

Educators balk at school-reform bill

Legislative leaders say teachers, districts always want more

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By **TERRENCE STUTZ** / *The Dallas Morning News*

AUSTIN – House leaders tout their massive school finance legislation as delivering both new money for schools and reforms to boost student achievement, but almost nobody in the education community of Texas wants any part of it.

From top to bottom, school districts, education groups and PTAs call the measure a disaster, particularly in terms of dollars. Up to the day the bill passed, they argued that its \$1.5 billion a year not only falls far short of needs but also is eaten up by dedicated spending and mandates.

Now, as the Senate prepares to craft its own plan, the mandates themselves are increasingly becoming a target, too. School districts, teachers and their allies are railing against untested programs and ideas in the bill that they assert would undermine local control of schools.

Two of the more volatile proposals are merit pay for teachers based on student test scores and a requirement that hundreds of low-scoring campuses be taken over by private management companies.

"I've never seen school districts and educators so united against a piece of legislation," said Wayne Pierce, director of the Equity Center, the voice for more than 600 low- and medium-wealth school districts in Texas. Mr. Pierce, a former school superintendent, has been active in education issues for the last two decades.

For House Speaker Tom Craddick, whose Republican lieutenants guided the school finance measure and a companion school property tax cut bill through the House over the last two weeks, the near universal opposition from the education community isn't surprising.

"They've been working against us the last two years on everything we've done, said Mr. Craddick, R-Midland. "We just can't put enough money in to please them."

The speaker defended the House bill as a "real plus" for education. "The money we're putting in will take care of their problems," he said.

House Democrats took the school districts' and advocates' side in debate over the changes, and even a few Republicans defected. But the GOP leadership held enough of its 87 members to push both bills through by a few votes each.

And privatization ...

Other provisions in the bill that have drawn the wrath of school districts and teachers include a new statewide start date for the school year, changes to testing and new rules on school board elections. But after merit pay, privatization is perhaps the most divisive.

The bill would require the Texas Education Agency to appoint private management companies to take over campuses

that fail to meet federal benchmarks and fall in the bottom 5 percent of Texas schools in test scores and other criteria for two years in a row. Opponents say that approach has failed elsewhere and represents the ultimate loss of local control to for-profit business entities.

Many of the GOP proposals mirror the agendas of conservative think tanks such as the Texas Public Policy Foundation, which contends that schools don't need more money, just greater accountability for the way they educate students and spend tax dollars.

"Texans deserve to know that their money is being well-spent," foundation president Brooke Rollins said in endorsing the House plan. "Since 1970, we have tripled per student spending, but we have not seen any demonstrable results. It's time to demand more education for our tax dollars."

House Republicans voiced similar arguments during debate on the bill.

"When our work is done, they will not measure our success in dollars and cents, but in the number of children who learn, graduate and go on to college," said Rep. Kent Grusendorf, the Arlington Republican who authored the school finance measure.

Teaming with education leaders are groups that have battled with conservatives over textbooks and other hot-button education issues.

Texas Freedom Network president Kathy Miller warned that the House sanctions for low-performing schools could result in more than 400 campuses being turned over to private companies that have had limited success where they were given contracts to operate public schools.

"These private, for-profit companies have failed students across the country while draining precious tax dollars from neighborhood schools to line the pockets of investors," Ms. Miller said. Her group has also attacked a provision that would free high-performing campuses from certain requirements such as class-size limits in elementary grades.

Following the money

In addition to what they call a lack of money, districts are complaining about the new ways state funds would be doled out as well.

For example, changes in transportation funding that benefit rural districts – offered to gain the support of rural Republicans, a key to the bill's approval – would cost urban districts millions of dollars. Dallas would lose about \$3 million and Houston about \$2 million.

Urban districts also oppose an increase in basic funding levels for high school students – an extra \$500 a year per student in the House bill. Dallas and other urban districts said that provision would cut into their overall funding because they have large numbers of low-income students, who are more likely to drop out of high school.

Suburban districts, by contrast, would gain money because more of their students remain in school until graduation.

Poorer school districts are upset about the lack of funding for facilities in the bill, as well as a provision that would gradually scale back "Robin Hood" sharing of property taxes by the wealthiest districts in the state. They also scoff at Mr. Grusendorf and other bill sponsors who have called the new school funding plan the "most equitable" in state history.

"There's no way this comes anywhere close to the kind of equity they're talking about," said Mr. Pierce of the Equity

Center, insisting that the legislation actually widens the funding gap between high-wealth and lower-wealth school districts.

Mr. Grusendorf said the legislation must be viewed in its entirety, including the big property tax reduction and education improvements.

"The bottom line for taxpayers, parents and students is that we are proposing more money and more equity than ever before without raising Texans' tax burden one cent," the Arlington Republican said. All of the new money for schools would come from savings in other areas of state government.

Opponents are counting on the Senate to rewrite much of the legislation when it begins work on its school finance plan and education reforms after Easter. Senators have been sympathetic, but the chambers have little more than two months to resolve the differences before the legislative session ends on May 30.

Plus, it's unclear how many of their provisions Mr. Craddick and other House GOP leaders will be willing to compromise in negotiations.

CHANGE AFOOT

A new, mandatory starting date for the school year. All schools would be required to start classes on the Tuesday after Labor Day, two to three weeks later than most do now. District officials call that a direct slap at local control. Supporters say it will save millions in utility costs.

Merit pay for teachers. All districts would have to earmark at least 1 percent of their annual funding – \$285 million statewide – for financial incentives. Bonuses would mainly be based on student test scores. Teacher groups call the concept insulting and say it's never been shown to improve student achievement; school districts object to a new state mandate they claim would eat up much of their additional state funding.

An overhaul of high school testing and a switch to online tests by next year. The bill would replace the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills with a series of end-of-course tests in core subjects. Local school officials complain the TAKS test is 2 years old and is just becoming familiar to students and teachers. They also point out that no money is provided for the mandatory switch to online tests.

Election changes. Local school board elections would have to be held in November instead of the spring, and school districts would for the first time be required to get voter approval for all tax rate increases.

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