



## Business leaders press for more school funds

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AUSTIN — Some of the state's corporate heavy hitters and former Lt. Gov. Bill Ratliff are teaming up to defend Texas public schools and ask lawmakers to invest more in education.

They want the Legislature to offer high-quality, all-day pre-K and kindergarten to all 4- and 5-year-olds, reduce class sizes in Texas schools and gradually increase education spending by \$2,000 per student.

Their bipartisan coalition, called Raise Your Hand, opposes school vouchers and wants to replace exit-level tests with rigorous end-of-course exams.

"We know that partnerships build successful schools, so we are asking students, parents, teachers, principals, business, professional and community leaders across Texas to join this coalition," Ratliff, a former Republican state senator and lieutenant governor, said. "We all have a duty to our children to give Texas schools the help they need to help themselves."

Under court order, Texas lawmakers made significant changes to school finance last year. The package emphasized school property tax cuts in addition to giving teachers a pay raise and improving accountability and performance measures.

Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst defended the Legislature's school reform package but acknowledged that more must be done.

"We are going to have to build on that with a stair-step of incremental improvements," he said.

H-E-B Chairman and CEO Charles Butt said he joined the Raise Your Hand effort because of his abiding interest in public education and concern for the state's future.

In the 19th century, Texas had abundant land, while oil and gas propelled the state in the 20th century, he said. But "human resources" will shape Texas for the next 100 years, which requires an educated labor force, Butt said.

"We feel that it's really vital to the economy of the state, and not only that — it's the right thing to do," Butt said of the group's focus on public education. He added that increasing the Legislature's attention to education "would be a goal of ours."

Spring Branch Independent School Board member Susan Kellner, also a member of the Raise Your Hand advisory board, said high property taxes are a concern, especially in her property-wealthy school district, which gets no state funding.

"I would hope that the state would put more funding into public education, and I would hope that (lawmakers) make that their priority even over lowering property taxes," she said.

Kellner said she believes the business-oriented nature of the advisory board will make it easier to influence both state leaders and state legislators.

The group cited a poll of 1,000 Texas voters conducted this month showing 54 percent believe state lawmakers are not spending enough money on education. A similar poll conducted last month by Republican and Democratic pollsters for the Texas State Teachers Association found 61 percent of respondents believed that.

Public-school students in the state's largest cities are mostly minority and come from low-income families. Hispanics and African Americans make up 97 percent of the San Antonio Independent School District enrollment, with 92 percent classified as low-income. The combined Hispanic and African American enrollment in the Houston ISD is 88 percent, with 82 percent being low-income. In the Dallas ISD, Hispanics and African Americans make up 94 percent of the student population, with 83 percent coming from low-income families. Studies indicate low-income children cost more to educate.

That's why lower student-to-teacher ratios and full-day pre-kindergarten and kindergarten programs are essential "in trying to get those kids ready," Ratliff said.

However, the Texas Public Policy Foundation, an Austin-based think tank that advocates for smaller government and less spending, disagrees.

"Researchers have concluded that pre-kindergarten provides lasting academic benefits for only the most disadvantaged children, all of whom already qualify for public pre-K in Texas," said Jamie Story, education policy analyst for the foundation.

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