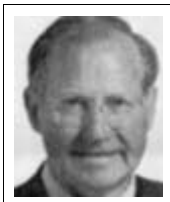


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Big hurdles loom in school finance debate

The committee fiddled while the governor visited Rome.

**DAVE
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**Austin
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A report from the Joint Select Committee on Public School Finance came in last week with more alternatives than answers on how to divide money among school districts or charge the tax system.

Meanwhile, Gov. Rick Perry took wife Anita and daughter Sydney to Rome and Florence. It's good to help sell Texas to Italians, Perry said.

The trip, a few weeks after Perry had gone to the Bahamas with James Leininger, a key voucher backer, to discuss school finance, coincided with Sydney's spring break from high school. A coincidence, said Perry's staff.

Before he left, Perry and his chief of staff, Mike Toomey, launched a couple trial tax balloons.

Toomey's would split tax rolls for business and residential properties; Perry's would limit local property appraisal increases to no more than 3 percent a year without voter approval.

The first — which Perry is now backing — drew fire from the business community, which fears a split tax roll would hit them harder than homeowners.

The local tax cap was blasted by several local officials, though defended by some. Critics said it amounted to an unfunded mandate that would tie their hands on raising money.

Editorial writers joined the target practice. Jack Z. Smith, columnist for *The Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, said the tax cap "smacks of Proposition 13," the 1978 California tax cap that crimped that state's once-excellent schools.

Smith called it "cheap political gimmickry that appeals most strongly to people who simply don't want to pay their full and fair share of taxes."

During the regular legislative session last spring, Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst crafted a school finance plan that the Senate passed unanimously.

It would have reduced the local property tax burden for schools by \$7.5 billion, while upping the state's contribution for schools by \$8.5 billion. It would have done that by raising and broadening the sales tax and would have ended the district-to-district sharing disaffectionately called "Robin Hood," without

injuring the almost nine out of 10 Texas school districts that get rather than give.

But House Speaker Tom Craddick and Perry spurned that plan, saying school finance was so important it should be considered in a special session.

He and Craddick might be wishing they'd taken Dewhurst's deal, rather than face a special session for which an agreement on what to do hasn't been reached.

Also, Craddick and key Republican groups are involved in an investigation by Travis County District Attorney Ronnie Earle and a grand jury for possible illegal use of corporate money in about two dozen 2002 elections. A special session would give restless Democrats a podium to hammer the speaker and governor.

Meanwhile, a court date looms in July for a suit by rich and poor school districts against the state. Perry probably won't punt to the courts.

But it's almost a Texas tradition that it takes pressure from judges for lawmakers to accept their responsibility.

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