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Schools fear 65% rule will cut other services

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AUSTIN -- A new school-spending requirement ordered by Gov. Rick Perry could force schools to cut back vital services such as transportation, libraries, security and health care, superintendents from across the state said Wednesday.

A panel of educators and citizens met for the first time to begin discussing how to carry out Perry's executive order requiring schools to spend 65 percent of each dollar in the classroom. Proponents of the rule said it would increase school accountability and improve student performance.

Perry ordered Texas Education Agency Commissioner Shirley Neeley in August to begin devising a plan that would penalize school districts that do not spend 65 percent of their revenue on direct classroom expenditures.

What defines a classroom expense was the focus of discussion Wednesday. The definition Perry outlined includes only items such as salaries for teachers and their aides, textbooks and school supplies, classroom technology and extracurricular activities.

School counselors, staff training, librarians, nurses, administrators, bus drivers, custodians, building maintenance and utilities would not count toward the 65 percent classroom allotment.

Jimmy Vasquez, executive director of the Region 19 Education Service Center, told Neeley that teacher training ought to be included as a classroom instruction expense.

"It is imperative we keep staff development as part of the classroom instruction, because without it, I think we would lose," he said. He cited recent improvement in student reading scores after teachers were trained in reading instruction.

Others said librarians, counselors, security and transportation are almost as important for classroom instruction as the teacher and provide the environment children need to learn.

According to a report the education agency released at the meeting, Texas schools already spend an average of nearly 64 percent of revenues on the classroom expenditures Perry outlined.

The nine El Paso County school districts spent an average of 62.13 percent on

classroom expenditures, according to the report.

Because the 65 percent rule will be phased in over several years, deputy education commissioner Robert Scott said schools wouldn't likely face drastic budget realignments.

"Districts are able to meet this now, and over time, it is a very achievable goal," he said.

Chris Patterson, an analyst with the Texas Public Policy Foundation, said research indicates more classroom spending improves student achievement.

"When you put your money where your mouth is, it really has an impact," she said.

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