

Administrators, citizens differ on spending rule

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Most people agree that more dollars should go toward classroom instruction. However, how to get there is the main sticking point. Education Commissioner **Shirley Neeley's** two task force groups held two meetings recently to discuss how to implement Gov. **Rick Perry's** executive order requiring that 65 percent of education spending go to the classroom.

The governor issued the executive order after the Legislature failed to pass comprehensive school finance reform.

"Us" versus "them"

In August, Neeley was sharply criticized for appointing a task force made up of the very people who vocally opposed the 65 percent rule - school administrators.

After several grassroots organizations publicly questioned the real chances of reform with the current task force, Neeley appointed a second group called the Citizens' 65 percent Task Force Committee made up of citizen watchdog groups and legislators who actually pushed for the measure in the 79th Legislature.

At the Oct. 25 joint meeting, House Public Education Chairman and member of the Citizens' task force, Rep. **Kent Grusendorf** (R-Arlington) expressed concern over the distrust among the superintendents and the citizens' task force groups.

Grusendorf was referring to former Hudson ISD superintendent **Joe Smith's** comments on a popular website blog for Texas school officials where Smith described the task force meeting made up of a "stacked deck of citizens."

"I am really concerned about this 'us' versus 'them' situation that we find ourselves in today," Grusendorf said. "I would encourage the superintendents that are in the room to think about that issue..." adding that the Citizens' task force is made of "the people who pay the bills."

Cypress-Fairbanks ISD Superintendent

David Anthony countered Grusendorf, saying "I think there's been shots fired from both sides of the fence" but admitted there needed to be greater dialogue between the two groups.

Neeley said the purpose of the two task force groups was to get input from both sides to help guide the Texas Education Agency in crafting the 65 percent rule.

What criteria to use

Mandating that 65 percent of expenditures go to the classroom is not as easy as it sounds. At issue is what criterion to use when defining "classroom expenditures."

There are currently two measures of instructional costs used in the debate. Perry's

plan would use as its starting point the definition drafted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), which includes: salaries and employee benefits for classroom teachers and teacher aides, instructional materials, and extra curricular activities such as field trips, sports programs or marching band. TEA's definition, however, also includes counselors, nurses and librarians, but excludes extra-curricular programs.

Many school board superintendents on the task force, like McAllen ISD Superintendent **Yolanda Chapa**, are advocating the inclusion of school counselors, librarians, security personnel, nurses, and even teacher training in the definition of "classroom expenditures."

State Board of Education member **Bob Craig** (R-Lubbock) testified teaching children is "team approach" and inclusion of librarians and counselors assists teachers and students in academic development.

"If we don't include the librarians and the teacher has to take the time to take the child in the third grade down to the library and show him the book and give him the book, they're not teaching," Craig said.

"For the team approach to be successful, teachers need that librarian, they need that nurse, they need that counselor... When we look at what comprises the 65 percent or the 75 percent, let's make it a team, let's involve everybody. Let's make it a joint effort to be successful."

However, citizen groups like Americans For Prosperity (AFP) advocate a more conservative definition of classroom expenditures or "instructional costs."

"We believe the criteria is already extremely liberal and would not want to see numbers adjusted to make it look like more money is going to classroom instruction when in fact it is not," said Peggy Venable, executive director of AFP.

There are some organizations that oppose the 65 percent rule all together. The teachers' union Texas Federation of Teachers issued a statement saying that "the '65-percent solution' is not a solution at all but rather a diversion from the real matter at hand - the shortfall in state funding to meet our commitment to Texas schoolchildren."

It's where you spend the money, not how much

National studies have shown that when schools shift a greater proportion of their expenditures on classroom instruction, student achievement generally rises, said **Chris Patterson** of the Texas Public Policy Foundation. This is true for Texas as well, according to a study by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory and the Charles A. Dana Center that showed similar findings.

In contrast, studies have consistently shown that the amount of money spent on education does not necessarily increase student performance. "The importance of resource allocation should be recognized," Patterson said, "but not confused with the unfounded belief that schools need more money to improve student achievement."

Perry's executive order also requires the TEA to develop a comprehensive financial accountability rating and reporting system. Nearly all the task force members agreed that it is critical that school districts maintain public confidence in how tax dollars are spent on public education.

Chapa said there's a disconnect between reality and public perception. "We all know that we are criticized so far as we don't spend enough money into instruction," said

Chapa.

"I say we do. But I believe if we can all work to show just exactly where it's going it will help us... because right now the community continues to look at us as people who do not put money into the classroom but into administration."

Not that far off

Neeley said reaching the goal would be a "small hurdle" for school districts. The Texas Education Agency and some citizen groups disagree about how many school districts are currently meeting the 65 percent standard.

Perry's plan calls for a four year phase-in of the 65 percent rule. School districts would have to meet 50 percent by the first year.

"Honestly, this should be a no brainer," said Grusendorf. "I know some see this as a restrictive mandate. I see it as great opportunity... to encourage every school district in the state of Texas to maximize their resources into [the] classroom." O