unique experience of living in Texas, Alabama, Germany, Belgium, and Nebraska. That journey included one elementary school, two junior highs, four high schools, and a public university.

She credits those moves and transitions with teaching her how to walk into any situation with confidence and ease. “I can go to different meetings all over the place and not know a single soul,” said Fisher, who was reelected in May to another term on the Coppell ISD Board of Education. “It doesn’t make me anxious at all. I’m an extrovert and that’s something that plays into it. I get my energy from people.”

Combining her outgoing personality with a passion for public education has been a winning strategy for Fisher. She has not only been elected four times to her local school board but earned the Texas Association of School Boards’ inaugural Advocate of the Year award, presented at the TASA | TASB Convention in Dallas in September.

“Tracy is the consummate advocate, pairing dedication and a willingness to learn about multiple facets of public education policy to achieve concrete results,” said TASB Legislative Committee Chair and Dallas ISD trustee Dan Micciche, who presented Fisher with the award during the TASB School Board Advocacy Network luncheon. “One of her most admirable talents is how successful she is in encouraging others to get engaged and fight for Texas public schools and our students.”

Focused on Student Success

At the center of Fisher’s work has been a persistent curiosity about the influences and people who shape what happens in public education at the state and local levels. “I actually sat in school board meetings for six years before I ever ran for school board,” she said. “I just wanted to understand the system.”

Since 2012, she’s been on the board of Coppell ISD, a growing district north of Dallas with more than 13,000 students. Before that, she had made volunteering and community involvement her full-time job. Fisher left behind a career in management, operations, and marketing with LSG Sky Chefs at DFW International Airport to focus on her service. Fisher said. “Our independent school districts are local and for children. That’s what drove me.”

Specifically, she’s been on a quest to ensure public education is tailored to the needs of every child, so school districts across the state are graduating students who know how to think creatively, not just score well on tests. “I want the kids to be in an environment that doesn’t take their natural creativity and their natural curiosity away,” she said. “I want a school system that allows a kid to soar.”

By all accountability measures, Coppell ISD is doing extremely well, and Fisher is proud of the work she’s done on the board. She finds strength in serving with other trustees who also care deeply about education as a way to build strong communities.

Creating Connections

“Tracy is just tremendous,” said the Rev. Charles Johnson of Pastors for Texas Children, a ministry that serves neighborhood public schools through prayer, service, and advocacy. “She’s smart, she’s strong, and she’s fearless.”

In today’s polarized environment, Fisher’s approach to advocacy — learning all she can on the issues and being able to communicate on behalf of all children — makes her especially effective. “Trusting model civil leadership for the community, and nobody does it better than Tracy,” Johnson said.

Fisher isn’t easily deterred from her mission, no matter the background noise. Her election website featured the motto “School Board Service is a Marathon, Not a Sprint.”

One of Fisher’s key strategies is to make connections with other advocates who share her passion for public education. In a state as large as Texas, she says it’s important to build those relationships.

“Connecting with others helps you build knowledge and understanding of the ways we are all impacted by the system,” Fisher said. “Our independent school districts are local and not one size fits all — the beauty of community. If I don’t know how others are impacted, my advocacy is not as effective. By connecting to fellow trustees, we have rich conversations and develop wonderful relationships that help Texas children. I feel blessed to know so many amazing advocates across the state.”

Among her contacts is Missy Bender, who serves as the regional advocacy director and a trustee in residence for Raise Your Hand Texas, an organization dedicated to public policy solutions to improve public education.

“Tracy is tenacious and committed to stand up for every one of the 5.5 million schoolchildren in Texas,” Bender said. “She inspires others to use their voice and join her in the quest to make sure that every child has the opportunity to find and maximize his or her potential.”

Always Learning

In working to become a successful advocate, Fisher has taken advantage of opportunities to learn and grow. She earned her Master Trustee designation from Leadership TASB in 2015 and has served in many roles for the organization, including on the Legislative Advisory Council and as a board Legislative Committee member. During her district board meetings, she makes a point of discussing a legislative item or topic.

“I started doing that when I was board president,” she said, “and I’ve just continued. It’s another way to build capacity in your fellow trustees and let your community know what kinds of things you’re facing.”

Photo by TASB Media Services

Tracy Fisher (third from left) leads a group from Coppell ISD as they arrive at the Capitol to meet with legislators during the 86th Legislative Session.
On the top of her list of issues is the expansion of charter schools across the state. “It’s affecting our school district badly and it’s hurting kids,” she said. “Three kids are coming back to us behind academically and we’re having to catch them up, and it’s just a constant churn. They’re recruiting them right out of private preschools.”

Fisher’s views on charter schools were shaped in part by her own experience as a parent. Her sons both attended charter schools for a period of time in elementary school, but her youngest son struggled and didn’t get the help he needed. “Big extra-curricular activities that are happening in the other schools for a period of time in elementary school, but her youngest son struggled and didn’t get the help he needed. “Biggest regret in my life,” she said. “He was dyslexic and not identified until we brought him back to our local public school.”

She advocates for school districts to be able to leverage community-based accountability systems tailored to the needs of students and to use measures of success that go beyond state tests. “Community-based accountability pulls communities together,” she said. “Local control and having the freedom to help your kids is important.”

Constantly Adapting

Amid everything going on in public education, and Fisher’s commitment of time and energy to the Coppell community and her advocacy work, she’s also serving on the Greater Dallas-Veterans Foundation Board. Her father, originally from Lubbock, served for 29 years in the Air Force starting in the late 1950s. For a short time, he was teaching and coaching football in a public school at Hereford High School in the Texas Panhandle, but he quickly found himself back in the Air Force, including a tour in Vietnam.

“He was recalled to service because they needed him,” she said. “He went for long stretches of time. But it imbued in her a sense of optimism even in difficult times. “I’m a hopeful person,” she said. “I’m a military brat and know things change.”

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“What I tell educators is, hang in there,” she said. “We’re going to get through this. It’s not going to be this way for long. Of course, at the same time, I encourage them to vote.”

Sylvia Wood is director of Content Strategy at TASB Communications.

2020-2021 Advocacy Game

Winner: Tracy Fisher, Coppell ISD

Runner-up: Heather Sheffield, Eanes ISD

Tier 2: 6,000-9,999 Points

Trish Bode, Leander ISD

Ana Cortez, Manor ISD

Tony Greaves, Irving ISD

Kristi Hassett, Lewisville ISD

Stephanie Luper, Bullard ISD

Paula McDonald, Granbury ISD

Vernagene Mott, Pflugerville ISD

Georgan Reitmeier, Klein ISD

Tracy Scott Miller, Lewisville ISD

Robert Sovard, Mesquite ISD

Becky St. John, Grapevine-Colleyville ISD

Andrea Walton, Midlothian ISD

Heather Sheffield just missed getting the most points in TASB’s inaugural Legislative Advocacy Game but she’s taking the long view, especially when it comes to encouraging lawmakers to share their commitment to public schools.

“Lawmakers will respond to advocates who are polite and who want to work with them, and who try to bring solutions to the table, rather than those who just yell at them,” said the Eanes ISD trustee. “In order to get things done, I have learned that patience is the biggest thing.”

As the mother of two children and a former first-grade teacher, Sheffield has had a lot of practice in that area. Her experience as a frontline educator and a parent is what prompted her to run for the Eanes ISD School Board in 2019. She was already attending board meetings and volunteering in her children’s schools. As she learned about the challenges facing public education, especially school finance, she knew she wanted to do more.

“It really just lit a fire within me to get more involved,” she said.

When she learned about TASB’s Legislative Advocacy Game, she didn’t hesitate to sign up.

“I’m very passionate about public education and making sure that our students have everything they need. As a parent and trustee, it’s come to my attention that sometimes legislators don’t always know what is needed in a school system,” she said. “It’s kind of one of those things that if not me, then who? I have time and the ability.”

During the last session, she enjoyed working on behalf of House Bill 3880 that would have included dyslexia among special-education services, giving more students access to full and individual evaluations (FIE), and help dyslexic students work on behalf of House Bill 3880 that would have included dyslexia among special-education services, giving more students access to full and individual evaluations (FIE), and help dyslexic students bring Texas in line with federal law.

The bill did not pass, but Sheffield said the work was taken up by the State Board of Education to incorporate changes into the Dyslexia Handbook. “That was a great example of what advocacy can do to make a meaningful change in the lives of students,” she said.

Looking ahead, Sheffield plans to run for reelection in May 2022 so she can continue to fight for students and a stronger public education system.

“I really just want the opportunity to continue to serve my school district and our students,” she said. “Whatever I can do to help, that’s what I’m here for.”

Tracy Fisher’s Top Tips for Public Education Advocacy

• Vote and encourage others to register and vote

• Get to know your local elected officials and talk to them about issues that matter to your school district

• Take part in TASB’s Grassroots Advocacy Process

• Provide updates on legislative issues at regular board meetings

• Connect with others who are already advocating

• Attend Rotary, Chamber, and other events and talk to others about issues that matter to your school district

• Invite elected officials to take part in school district events

• Get to know lawmakers’ chiefs of staff as they are often gatekeepers

• Write letters, make phone calls, attend hearings, and testify in person

• Don’t get discouraged: school board service is a marathon, not a sprint

THE SECRET TO EFFECTIVE PUBLIC ED ADVOCACY: PATIENCE IS KEY

Eanes ISD’s Heather Sheffield talks about taking the time to get Texas students what they need

Heather Sheffield

2020-2021 Advocacy Game Runner-Up

Tier 3: 0-5,999 Points

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