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School finance outlook tops local issues at Capitol

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AUSTIN — Two organizations presented different views on how to fix school finance problems to Longview Partnership members who were in Austin on Monday for Longview Days at the Capitol.

The Equity Center, an organization of 630 Texas school districts, called for more money for schools, while the Texas Public Policy Foundation called for directing more money to the

classrooms.

Under Texas' so called "Robin Hood" school funding system, money from school districts with the most taxable property per student is redistributed to districts with the least taxable property. However, a lawsuit brought by so-called rich and poor districts around the state led to the system being ruled unconstitutional. That decision by a state district judge has Texas lawmakers working on a new school finance plan.

One proposal to address the problem comes in House Bill 2, which is scheduled for debate today.

Wayne Pierce, executive director of the Equity Center, said the solutions offered in House Bill 2 do not close the gap between wealthy and poorer

campuses.

Pierce cited testimony during the lawsuit in which one expert said the state needs an average of \$1,100 more per student. There are 4 million students in Texas, which equals about \$4.5 billion yearly in new money.

He said the Equity Center supports

that amount, but the House proposal does not come close to it. He said, though, that the money doesn't have to be provided immediately.

"When you do get more money it takes a while for you to use it in the best possible way," he said. "In four years they need to be at that level. The other thing is whatever money is available, whether its enough or too little, it needs to be made available to children regardless of where they live, based upon their needs."

More money should go to children

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who live in poverty or who don't speak English because it takes more money to help them achieve the same goals as other students, he said.

"You have different amounts of money you'll spend on kids, but it shouldn't be dependent on the kid's ZIP code," Pierce said. "It should be based on the costs in that area and the needs of that child."

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He said the Equity Center does not have a suggestion for how to accomplish the goal of putting more money into education.

Michael Quinn Sullivan, vice president of the Texas Public Policy Foundation, said the problem is not the amount of money spent on education but how it is spent. He described the organization as a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank.

Sullivan said the amount of money spent per student on public education in Texas has tripled since 1970 and doubled since 1990.

"I see a disturbing trend where we spend lots of money but at the same time we haven't had a lot to show for it," Sullivan said.

He added later, "At the same time we have not seen the tripling, the doubling or even modest increases in norm reference national tests, the SAT and the ACT."

A troubling sign of primary and secondary teaching,

Sullivan said, is that more money is spent on remedial teaching than any other aspect of higher education.

The blame, he said, is with state lawmakers. Until the state addresses some core issues, Texas will revisit school financ-

ing problems every seven or 10 years. The state must define what education is, he said.

Funding priorities for education are not about the classroom, he said. Instead, public education is a transportation service, food service and jobs program, for instance, with the time left used for teaching students.

He cited a state comptroller's study about how money is spent on public education. He said that study showed that 52 cents of every education dollar goes to direct classroom instruction.

"When I hear people argue, particularly parents, that we need more money in public education, they are absolutely right," Sullivan said. "We're not spending enough money on classroom instruction. We're

spending lots of money in other places, but they're not having direct discernible results coming out of the classroom, and that's unfortunate."

He said there probably are good reasons to support and oppose House Bill 2, saying it does have some good classroom-centered initiatives and reforms.

"But at the end of the day, the question that we have to ask ourselves about House Bill 2 or any measure purporting to reform education, in my mind, is does this policy move the ball forward in allowing us to better define what we expect out of the institution we call public

education?" Sullivan said.

The Texas Public Policy Foundation supports choice in schools, he said, and competition. That could include giving schools districts the ability to outsource bus or food services, for instance, freeing "school districts to make the best choices for them."

The decision in the school finance lawsuit is under

appeal, and Pierce said he expects the Texas Supreme Court to make a decision in September. He said, though, that he doesn't want lawmakers to wait for a decision from the court to address school finance.

"The solution has got to come from the Legislature," Pierce said. "They're the only ones that can pass these bills."

He predicted that whatever solution is adopted, it will be challenged in court, just as the state's current system was.

Longview Days at the Capitol continues today. Members of the Longview Partnership, including local business and government leaders, will meet with Robert Wood, assistant commissioner for the rural economic development division of the Texas Department of Agriculture, to discuss nature tourism. They'll also meet with state Comptroller Carole Keeton Strayhorn and be introduced on the floors of the House of Representatives and Senate.

