

The Quorum Report

Editor: Harvey Kronberg
P.O. Box 8 Austin, Texas 78767
Voice: 512-292-8191
Fax: 512-292-0099
Email: kronberg@quorumreport.com

January 27, 2005 10:13 AM

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SPEAKER READY TO SPLIT THE SCHOOL FINANCE BILL

Two chairs expected to carry parts of the bill

Speaker **Tom Craddick** is expected to split school finance into separate bills on school finance and education reform and hand it off to two chairs.

Craddick's office confirms the tax bill on school finance – or at least the shell of it – will be filed this week and that a separate education reform bill will be filed next week.

Rep. **Jim Keffer** (R-Eastland) is expected to carry the school finance tax bill. Rep. **Kent Grusendorf** (R-Arlington) will file a bill within the next week on school reform.

Gov. **Rick Perry** made it apparent in his State of the State speech yesterday that vouchers would be on the table this session. By separating school finance from education reform, a voucher proposal would only need to carry a clear majority of the House.

The outline of at least one proposal on the finance side was revealed at the *Texas Public Policy Foundation's pre-legislative conference* yesterday. During a session on taxation, Rep. **Bill Keffer** (R-Dallas) outlined the S.T.A.R. proposal, which has the support of Grusendorf and other conservatives in the House.

The main component of the proposal, similar to a bill filed by Sen. **Kyle Janek** (R-Houston) last session, would increase transparency by separating education funding into components. *State funding* would pay for teachers and textbooks. *Local funding* would pay for administration and overhead. Separating the two areas is considered to be one way to make both the state and the local school districts accountable for funding.

“That’s not to say that one is important and the other is wholly unimportant,” Keffer said. “Our legislative obligation is to focus our efforts on making sure classroom instruction happens. When local school districts pay for administration at the local level, it becomes something between a school board and a superintendent and the local taxpayers. However, that’s not our Constitutional obligation. Our focus is on teaching and learning and making sure that kids get taught.”

A similar proposal was made during Gov. **Ann Richards'** administration. While teacher groups may consider the funding method viable, it's unlikely to win fans among school administrators and certainly will not be met with warmth by equity advocates.

Splitting the budget is the “S” in S.T.A.R. proposal and is noted as “specified funding.” The “T” stands for tax fairness for all, meaning any taxing level would be the broadest base at the lowest rate possible. The “A” would stand for “administrative freedom,” which would be the state cutting the bonds on local administrators.

“When the administrators answer to local taxpayers for their side of the budget, they get the carrot,” Keffer explained. “They don’t have to worry about Austin running the show. All we’re really concerned about is that those kids pass these tests, and everybody will have a different way to do that through this new administrative freedom.”

The “R” stands for “rewarding excellence.” Keffer said the only way for reform to work is to bring market principles to the education profession, letting effective teachers enjoy the fruits of their success through financial incentives. – *Kimberly Reeves*

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