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Retired GOP Sen. Bill Ratliff helped create the current public school ratings system, but says it's time for an update.

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Ratliff says new school ratings system needed

By GARY SCHARRER

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AUSTIN — The father of the state's public school accountability system says it's time to scrap the way schools get rated and substitute something better.

"We think it's become cumbersome. Nobody can understand it," says retired Republican Sen. Bill Ratliff of Mount Pleasant.

Ratliff travels around the state these days beating the drum for public education, telling audiences that Texas needs a universal pre-kindergarten program, full-day kindergarten and smaller classroom sizes.

All of that will cost money, but the former interim lieutenant governor says it's the best investment Texans can make for their future.

"If the public is behind it, then the Legislature will be more inclined to put the money where we need it to be," said Ratliff, who heads up a new group of pro-education business leaders called Raise Your Hand.

When he chaired the Senate Education Committee in the mid-1990s, Ratliff helped create the accountability system that rated Texas schools on a scale from exemplary to unacceptable.

"Fifteen years later, we think it's time to just wipe the slate clean, start over and produce an accountability system that is understandable, simple enough for parents and taxpayers to understand," Ratliff said.

"For one thing, it needs to be consistent with the federal law. You don't need a situation where you can be exemplary in Texas and be failing under No Child Left Behind. That's crazy."

Allies on education

Also favoring a change are the current Senate education chairwoman, Florence Shapiro, R-Plano, and House Public Education Chairman Rob Eissler, R-The Woodlands. They are proposing a select committee, to include nonlegislators, to recommend a reform plan for the 2009 legislative session.

Shapiro and Eissler also want to end the TAKS tests for high school students and return to end-of-course exams. With a new curriculum also in the works, Ratliff figures a new accountability system should await education changes pending before the Legislature and U.S. Congress.

State leaders have little time to address the pressing needs confronting public education, said Charles Butt, chairman and chief executive of H-E-B and a member of Raise Your Hand's advisory board.

"The schools inherit all the challenges of our society — too much television, dysfunctional families,

drugs, violence, and the list goes on. It's easy to delude ourselves into underestimating the task of educating children in the 21st century. We do so to our peril," Butt said.

Butt warns that Texas will fall behind in global competition if state leaders fail to offer voluntary pre-K programs, increase teacher pay, lower school class sizes and enhance professional development for superintendents, principals and teachers.

"Our urban dropout rate today is a crisis and should be treated as such," he said. "The economic and social consequences of ignoring this are much greater than any of us want to recognize but not doing so is putting our heads in the sand and waking up to a Texas of which we're not proud."

Caught in the middle

Accountability is necessary, but testing has become a weapon against the system, said Susan Kellner, a Spring Branch school board member. She and her husband, Continental Airlines Chairman and CEO Larry Kellner, are on the Raise Your Hand advisory board.

"State and federal accountability measures are so inconsistent that we don't even know which way to run, so we're frozen, and yet both the feds and the state are going to use it against us," she said. "The current accountability system has become myopically focused on tests requiring students to regurgitate information at the expense of innovation necessary for creativity and competitiveness."

Ratliff said state leaders must address the rapidly growing population of low-income students and those with limited English proficiency. About 2.5 million, or 55.6 percent, of the state's 4.5 million public school children come from poor families and 711,395 were classified last year as having limited English skills.

Pre-K push

Many of those youngsters fall behind academically and drop out of school.

"That's why we are so strong for pre-K and full-day kindergarten," Ratliff said. "And they ought to be available to every 4- and 5-year-old. That costs some money, and we understand that. But we think it's the best money you can spend."

Not everyone agrees.

"Multiple studies indicate that students who participated in pre-K are more likely to exhibit behavioral problems such as aggression and bullying," said Jamie Story, an education policy analyst for the Texas Public Policy Foundation, which advocates for limited government.

"More than 60 percent of Texas 4-year-olds already participate in publicly funded preschool," she said.

"Universal pre-K would be nothing more than a subsidy to middle- and upper-income families, the children of whom show no lasting effects from preschool," Story said. "Not only is universal pre-K fiscally irresponsible, it is also ineffective."

Reducing class size

Ratliff and the business leaders allied with him want lawmakers to reduce class sizes next session. Most experts say 18 students per teacher is more manageable than 22 and increases student achievement, he said.

"We think the student-teacher ratio needs to be reduced," he said. "That's expensive. It means teachers, and it means classrooms."

Story says some research has found academic gains from smaller class sizes, but only in the early primary grades.


"Far more important than class size is teacher quality. It is better to have an excellent teacher in a classroom of 30 students than a poor teacher in a class of 15," she said, adding that smaller class

sizes would hang a huge price tag on public education, requiring more teachers and diluting the teaching talent pool.

Ratliff said if he worried about the Texas Public Policy Foundation's research, "I don't think we'd ever get anything done."

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