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Education issues aired

Think tank's conference talks vouchers, equity

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AUSTIN — Two hot-button education issues — school finance and private school vouchers — kicked off a Texas Public Policy Foundation conference as the think tank and its pet initiatives moved from the fringes to the forefront of debate this legislative session.

The San Antonio-based group long has pushed for a publicly funded voucher program that would pay for private school tuition, an idea that has gained unprecedented momentum in the Texas House and Senate, both controlled for the first time in more than a 100 years by Republicans.

Key lawmakers and policy experts made a case for vouchers on the first day of the four-day conference, which also featured a keynote speech by Gov. Rick Perry.

"The Texas Public Policy Foundation started as an idea, and it has become an idea that is accepted by, I think, mainstream Texans as a foundation

that is interested in solutions to public policy issues," Perry said.

Other participants included Senate Education Committee Chairwoman Florence Shapiro, R-Plano, and Rep. Kent Grusendorf, R-Arlington.

Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst and House Speaker Tom Craddick, R-Midland, also are scheduled to take part in the conference, which will address health care, transportation and insurance in the next three days.

"Look at the leaders who have agreed to participate," Shapiro said, highlighting the group's new prominence in Austin politics.

Its status may help vouchers, which, like the foundation itself, have traditionally been on the periphery of public policy debates in Austin.

That, however, was not the case Wednesday, when several people spoke in favor of a pilot voucher program, presumably one targeting the state's six-largest school districts.

Rep. Glenn Lewis, D-Fort Worth, said there is a great need for public school reform, but large bureaucracies are not inclined to change on their own.

"There has to be outside pressure," he said, "and that pressure could come from hav-

ing to compete."

Grusendorf moderated a voucher panel consisting of Lewis; two academics; a school board member from Milwaukee, which has the nation's oldest and largest publicly funded voucher program; and one voucher critic, Richard Kouri, spokesman for the Texas State Teachers Association.

Kouri praised the public school system, saying its graduates have made the United States what it is today, and he touted the strides made by Texas students on standardized tests in recent years.

One drawback of vouchers is that private school administrators will choose who attends their schools, he said, and public funds will inevitably come with strings attached.

If not, Kouri said, "it would be a first."

The panel discussion on school finance did not fall along the same kind of clear-cut lines.

Panelists disagreed, for example, about increases in per-pupil spending and whether they had led to academic gains over the years, but they did agree with a statement by Harrison Keller, of Craddick's office: "Our current system is on its last legs."

Much discussion focused on

the pros and cons of a new school finance trend known as adequacy, which has replaced equity as the guiding force in school funding in some states.

Supported by Shapiro, who chaired the school finance panel, it would require a study to establish the desired amount for per-pupil spending. Then the funding system would be adjusted to meet that goal.

Dick Lavine of the Center for Public Policy Priorities said he was not opposed to a study, but he was concerned about maintaining an equitable distribution of funds between rich and poor school districts.

"Children, regardless of their backgrounds, are being given the opportunity to achieve," he said. "We need to hang on to equity."

In the end, though, the discussion came around to the bottom line — the need to put more money into the system and to move away from the state's reliance on local property taxes to pay for public education.

"There is going to be more money spent by the state no matter what we do," Shapiro said. "There will be some change in our taxing structure. That's a given."

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