

## Perry had some successes but big prize elusive

12:30 AM CDT on Monday, May 30, 2005

By CHRISTY HOPPE / The Dallas Morning News

AUSTIN – Gov. Rick Perry cemented his relationship with social conservatives this legislative session, but he didn't make many new friends.

He also didn't put much distance between himself and potential primary challengers, including a certain U.S. senator who might have an eye on his job.

In his session's 140-day to-do list, Mr. Perry scored some major victories: revamping the workers' compensation system, requiring parental consent on abortions, securing new help for abused and neglected children.

But the issue at the top of the list – billions more dollars for education and a restructuring of the tax system that pays for schools – circled around the drain at midnight Saturday.

"I just think there's no way you can say, 'I got asbestos reform, but I didn't get school reforms, so it's a wash,' " said SMU political science professor Cal Jillson.

"I really think he was on the griddle this session to do something significant to improve the quality of education."

But Republican political consultant Bill Miller said it's not all bad, especially because the education plan that cut property taxes would have required almost \$8 billion in new and different taxes.

"You don't get school finance. That's a negative. You don't raise taxes. And that's a plus," Mr. Miller said.

Mr. Perry might have expanded his political base if he could have tackled the thorny school-finance issue, but that has always been a high mountain to climb, Mr. Miller said.

For the last 25 years in Texas politics, improving public schools has been the signature issue for every governor.

"If he didn't have a U.S. senator looking over his shoulder, you'd say pretty good session," he said.

Perhaps because he does have Kay Bailey Hutchison contemplating a challenge to him in the 2006 primary, Mr. Perry himself is sensitive to how his success this session is scored.

Late last week, while the House and Senate were still furiously negotiating school finance, Mr. Perry pointed out that the budget and other important work were also getting done.

"We've got a workers' comp bill. We've got an asbestos bill. I don't know how big the mountain's got to be before we



ERICH  
SCHLEGEL/DMN

Gov. Rick Perry can point to some victories: help for abused and neglected children and a bill requiring parental consent on abortions. But some who followed the session said he needed to do more to avoid a primary challenge.

say, 'Heck of a session,' but we're really close to it," Mr. Perry said at the time.

On Sunday, press secretary Kathy Walt said that the governor was "profoundly disappointed" that property appraisal caps failed, as did school reforms, a problem that she blames on interest groups.

"But those issues aren't going to go away and the governor will continue to fight to achieve those things," she said.

Ms. Walt pointed out that even one of the most popular governors in the state – George W. Bush – failed to restructure school taxes.

"Nobody likes taxes. It's a very high hurdle, and this Legislature came very, very close to agreeing," she said.

Overall, she termed the session a good one for the governor. "I think we have successes that will impact Texans for a long time and in a good way," Ms. Walt said.

Mike Lavigne, spokesman for the Texas Democratic Party, said he believes most Texans will find it hard to discover anything the governor or the Republican Legislature accomplished.

"There was no school finance reform, no new money for schools, no teacher pay raise, no ethics reform, no tuition relief for college students, no property tax relief for homeowners," Mr. Lavigne said. "What did he do this session? Where was he this session?"

Indeed, the Democrats are hoping to exploit what they see as a leadership gap that might be big enough even for a Democrat to slip through.

"There will be a long line of people who want to run against Rick Perry," Mr. Lavigne said.

Perhaps. One Democratic operative was circulating a suggested campaign slogan for a potential run by former Comptroller John Sharp: "Just because Rick Perry can't do it, doesn't mean it can't be done."

But the state is still overwhelmingly Republican, and among his base of evangelical conservatives, Mr. Perry is considered to have had a great session. In the plus column is a constitutional amendment that would ban gay marriage, headed to the voters in November, as well as new abortion restrictions. While school vouchers failed, the measure almost made it through the House for the first time.

"I think he's done great," said Cathie Adams, president of the Texas Eagle Forum.

The failure to change the school tax system is a huge relief, she said, because some of the business tax proposals came dangerously close to a variation of an income tax.

"He's against such taxes that would be a job killer. The grass roots are going to be pleased that it failed," she said.

"On social issues, he wanted the Defense of Marriage Act and parental consent, and he's gotten both of them," Ms. Adams said.

The only smudge on his record this session is that the budget has grown too big, too fast, she said.

Michael Quinn Sullivan, a spokesman for the low-tax, small-government Texas Public Policy Foundation think tank, agreed.

"Rick Perry has done what a governor is supposed to do: outline priorities, the broad objectives, and leave it to the Legislature to craft the policy," he said.

While school reforms didn't happen, Mr. Sullivan said Mr. Perry shouldn't be blamed.

Dr. Jillson predicted Mr. Perry's victories would please the conservatives who have been his core supporters. But with approval ratings that have hovered in the mid-40s for more almost two years, Mr. Perry needed to score a victory to attract moderates.

"He's held his own, but he hasn't broadened his base," Dr. Jillson said. "He needed to deal definitively with education if he was going to hold off Hutchison. I think that door is still ajar."

E-mail [choppe@dallasnews.com](mailto:choppe@dallasnews.com)

## **PERRY'S PRIORITIES**

Gov. Rick Perry outlined an ambitious list of initiatives in his state of the state speech, delivered to lawmakers in January. Here's how those proposals fared:

### **EDUCATION AND TAXES**

"Each day that passes without a school finance bill represents another day of uncertainty for our schools, and another day Texans must live under a property tax system gone awry."

Failed.

"Let's cap [increases in property] appraisals at 3 percent this legislative session."

Failed. The cap remains at 10 percent.

"I want our best and brightest teachers to be paid salary incentives as high as \$7,500 a year."

Failed as part of the school-finance and tax overhaul.

"Every child is entitled to a public education, but public education is not entitled to every child. ... Let's give them school choice."

Failed.

"It is time to ... increase funding for the Early Start program."

Done.

### **BUSINESS AND ECONOMY**

"I ask you to not only replenish the Enterprise Fund, I ask you ... [for] a new \$300 million Emerging Technology Fund."

Half a loaf: About \$185 million was approved for the enterprise fund; the governor requested \$300 million. About \$100 million was approved for the technology fund, with another \$100 million contingent on the economy improving.

"I ask you to relieve Texas employers of some of the highest workers' compensation costs in the nation."

Done.

"It is time to end Texas' status as the home of the frivolous asbestos lawsuits."

Done.

## SOCIAL SERVICES

"We can greatly reduce investigator caseloads at Child Protective Services, improve salaries, improve case management ... and refocus this important agency on its core mission."

Done, although more modestly than Mr. Perry had hoped: The state will spend \$200 million – \$50 million less than requested – and there's little new money for Adult Protective Services.

## LIFE ISSUES

"If you send me a bill requiring parental consent for a minor to have an abortion, I will sign it without delay."

Done, the measure has passed both the House and Senate as part of a larger bill and is awaiting Mr. Perry's signature.

"In order to preserve the sanctity of human life, I ask you to send me a bill to ban human cloning in Texas."

Failed.

Christy Hoppe

---

Online at:

<http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/news/texasouthwest/legislature/stories/053005dntexperry.f832b859.html>