

HISD trustee takes school bill to task

Finance panel is told that proposal doesn't put money where the greatest needs are

By JANET ELLIOTT

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AUSTIN - A Houston school board trustee was among several witnesses who expressed concern Wednesday that a proposed House school finance bill doesn't consider the cost of educating students who come from impoverished homes and have limited English skills.

"It is precisely those children who are the most expensive to educate," said Harvin Moore, a trustee of the Houston Independent School District.

Moore also called for the state to fund full-day pre-kindergarten for at-risk students. And he criticized a proposal to delay the start of school until after Labor Day.

Moore said half-day pre-K doesn't work for many families because the parents can't leave work to pick up their children.

"The trouble is there are a large number of students in families where they're not read to. These are the children that must have pre-K if they are to enter kindergarten somewhere near where the rest of the kids are," he said.

Moore was among about a dozen witnesses who testified about House Bill 2, which rewrites the state's "Robin Hood" school finance law, requires teacher incentives and places new accountability measures on schools.

More for HISD

Dan Casey, a consultant on school funding issues, said he is concerned that the bill doesn't place resources "where the highest needs are."

David Hinojosa, who represents poor school districts, said HB 2 offers a few rich districts a "smooth, fast, unending highway" while the poorest districts are "left on a dirt road with a dead end."

HISD would get about 4 percent more in per-student funding under the bill, slightly less than the statewide average of 5 percent. Some of the state's wealthier districts would get substantially larger boosts because of strict, new limits on how much local tax revenue they would have to share with poor schools.

House Public Education Committee Chairman Kent Grusendorf defended his bill as providing more overall equity to the system than the "Robin Hood" plan now in place. He called the boost to Highland Park, which would have \$8,948 to spend per pupil in the 2005-06 school year, compared with \$6,628 for HISD, a "red herring."

"It's unfair to compare (the plan) to some ideal as opposed to comparing (it) to current law," said Grusendorf, an Arlington Republican.

Property tax relief

David Thompson, a lawyer who represents HISD and other districts in a lawsuit against the state, said the House plan would spend about \$11 billion on property tax relief and \$3 billion on new money for schools over the 2006-07 biennium.

"It's a little thin on new money," said Thompson.

A different perspective was offered by Byron Schломach, an economist with the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a free-market think tank that supports school vouchers.

Schlomach said Texas already spends enough on schools but too little of the money stays in the classroom. He pointed to school counselors as an example of non-educational spending.

"We've got to focus on a single mission, the education of children," he said.

The districts represented by Hinojosa and Thompson won a ruling last year from a state district judge in Travis County declaring the school funding system inadequate.

The state is appealing the ruling to the Texas Supreme Court.

Thompson said evidence shown during the trial showed that the state needed to spend about \$1,000 more per child to address an achievement gap.

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