

## State leaders talk about school finance

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**AUSTIN** - Education reform should focus on results rather than dollar signs, lawmakers said at a public policy conference Wednesday, reiterating the governor's call to "keep the most important issue the most important issue."

Republican Sens. Florence Shapiro and Kyle Janek and Reps. Kent Grusendorf and Bill Keffer told an audience of the Texas Public Policy Foundation that providing performance-based incentives, reducing property taxes and defining the state's role in public education are critical to giving children quality education.

"We will come to a resolve on this issue. There's no doubt in my mind," Shapiro, of Plano, said, "and the winner will be the schoolchildren of Texas. Along the way the property taxpayer in Texas is going to win as well."

Overhauling the state's \$30 billion school finance system is the priority issue for legislators during this session. Lawmakers failed in a 2003 special session to agree on reform initiatives for the school funding system.

Last fall, a judge ruled the system, called Robin Hood because it distributes money from property rich school districts to poor ones, unconstitutional and ordered lawmakers to come up with more money for public schools.

Republican Gov. Rick Perry has declared the issue an emergency item so that lawmakers can take action on a new plan as soon as possible.

Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst, a Republican, revealed the highlights of a Senate plan earlier this month, and Republican House Speaker Tom Craddick said Tuesday the outline of a House school finance bill could be unveiled as early as Thursday. An education reform bill from the House is expected next week.

The Senate plan calls for \$3.2 billion to be spent on education reform initiatives from 2006-2007.

"That's really what's going to make the difference is education reform, making sure that every child, every child in the state of Texas, gets a great education," said Shapiro, who chairs the Senate education committee.

Grusendorf, who chairs the House public education committee, said providing monetary incentives for teachers who perform well is critical to the success of education reform.

"There's not any other profession where everybody's treated exactly the same and everybody gets a step increase every year regardless of whether they're doing a good job or a bad job," the lawmaker from Arlington said. "It doesn't make sense."

Keffer, of Dallas, and Janek, of Houston, said the state must first define what its role in education will be before deciding how to allocate funds. They advocated a system in which state funds would be used for instructional items, while local districts would pay for administrative functions.

Such a system, Janek said, would engender accountability and allow school districts more freedom to decide where local funds should be allocated.

"If the state defines what it is we're going to pay for and the school district defines what it is they're going to pay for, and there's not enough money in there, at the end of the day we know who's responsible," Janek said.

But such an idea won't be feasible if a statewide property tax is adopted by the Legislature and approved by voters, Janek said.

Grusendorf said the education finance bill he plans to submit does not include measures to differentiate state and local spending.

Putting together the pieces of education reform is a "legislative version of a Rubik's cube," Keffer said.

"We know there's a solution where you get all the colors on the right sides of the cube," he said "and we just keep spinning until it finally looks the way it ought to look."