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Think tanks fight school finance plan

*Gary Scharrer
El Paso Times*

AUSTIN -- The school-funding battle in the state Capitol provokes divergent perspectives, and lawmakers haven't even reached the politically tricky part of finding a new way to finance public education.

Gary Scharrer

El Paso Rep. **Pat Haggerty**, R-El Paso, pointed out this week that the House leadership's plan proposing a \$3 billion increase (over two years) doesn't add up. The supposed increase does not even cover the education cuts and payment delays lawmakers used two years ago to avoid a tax increase, Haggerty says.

El Paso and other property-poor school districts won an important court ruling last year that, in part, gave the state of Texas an F for not adequately funding public education to meet the standards and expectations set for schools.

Evidence in last year's trial showed the state not coming close to proper funding levels for educating English-deficient and low-income students.

But there are influential groups that contend Texas is already spending enough on public education and simply needs to establish better spending priorities. One of those groups is the Austin-based Texas Public Policy Foundation, a conservative think tank that holds considerable sway with Gov. **Rick Perry** and legislative leaders.

Earlier this week, **Byron Schlomach**, the foundation's chief economist, insisted that Texas does not need more money for public education.

"In the last 30 years, adjusted for inflation, we have tripled per-student expenses. We have nowhere tripled in terms of performance. We haven't seen the big improvement. The question is, where did all the money go?" Schlomach asked during a public school finance conference.

"There's really no strong evidence that money makes that much difference in student accomplishment. The accountability system has made some difference but not money," he says.

And Schlomach doesn't believe it takes more money to educate students without a good grasp of English or those from low-income families.

"I don't know how to say this delicately ... I don't know why it's different, in terms of cost, to educate a black kid or an Hispanic kid or some white kid or an Asian kid. They are all human beings," Schlomach says, citing anecdotes to make his case.

"The issue here is whether our schools are going to do the job that we are giving them to do with the money we give to do it. I don't think they've been doing the job," he says.

Ysleta Superintendent **Hector Montenegro** says Schlomach fails to realize that society has changed and families no longer reflect the "Leave It To Beaver" era.

"More children are growing up in poverty, broken homes, and live in a culture of immediate gratification," Montenegro says.

Schools face unfunded mandates and must educate more children with learning and physical disabilities who need greater individualized services, he says.

"Educating children from throughout the world is not an easy task because they require additional services such as additional language classes and teachers, tutorial services, and funding for free- and reduced-lunch programs," Montenegro says.

And that's not counting extra money for overcrowded and deteriorating buildings and millions more on litigation expenses, he says.

The perspective of the economist clearly irks Montenegro, who says, "Schlomach has demonstrated a total disregard and a profound ignorance of the realities of the educational landscape of today and tomorrow."

David Thompson, former general counsel for the Texas Education Agency, notes that most Texas children attended segregated schools 35 years ago.

Anglos in large urban schools made up between 60 percent and 70 percent of the student population attending back then, compared with less than 10 percent today, he said.

"We didn't even have a program for bilingual students. We didn't even have a program for at-risk students," says Thompson, now a prominent lawyer, who represents property-wealthy schools.

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