

JACKSONVILLE
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School finance bill passes House

By Will Knous - Progress News Writer

AUSTIN - House Bill 2, the controversial school finance plan - heavily debated by officials and school personnel throughout the state - narrowly passed through the Texas House of Representatives Wednesday night.

After two lengthy days of discussion, the bill passed with a vote of 76-71, with the Speaker voting aye.

The vote was largely along partisan lines, with only nine Republicans voting no along with 62 Democrats.

Cherokee County State Rep. Chuck Hopson (D-Jacksonville) voted against House Bill 2, saying the bill didn't adequately fund the school system or provide promised property tax relief.

"I could not, in good conscience, support a bill that fails to improve education," Hopson stated in a release Wednesday night. "Our superintendents, teachers and parents have expressed real concerns about this bill and asked me not to support it.

"We must do better by making long-term changes that fuel continued growth for our economy, give our children the tools and resources they need to grow and succeed in the future."

Hopson said the state currently pays for 38 percent of public education.

"Rather than increasing the state's share, HB 2 passed unfunded mandates down to the local level and instead requires rural communities and taxpayers to increase their local tax burden if they want to provide additional funding for their local schools for programs," Hopson said in the release. "It's Robin Hood in reverse. The students in rural Texas deserve the same level of education, funding, and resources as students in Highland Park."

HB 2 includes a teacher pay raise and additional funding by mileage to offset the cost of busing students in from outside areas.

However, according to other published reports, the bill was opposed by every major education group in the state.

"HB 2 does not put new money into our classrooms - it does not provide a real teacher pay raise - and it does not benefit our children, parents, teachers or taxpayers," Hopson said. "HB 2 does not meet the litmus test - the children of Texas deserve far better."

According to a release from the Texas Public Policy Foundation (TPPF), under HB 2 there will be higher standards for academic achievement with the restoration of end-of-course exams, school reimbursement for giving SAT or ACT tests and evaluating students with national standards.

In the release, TPPF also stated one percent of state funding set aside for teacher bonuses, to be paid on top of pay increases.

The measure has only passed through the house and must be approved by the Texas Senate before becoming policy.

Next on the House's agenda is HB 3, the \$10 billion tax bill drafted to fund the new school finance system under HB 2.

The new tax plan would replace monies lost when HB 2 significantly cuts property taxes with other taxes such as a snack tax and a new, larger sales tax.

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