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Michael Quinn Sullivan: Perry's on the right track

By Michael Quinn Sullivan

At least the Legislature left town without doing any new harm. Small condolence for a state eager to receive tax relief and education reform, one might be tempted to say, but it could have been worse.

The political economy of the 21st century is similar to the age-old rule of pick-up basketball: No blood, no foul.

But in this game, Texans have perhaps become so accustomed to bleeding, we don't notice the flung elbow. How have we bled? Soaring property taxes and mediocre performance in our schools.

Perhaps that's why Texans are baffled by the Legislature's inaction.

Since 1960, Texas has tripled real per-student spending (on top of spending for inflation and population growth), but independent test scores and graduation rates have remained mostly static or worsened since the 1980s. We spend more today on public education than the state spent on all services in the late 1980s.

The drop-out rates are a telling sign of our inability as a people to motivate kids and their parents to remain academically engaged. What is that sign? Part of the problem is that no one really knows how many kids are vanishing, though in some school districts the difference between ninth grade and graduation is almost half.

One obvious problem is the lack of resources going into the classroom – teacher salary, instructional materials and the like. In 2003, the state's

comptroller found that less than 51 percent of each education dollar reached the classroom.

While the pupil-to-teacher ratio in Texas is 14.8 students per teacher – compared to the national average of 15.9 – the teacher-to-non-teacher ratio is almost 1-to-1.

Too many resources are going outside the classroom, and it is getting worse.

Reforms designed to drive more money to the classroom met a wall of resistance from the public education lobby – schools boards, superintendents and, inexplicably, teacher associations. Spending more money on administration has not been shown to increase student achievement, but putting more resources directly in the classroom has.

The effort to defeat such common-sense reforms (which included provisions to let taxpayers more easily see how school districts spend their money) was so intense that the lobby thwarted even a teacher pay raise. Such is the apparent power of school superintendents over state legislators – the needs of taxpayers, teachers and children to the contrary.

And so Gov. Rick Perry announced on conclusion of this last special session that he would implement many stalled reforms either by executive order or through his appointed education commissioner's agency rules so that at least the academic bleeding can be stymied.

Is policy by executive fiat preferred? Not by anyone, and certainly not by me. At least the governor is doing

something; the reforms are simply too important for Texas' children and their future.

Maybe his actions will, at a minimum, inspire entrenched bureaucrats and legislators to rethink hard-nosed opposition. Some teachers will get a modest pay raise from the governor's use of his executive power, but not nearly as much as was killed on the Legislature's watch.

Superintendents will have more responsibility to direct dollars to the classroom instead of other projects and programs, but they won't have the new money (without reforms) as they had demanded.

What the governor cannot do by order or rule is cut taxes; only the Legislature can do that.

So while his ordered reforms will trigger better school spending, gradually improve academic performance and eventually lower the costs associated with public education, our tax burden will not be lightened.

It won't be lightened, that is, until state representatives and senators feel greater pressure from the taxpaying public to reduce taxes and reform schools than they feel from hostile superintendents in opposition.

Michael Quinn Sullivan is the vice president of the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a nonprofit, non-partisan research institute based in Austin. His e-mail address is msullivan@texaspolicy.com.