

COMMENTARY

## **Patterson: School officials lash out at threat to their power**

**Chris Patterson, TEXAS PUBLIC POLICY FOUNDATION**

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Here's a brain teaser: Why should state legislators vote for an education reform bill if school administrators hate it?

Administrators are suffering severe heartburn over House Bill 2 because it requires schools to devote at least 65 percent of available money to core instruction.

Public education will be ruined, school administrators claim, if they must allocate 65 percent of funding to mathematics, science, English and social studies because no money will be left for enrichment — such as music and art — and vocational education.

This is simply untrue. First, some school funds can't be subject to the 65 percent spending requirement — such as money for vocational education and facilities debt — due to state and federal requirements. Second, the 35 percent of remaining money should be more than sufficient to cover the cost of electives that represent a small fraction of the school day.

What administrators aren't saying is that 35 percent of today's education dollar isn't nearly enough to pay for enrichment plus all of the non-instructional costs that consume a growing part of school budgets. Administrators would be forced to make hard decisions about divvying the remainder of available funds between enrichment courses and administrative costs — and technology support, legal counsel, lobbying fees, adult education, donations to chambers of commerce, day care, professional association memberships, cultural training programs, paved tennis courts, planetariums, and 200-acre nature preserves.

By decreasing spending on non-instructional items and devoting 65 percent to the classroom, Texas school administrators could channel another \$1.6 billion toward student learning — without raising taxes.

It's absolutely essential to change school spending priorities. The research is clear: When schools spend more of each dollar in the classroom, student performance improves.

It isn't unreasonable to ask Texas public schools to devote more money toward classroom instruction. Texas channels a smaller percentage of total education funds to the classroom than 20 other states, according to numbers provided by the Texas Education Agency to the federal government. Today, four states spend more than 65 percent of the education dollar on activities directly associated with the interaction between teachers and students.

Unlike school administrators, Texans like the 65 percent solution. A recent poll showed that 78 percent support the legislative minimum for classroom spending, and that support rose to 91 percent when Texans learned this would put additional money in the classroom without increasing taxes.

When it comes to school spending, taxpayers and administrators are not always on the same page. Texans are openly rebellious about rising property taxes — taxes that reflect expansive school budgets, with a lion's share of spending going to stuff without the least connection to classroom learning.

In fact, the instructional portion of the total school spending pie has been decreasing annually in Texas since 2000. Some researchers link this trend to the declining authority of elected school boards. Their research shows that

classrooms get a greater share of the school budget in communities where parents and taxpayers are significantly engaged in school district decisions.

In our super-sized schools, administrators wield enormous power over huge budgets and employ a significant segment of the community. Their power reaches beyond the school doors.

Some legislative offices say school administrators threaten to work collectively to unseat legislators who vote "against schools." Offices report communications from parents who say their superintendent advised them to complain about specific bills. Just last week, the Houston Chronicle reported that Katy ISD administrators sent e-mails to employees advising how they should vote in the spring election of school board trustees.

This influence might soon be restrained by a provision in HB 2 that puts local school board elections on the same ballot as election for state offices. A November election date would enlarge the number of voters who participate in school district elections and make it more difficult for administrators to influence election outcomes.

The bottom line? School administrators hate HB 2 because it would restrain their political influence and reduce their power over how tax dollars are spent.

Even though school administrators hate it, HB 2 is good for students, teachers and taxpayers. We have the opportunity to improve public schools by prioritizing dollars for the classroom and engaging more Texans in school district decisions.

Patterson is director of research at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, an Austin-based research institute.

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