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2 senators offer way to end gridlock

■ A Democrat and a Republican suggest a plan to raise teacher pay and fund millions of textbooks. Top state leaders are split on the idea.

By JAY ROOT

STAR-TELEGRAM AUSTIN BUREAU

AUSTIN — As hope wanes for comprehensive tax and education changes, a bipartisan pair of state senators Tuesday proposed an exit strategy for the rudderless Texas Legislature.

State Sen. Rodney Ellis, D-Houston, and Sen. Kevin Eltife, R-Tyler, unveiled a \$1.8 billion plan to increase teacher pay and deliver to Texas schoolchildren millions of textbooks that were ordered long ago but never funded.

The senators said those two items enjoy broad support in the Legislature but haven't advanced because they're in controversial tax and education measures that have tied the House and Senate in knots.

Since 2003, the Legislature has failed four times to enact sweeping school-finance changes and now sits on the precipice of a fifth misadventure in a special legislative session that ends in about two weeks. The lawmakers aren't even formally meeting again until Thursday.

"The things we agree on are being held hostage by the issues we cannot yet find consensus

on," Ellis said. "Our legislation allows the Legislature to ... stop the bleeding on school finance."

Eltife said he still wants the Legislature to cut property taxes and improve education standards.

"We should not leave this special session without providing critical funding for textbooks and teacher pay raises," Eltife said.

The "get out of Dodge plan," as some at the Capitol call it, is a way to salvage something out of the wreckage of a third special session on school finance. The House defeated tax and spending plans backed by its own leadership last week, and prospects for resurrecting them appear dim.

A placard-carrying clown at the Capitol's south entrance seemed to sum up the surreal atmosphere of the gridlock: "Welcome to the 3-Ring Session Circus," the poster said, with the word "session" crossed out.

Top state leaders are split on the stripped-down approach. Gov. Rick Perry, told reporters this week that "half a loaf" is better than nothing.

But House Speaker Tom Craddick, R-Midland, and Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst, the Republican Senate leader, have said legislators should not pass bills appropriating more money without education changes and property-tax relief. The Legislature is also under pressure to enact major

changes because a state judge has declared the current system unconstitutional. An appeal is pending in the state Supreme Court.

"While I continue to support teacher pay raises and funding textbooks, the bill proposed by Senators Ellis and Eltife does little to improve public education in Texas," Dewhurst said. "I strongly believe that any legislation that is passed must reform and improve the quality of our public schools, give teachers a much deserved pay raise, fund textbooks and end the lawsuit."

Chiming in with opposition to the quick exit was a group of conservative activists representing think tanks and lobby groups. Their message: No bill is better than a bad bill.

They said any education-spending bill should contain changes, such as improved financial accountability, assurances that 65 percent of education dollars go to classrooms and performance-based financial incentives.

"It's not good enough to just put a big pot of new money in and in return not receive some justifiable, important reforms that will improve this state," said Brooke Rollins, president of the conservative Texas Public Policy Foundation.

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