

79TH LEGISLATURE

Educators worry that funding won't keep pace with demands

Standards for schools have grown tougher.

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The burden of high-stakes student testing landed squarely on Stacey Smith's shoulders this year.

For the first time, Smith's fifth-grade students at Pickle Elementary School in Northeast Austin must pass state-mandated tests in math and reading to move on to middle school. They also must reverse the sagging science scores that landed Pickle on the state's list of "academically unacceptable" campuses last fall. And the threshold for schools to gain "acceptable" ratings will be even higher next year under new policies released Monday.

So Smith and other teachers give major practice tests every couple of months and weekly testing drills.

"The big buzzword is to compact the curriculum, which is to teach it as fast as you can and compactly as you can," said Smith, 34. "The result of that is there's not a lot of time for reteaching."

Since the Texas Supreme Court approved the state's current school finance system a decade ago, the Legislature has steadily toughened the requirements that Texas' 4 million schoolchildren must meet.

Educators are begging lawmakers to remember these higher standards — some of which have yet to take full effect — as they build a new system to pay for public schools over the next decade. But with many state leaders determined to say at the end of the legislative session that they did not raise taxes, school officials worry that they won't see the money they need to help every student clear the hurdles put in front of them.

"These are all very appropriate tools to guide us to more academic rigor," Austin Superintendent Pat Forgione said of the state testing requirements. "But what I don't see happening in this new era of reform is giving us the resources and the time to build the capacity of the system to meet the standards."

Among the changes in state and federal requirements in the past 10 years:

- Students now take the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills, a test that is considerably more difficult than the old Texas Assessment of Academic Skills. The TAKS has tougher questions, covers more subjects and is given in more grades.

- Third-graders now must pass the reading section of the TAKS to advance to fourth grade; fifth-graders must pass the reading and math sections to move on to sixth. State law allows parents and school officials to override the promotion requirement for students who fail.

Eighth-graders will have to pass reading and math beginning in 2008.

- All high school students are now expected to take classes that previously were considered necessary only for the college-bound.

•The federal government now requires schools to meet annual benchmarks, known as adequate yearly progress, on tests and other indicators. If a school doesn't reach those marks for two consecutive years, its students can transfer. The benchmarks will increase until every student is required to pass the tests in 2014.

Kirk London, superintendent of the Hays Consolidated school district, said more money would help schools satisfy those state and federal demands by paying for smaller classes, staff training and research on the best teaching techniques.

"We support the higher standards, but we need help getting there," London said.

But Byron Schlomach, chief economist at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, which advocates for smaller government, said schools have the money they need.

"If they didn't give them another single dime, it would be enough," Schlomach said. "They've been more than keeping up with inflation for a long time."

He said schools can meet the standards if they worry less about trying to keep classes small and provide extra pay for their best teachers.

Increase in spending

The current finance system caps how high local districts can set their tax rates, then requires districts with high property values relative to their student enrollment to share their money with schools that have lower property values. Most students in Texas are enrolled in schools that tax at or near the maximum rate, causing school officials to say there's no room in the system to raise more money.

State District Judge John Dietz of Austin, who declared the state system unconstitutional last year, pointed to spending levels in the previous decade in making the argument that higher standards require more spending. He said the 30 percent improvement in the number of students passing state tests during the 1990s closely tracked the 24 percent increase in per-student, inflation-adjusted spending between 1994 and 2002.

House leaders have called for spending about \$3.2 billion more on education over the next two years, and senators are looking to add a similar amount. Under both plans, local districts could raise their tax rates to generate slightly more money.

School officials are not convinced the money will keep pace with the rising standards. They also point out that, under the plan approved by the House, much of the new money will go toward new requirements, such as more detailed reporting of school expenses.

The Senate is expected to unveil a first draft of its bill today.

An analysis by San Diego State University's Jennifer Imazeki and the University of Wisconsin's Andrew Reschovsky for school districts suing the state last year found that it would cost at least \$4.7 billion in 2004 dollars to help 70 percent of Texas students pass the state test and as much as \$10.1 billion to help 90 percent of students pass. Dietz called the study credible but said it underestimated necessary spending.

Funding lags behind

The first time test scores were tied to promotion was 2003, when third-graders had to pass the reading test. The state began preparing for the test four years earlier by providing money for extra instruction and giving additional training to teachers in kindergarten through third grade.

When the first class of third-graders took the reading test in 2003, 89 percent passed the English version on the first try. But just 75 percent of the same student group passed the fifth-grade reading test this spring, when it became part of the promotion requirements.

The state has raised the number of correct questions needed to pass the various TAKS sections over the past three years, so part of the dropoff in scores is probably a result of that. But school officials also say state funding has not kept up with the testing requirements.

Lawmakers in 2003, for example, budgeted \$165 million for the Student Success Initiative, programs intended to prepare students and teachers for the promotion requirements, according to the Legislative Budget Board. That was \$65 million less than they budgeted two years earlier.

The Austin district provided 20-day summer programs for entering third-graders who needed help with reading before the 2003 test. But Forgione said there was no money for a similar effort when those students were about to enter fifth grade.

"The child has a right to have those supplemental services to meet the standard," Forgione said.

Stacey Smith, the Austin teacher, remembers when she could give students a week or so to work on a creative project on a topic such as the

Civil War. She says she tries to make room for those projects today, but the demands of the state's broad curriculum cause her to fall behind quickly. At that point, she said, sometimes it's better to fall back on worksheets that resemble the state test.

"When you have that time crunch, you just go into this desperation mode. You resort to what you think you can cover in a short amount of time."

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