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State's education boss takes direct approach

She backs school choice and says 'Robin Hood' must go.

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BY KAREN ADLER
EXPRESS-NEWS STAFF WRITER

"School choice is nothing to be afraid of if you are doing a good job. Your school will be the school of choice."

SHIRLEY NEELEY
Texas education commissioner

AUSTIN — Only two weeks after Shirley Neeley was appointed Texas education commissioner, the self-described Harley-riding, fast-talking schoolmarm isn't shy about offering her stance on hot-button issues.

School choice? She's all for it. Temporary teaching certificates for college graduates? Absolutely.

And the state's "Robin Hood" school finance system? Bring it down, she says.

"I'm not afraid of the devil himself," said Neeley, speaking to 400 people Wednesday at the Texas Public Policy Foundation's Policy Orientation for the Texas Legislature.

The two-day program ends today and includes panel discussions on tax reform, school finance and health care costs.

Neeley, 55, was appointed Jan. 12 by Gov. Rick Perry to oversee the state's public education system.

The post is the pinnacle of Neeley's career. She is a former elementary school teacher, assistant principal and principal.

She had served since 1995 as superintendent of the Galena Park School District, near Houston, where she employed a supportive, yet take-no-excuses style of leadership.

Under her tenure, Galena Park became the largest and most diverse district rated "exemplary" in Texas.

Neeley is perplexed by the furor over school choice, the idea that parents of children in low-performing schools should be given state money in the form of vouchers to send their children to private institutions.

"School choice is nothing to be afraid of if you are doing a good job," she said.

"Your school will be the school of choice."

Neeley said she fully supports the recent decision by the state Board of Educator Certification that would let college graduates into the classroom if they majored in the subject they're teaching.

Considering the state's teacher shortage, if someone loves children and loves to

teach, "it's our job to give them the opportunity," Neeley said.

"Certification is nothing but a piece of paper," she said. "It does not make a master teacher."

Despite her apology-free opinions, Neeley has had no problem racking up fans.

"I love her," said Dan McLeRoy, a member of the State Board of Education. "She treats our board like we hired her. I feel more important as a board member than I've ever felt before."

The Texas Public Policy Foundation doesn't often agree with the education establishment, acknowledged President Brooke Rollins, but she's thrilled with Neeley's appointment.

"Dr. Neeley represents to me a visionary thinker that has the record of credibility," she said. "You don't often find those two together in one package."

Neeley, a longtime Houston resident, said she's confident the legislators in her new hometown will work together to find an equitable school funding system.

The Robin Hood formula of taking money from wealthy districts to give to poor districts, which benefited Galena Park, has had its day, she said.

"Everybody knows property owners need a tax break," she said. "We're going to find a funding system that is a win-win for everybody."

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TOM REEL/STAFF

Texas Education Commissioner Shirley Neeley speaks at a Texas Public Policy Foundation session in Austin. She was there Wednesday.

