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# 180 Poll shows some tax support

**Increases favored on businesses, smokers to help fund schools**

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AUSTIN — Most Texans are ready to increase taxes for businesses and smokers and legalize video gambling machines to raise money for public schools, according to a new Texas Poll.

But the poll, released today, found Texans split over raising the sales tax.

With the Legislature gearing up to tackle school finance reform in its 2005 session, the telephone survey found that three out of four adult Texans agree schools need more money and nearly as many believe the extra funding will produce improved student performance.

If most lawmakers come into the session considering education their top priority, they will be mirroring the views of their constituents, the poll found.

"Education" was rated the No. 1 issue by 24 percent of respondents, far more than any other is-

sue. "School finance" and "health care" each were cited by 13 percent of those polled. Other issues, including jobs and the economy, were named the top issue by only single-digit percentages.

Groups seeking an overhaul of the state's troubled school finance system were encouraged by the poll results, pointing to public support for an array of tax changes that would retool the system and devote more money to schools.

"Citizens are clearly behind a more adequately funded system of public education," said Wayne Pierce, director of the Equity Center, which represents hundreds of low- and medium-property-wealth school districts.

At the other end of the wealth spectrum, Clayton Downing of the Texas School Coalition said lawmakers need to get used to the idea that new revenue sources are needed. The coalition represents higher-wealth districts.

"A lot of legislators think more money is needed, but there is still a reluctance to talk about raising taxes," said Dr. Downing, former superintendent of Lewisville

schools. "It's a waste of time to talk about changing the system without new revenue."

A leading conservative think tank, on the other hand, has cautioned lawmakers about moving too quickly to boost education funding.

Byron Schlomach, chief economist for the Texas Public Policy Foundation, said in a recent report that public school spending has "spiraled out of control" in the last decade. He cited evidence that he said shows the growth in spending exceeded student population growth.

School finance is expected to be a dominant issue when lawmakers convene in their next regular session on Jan. 11.

Pressure on the Legislature is coming not only from financially strapped school districts, but also from the courts. In September, state District Judge John Dietz ruled the \$30 billion-a-year finance system unconstitutional and gave lawmakers a year to fix it.

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