



## EDUCATION

## A PRIORITY

Congressional, education, industry leaders discuss STEM education



Staff photo by Adam Sacata

■ Rep. Ralph Hall, R-Texas, talks with Texas High students after a congressional field hearing on science, technology, engineering and mathematics education and the workforce Monday at the Sullivan Performing Arts Center.

By MARIE MARETT ■ Texarkana Gazette

Local industry leaders in education, health care, paper making and one of the largest industrial centers in the country shared views on STEM education during Monday's congressional hearing at the Sullivan Performing Arts Center.

The topic of the day, "STEM Education in Action: Communities Preparing for Jobs of the Future." Witnesses examined how the region will prepare for jobs to meet the needs of area industry and students who intend on graduating from local science, technology, engineering and math-based programs.

"STEM education and a trained, skilled workforce are closely connected and are both essential elements for U.S. economic prosperity. They should be top priority for every community, much like they are here in Texarkana," said U.S. Rep. Ralph Hall, R-Texas. Hall and U.S. Rep. Eddie Bernice

Johnson, D-Texas, chairman and ranking members of the Science, Space and Technology committee, respectively, have made STEM education a priority in Texas.

"I know we are both glad to be members representing this great state, and STEM education had been a top priority for both of us on this committee," Hall said.

The committee has jurisdiction of all nondefense and nonmedical research and development activities in the nation, Hall said. The oversight includes NASA, U.S. Department of Energy's Office of Science,

the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, portions of Homeland Security and the National Science Foundation.

"We have a STEM education crisis in this country. We are lagging behind our international peers," Johnson said, adding that if U.S. companies cannot find a highly skilled workforce, they risk losing competitive edge and will move abroad to find it.

The seven witnesses included James Henry Russell of Texarkana College, Dr. C.R. Rathbun of Texas A&M University-Texarkana, Dr. Brad Johnson of Northeast Texas Community College, Pam Kennedy of CHRISTUS St. Michael Health System, Myron Barnett of International Paper, Denis Washington of TexAmericas and Dr. Cora Marrett of National Science Foundation.

The statements of Monday's witnesses will be in the Library of Congress for 100 years.

"It will be congressional record for 100 years and all the testimony will be read again many times and discussed in committee rooms and the floor of Congress," Hall said, adding that Texarkana is a leader in STEM education. "Texarkana and this area gave the first thrust in STEM education when land was given by people who were very generous and created an elementary school here. We're the first as far as I'm concerned."

Eddie Bernice Johnson said community colleges are especially important in highly technical jobs because they are the pathway to higher education and STEM fields for students who may not be immediately ready for higher math and science after graduation or may have economic barriers to higher education.

"Community colleges face unique challenges including providing remediation," she said. "I am interested in hearing from our witnesses — how you will create and grow STEM programs in East Texas using federal funding."

Marrett agreed.

"Community colleges are essential for community development — and a gateway to millions of Americans to good jobs

and a better life," Marrett said. Russell said Texarkana education resources are giving students highly skilled certificate and degrees without a big debt burden.

"Students graduating today have way too much of a debt burden on them. We are so lucky in this area to have such efficient community colleges and one of the best-priced, four-year universities that you're going to find anywhere in the nation," he said.

Answering a question Hall asked before Monday's hearing, Russell said one of the collaborations he's most proud of is the TexAmericas training at TC's satellite campus, a collaboration between the college, the U.S. Army, Texarkana, U.S.A., Chamber of Commerce and Caterpillar Inc.

Another of the questions Russell addressed concerned the barriers or obstacles to STEM education.

Russell said one of the biggest problems in students attaining a certificate or degree in STEM education is math readiness.

"The No. 1 obstacle is students being ready for math that first year. Study after study will tell you that if a student is not successful in a college-level math class that first year, the chance of them earning a degree or certificate dramatically goes down," he said.

The hearing was followed by a luncheon at Texarkana College hosted by Texarkana Independent School District and its food service department.