



New way to rate Texas public schools urged

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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 state Sen. Bill Ratliff of Mt. 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 a new group of pro-education business leaders called Raise Your Hand.

When he was chairman of 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."

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

State leaders have little time to address the pressing needs confronting public education, said Charles Butt, chairman and CEO 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.

"Catching up requires real commitment and will require additional funding as well," he said.

Butt warns that Texas will fall seriously behind in global competition if state leaders fail to do more to offer voluntary pre-K programs and full-day kindergarten, increase teacher pay, lower 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.

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 low-income families, and 711,395 were classified last year as having limited English skills.

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 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 from an academic perspective."

She said a Rand Corp. study shows full-day kindergarten may not enhance long-term achievement and could impede math performance.

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 achievement, he said.

Story says some research has found academic gains due to 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 smaller class sizes would hang a huge price tag on public education, requiring more teachers and diluting the teaching talent pool.

Ratliff said his weekly meetings with chambers of commerce and civic groups are designed to help celebrate the achievements in Texas public schools.

"One of the messages is that you are not pouring money down a rat hole. If you put more money into public education, it will go to improve class sizes and things like that."

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