

INSTEAD OF A BOOK

Try something aside from 'More money!'

By Randy Davidson

State Sen. Eddie Lucio Jr. stopped by the Star office Friday to give us a brief preview of what to expect from him during the current session of the Texas Legislature.

Well, not so brief, really. Politicians, as a group, tend to love the sound of their own voices. Lucio is no exception. (Don't even get me started on state Comp-troller Carole Keeton Rylander, Gov. Rick Perry's grandstanding rival/nemesis. She stopped by the office several years back and I'm not even sure she stopped talking long enough to take a breath.)



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Anyhow, Lucio visited with our education reporter Amy Medellin and me, giving us the lowdown on what will be on his agenda during the 79th Session, which began earlier this month. He touched on the budget, Health and Human Services, the Children's Health Insurance Program, Child Protective Services, natural resources, credit scoring, trade and other border issues.

Those all took a back seat to education, however. And with good reason, as school finance is destined to loom over the entire legislative session.

While the framework for a new method of financing the state's public schools has been unveiled by Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst and state Sen. Florence Shapiro, don't expect any conclusions by the end of the session in June, Lucio said. Adopting a new system without a special session will be impossible because the state has appealed Judge John Dietz's decision, in which he found the current Robin Hood method of financing unconstitutional.

Lucio said that he supports the philosophy behind that framework but, at this point, nothing is in writing.

The senator outlined many of his initiatives, some new and others rehabilitated from past sessions. Several of those initiatives would create a new program or expand an existing one to meet a vaguely defined need. Invariably, they rely on what Lucio refers to in his op-ed column (see opposite page) as "new money." Therein lies a major difference in philosophy between he and I.

"New money" sounds like the funds will come fresh off the printing press. Politicians know that isn't the case, but that doesn't prevent them from spending tax dollars like they were found under the Christmas tree.

In fact, there really isn't any "new money" in Austin. Lucio is proposing to spend more of your money when he speaks of funding this initiative or that initiative with "new money."

And when he — or any other politician, for that matter — refers to "greater needs and a dwindling budget," take it with a grain of salt. Since Lucio was elected to

the Texas Senate, spending by the state government has risen 168 percent, from \$22.68 billion in 1990 to \$60.72 billion in 2004.

When I hear "budget cuts" come from the lips of an elected official, I immediately dismiss it as a ploy to seize more of my money — excuse me, more "new" money. That's because the government budget that is actually cut — that is, actually declines — is a very rare one indeed.

Many of Lucio's proposals concern the public schools — starting an advisory council on nutrition, starting health-related mentor programs, in-school diabetes screening, restrictions on the duties of school counselors, cost-of-living raises for teachers and a minimum of \$150 million allocated to school construction every two years.

Most of those would cost us more money. But if more money was the answer, why aren't our children's schools producing significantly better results than the ones from my generation? The money spent per pupil, after being adjusted for inflation, has risen at a jarring pace, according to data from the Texas Public Policy Foundation. In 1969-70, spending at Texas public schools was \$2,196 per student. It rose to \$3,595 by 1979-80, \$5,298 by 1989-90, and \$6,713 by 1999-2000.

That amount has no doubt risen since 2000 and will do so again when Lucio and his colleagues get done this year. But how much money is needed to teach a student if not \$6,713? \$7,500 per year? \$10,000 per year?

Will the perceived need for more money ever be met under the current educational system? Or is thinking "outside the box" — something that most politicians can't, or won't, do — the recipe for improving education?

If this sounds like I am dumping on Sen. Lucio, let me assure you that I don't intend to. I don't know whether he is any better or any worse than the average state senator.

It's just I view the world from a different perspective, one in which government — in this case, state government — doesn't hold all the answers. In fact, it holds very few of them.

Nobel laureate economist Milton Friedman once remarked, "The government solution to a problem is usually as bad as the problem." I think that is true.

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