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TOP STORIES**Craddick wants more accountability on bilingual education**

*By Elizabeth Pierson
The Brownsville Herald*

AUSTIN, January 10, 2006 – Schools should have to follow stricter reporting standards to show the state they are teaching bilingual students to speak English, House Speaker Tom Craddick said on Monday.

The Republican from Midland also said he wants changes to the state's school finance system to include increased accountability of schools, a merit-based teacher pay raise, uniform school start dates and mandatory November school board elections.

Craddick was addressing the Policy Orientation for the Texas Legislature, an event sponsored by the non-profit, conservative Texas Public Policy Foundation.

The event drew many of the state's top leaders, along with national names like Newt Gingrich, former U.S. House Speaker.

Craddick said he was surprised to learn just before speaking to the group on Monday that bilingual programs in Texas do not report students' progress directly to the Texas Education Agency.

"You don't have to report the success you're having or whether it's working in the district or not, and whether the students are converting English on day one, two, three," he said.

He is not advocating for total English immersion, he said.

"I don't think we can do that in Texas," he said.

He wants teachers to earn more money, but those raises should be based on merit, just as businesses would give raises to employees who perform well, he said.

What happens in the next legislative session, which Gov. Rick Perry is expected to call in March or April, will depend largely on the agenda Perry sets and what lawmakers want for their districts, Craddick said.

The Legislature is under the gun to get rid of an unconstitutional \$1.50 per \$100 valuation property tax cap, and must do so by June 1, the Texas Supreme Court has ruled.

Craddick said the House will aim to pass school finance bills that don't just spend more, but spend money more wisely. And he tried to dispel talk among some that he, Perry and Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst should have passed reform simply because they are all Republicans.

"It's not a Republican versus Democratic issue," he said. "Every legislator is going to look at their individual school districts and how it's going to affect them."

On the Senate side, Education Chairwoman Sen. Florence Shapiro, R-Plano, said a select committee on public school finance will meet next week and revisit many of the same questions it did in previous sessions.

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