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Interest groups are derailing public school funding reform

By **JOHN COLYANDRO**
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FOR THE ENTERPRISE

AUSTIN — The state Legislature concluded another special session without a fix to the school finance system. The media blames the governor and other top officials for their inability to get a deal done. But everyone at the Capitol knows otherwise — the real culprit is the public school lobby.

From the very beginning of the 78th Session in 2003, legislators have been subjected to intense lobbying by teachers' organizations, principally the Texas Federation of Teachers, as well as school district superintendents and various front groups, like the Texas School Alliance.

One of the worst-kept secrets this session is that some legislators say they can't vote for HB 2 or HB 3 because school officials oppose it. Legislators are told they won't be re-elected if they don't vote "right."

The fact that government employees derail every serious attempt to provide property tax relief and improve public schools is shameful. Money is the motive and legislators simply aren't coughing up enough, according to TFT and the Equity Center.

The facts say different. In the latest version of HB 2:

- ◆ Every teacher gets a pay raise of \$1,500 this year.

- ◆ Overall average teacher pay increases an additional \$500, with this money going to the best teachers — an amount that will increase another \$500 in 2006-07.

- ◆ Teachers at campuses with high percentages of economically disadvantaged and at-risk students have the opportunity to earn up to \$3,000 more as incentive bonuses.

- ◆ Plus, teachers will benefit from property tax relief just like

every other homeowner.

If fiscal estimates by the Legislative Budget Board are correct, HB 2 would benefit teachers and school administrators more than any other group of Texans. Yet, education groups continue to derail the process in hopes of getting even more money.

The SB 1 Conference Report (79R) indicates the Legislature would have increased public education spending another \$2.2 billion — a 6.5 percent increase. The fiscal note for HB 2 calls for another \$7.8 billion in spending on public education, with about \$1.5 billion in new funds beyond what it costs to pay for property tax cuts.

Claims that schools are broke ring hollow. In the 2004-2005 state budget, legislators dedicated 58.4 percent of all general revenue dollars to Texas public and higher education. In fact, appropriations for public education increased \$1.19 billion over the previous biennium. Currently, Texas ranks third in the nation for the percentage of total state expenditures devoted to public education.

Public school teachers pocketed an average salary increase of nearly \$9,300 since 1999, according to the governor's office. Additionally, qualified teachers earn a \$5,000 bonus from the Master Teacher Program that Gov. Rick Perry helped create for the fields of reading, math and science.

The public school lobby has succeeded in stripping some of the very best education reforms from HB 2. End-of-course exams have been blocked along with minimum standards for school accreditation and ISO certification of school operations.

Every reform stripped from HB 2 is one less chance for a Texas student to get a better education and every new dollar spent to placate school groups is one less dollar for property tax relief.

Texans must tell school districts and their associations to stop the lobbying blitz. Encourage legislators to pass the reforms needed to improve classroom learning and lower property taxes.

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