

Most OK with tax hike for schools

Exclusive: News poll reveals 52 percent willing to pay more in state taxes for education

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By **CHRISTY HOPPE** / The Dallas Morning News

AUSTIN – The majority of Texans, despite being tax leery and skeptical of government spending, are willing to open their wallets to provide more money for public education, according to a new statewide survey.

A poll conducted for *The Dallas Morning News* shows that 52 percent of Texans say they would pay more in state taxes if the money went to schools, while 39 percent oppose an increase.

The majority disagree with Gov. Rick Perry and House Speaker Tom Craddick, who have insisted that any plan that lowers sky-high property taxes should only raise other taxes enough to replace the lost revenue – a tax shift where schools would get little, if any, new funding.

The finding comes as lawmakers head into a primary campaign dominated by school finance and just weeks before the governor is expected to call a special legislative session to address a Texas Supreme Court ruling on property taxes.

"This is phenomenal," said Scott McCown, a former state district judge who oversaw school finance lawsuits and now heads the Center for Public Policy Priorities, a progressive think tank.

"For three years now, there's been a sustained attack on the integrity, competence and ability of public educators and against any kind of public investment in schools, and you see all the state's key leadership leading the attack," Mr. McCown said.

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For Texans to reject that drumbeat and say that schools need more money overall, "that's remarkable," he said.

On other issues of statewide interest, Texans were evenly split on whether intelligent design – the theory that life is so complex it must have originated from an intelligent force – should be taught as a science in public schools along with evolution. And they are similarly divided over whether a security fence should be erected along the U.S.-Mexico border.

The telephone survey of 1,482 registered voters was conducted Feb. 9-15 by Blum and Weprin Associates Inc. of New York. The error margin is plus or minus 3 percentage points, meaning the results could vary by

that much in either direction.

The exception?

On taxes, pollster Mickey Blum said that Mr. Perry – or any other politician – won't suffer voters' wrath for being against tax hikes. But on the other hand, the other candidates in the race have assumed the risk of advocating more funding for classrooms.

"It's interesting that Texas, which has always said no more taxes, no more taxes, no more taxes, is willing to say OK to this," Ms. Blum said. "But you find this all over the country, that the one issue that will open up the pocketbooks – and we all hate taxes – it is education."

Kathy Walt, press secretary to the Republican governor, noted that Mr. Perry has appointed a commission to recommend changes in the state tax system. Mr. Perry believes the commission, led by former Comptroller John Sharp, will produce a broad-based business tax to replace the outmoded franchise tax, which few businesses pay. It could recommend a small increase in the sales tax.

The new tax structure "would provide more money in the outlying years," and those dollars could be funneled into education, Ms. Walt said.

During three legislative sessions last year, lawmakers considered proposals that would have boosted consumer and business taxes to offset cuts in property taxes. But business groups opposed new taxes and educators opposed new mandates, and the overhaul failed.

Then last fall, the state Supreme Court ruled that state laws have created a statewide property tax, which the Texas Constitution prohibits. The justices gave lawmakers until June 1 to fix the problem.

'A big black hole'

Michael Quinn Sullivan of the conservative Texas Public Policy Foundation said that in a sense, both sides on taxes for schools are right: "New money isn't the answer. And more money has got to be getting into our classrooms."

He described current education spending as "a big black hole" and said more accountability, trimmed administrative costs and added efficiencies would direct more money into classrooms.

"I hope raising taxes is a nonstarter," Mr. Sullivan said.

Intelligent design

On intelligent design theory, 44 percent of Texans said it should be taught as a science along with evolution, while 42 percent oppose it.

Dan Quinn, a spokesman for the Texas Freedom Network, which advocates the separation of church and state, said he was surprised so many Texans favor teaching a religious hypothesis.

"Intelligent design is nothing more than creationism dressed up in a lab coat. There is no science in it," Mr. Quinn said. "There's nothing wrong with believing it, but you should not be teaching it in the classroom."

Ms. Blum said Texans saw some fairness in presenting evolution and intelligent design together.

"America is a religious nation. People would like to believe both; they want religion to be compatible with science," she said.

Sandy Brown, a semiretired middle school teacher in Midlothian who was surveyed, falls into that category.

"Being a Christian and a believer in the Bible, I believe it's a fact," Ms. Brown said. "I don't know that you could call it a science. But it's definitely a belief that needs to be presented along with evolution."

On building a security fence along the border, 47 percent of Texans disagreed with such a proposal, while 42 percent thought it would be a good idea.

Mr. Perry has opposed the idea, Ms. Walt said, because it would take years to construct. Plus, immigrants and smugglers have shown they are willing to tunnel under obstructions.

"The problems Texas has are now, and a fence doesn't address the immediate needs," Ms. Walt said.

On immigration issues, Texans tracked what national polls have showed, with Republicans more strongly opposed to illegal immigration than Democrats, Ms. Blum said.

But on the issue of the fence, she said, "they are on the fence."

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VOTER VIEWS

52% would be willing to pay more in state taxes to put more money into schools (**39%** would not)

46% of Republicans would not want to pay more (**44%** would, making Republicans the only voter group unwilling to pay more)

44% think intelligent design theory should be taught in public schools as science (**42%** disagree)

49% of Republicans think it should be taught (**37%** said no)

38% of Democrats think it should be taught (**50%** don't think so)

47% oppose building a fence along the U.S.-Mexico border to stop illegal immigration (**44%** favor a fence)

Undecided voters and those who declined to answer are not included.

ABOUT THIS POLL

Blum & Weprin Associates Inc. of New York conducted the random telephone poll of 1,482 registered voters Feb. 9-15. It has an error margin of plus or minus 3 percentage points.

In 19 out of 20 cases, poll responses probably would differ by no more than that amount in either direction, even if all Texas adults in households with telephones were interviewed. Respondents were offered the

questionnaire in Spanish.

An error margin of 3 percentage points means that each response could vary by six points. For instance, if 40 percent of respondents chose a certain candidate, the result could range from 37 percent to 43 percent.

Of those polled, 301 say they are likely to vote in the Democratic primary. The error margin for those voters' responses is 5.5 percentage points.

Differences in how questions are worded or what order they are asked in can cause results to vary.

WHERE GUBERNATORIAL CANDIDATES STAND

Most candidates for governor have said they would favor new taxes to pay for education, though most haven't offered detailed proposals. A look:

Chris Bell: Would close loopholes in state business taxes to make more companies pay; opposes a state income tax.

Kinky Friedman: Favors increased taxes on oil and gas interests.

Bob Gammage: Would close loopholes in state business taxes; would consider an income tax; opposes a sales tax increase.

Rick Perry: Wants a plan that is revenue neutral, cutting property taxes and raising sales and business taxes to make up the difference, but raising no new money.

Carole Keeton Strayhorn: Favors a revamped business tax and video slot machines.

Online at:

<http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/dn/latestnews/stories/022106dntexschoolpoll.d0f9aad.html>