

Chalk two up for teachers with merit pay's fall in House

Chamber's budget debate also saw vouchers on losing end

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AUSTIN – Teachers and education groups hailed the surprise House vote to gut the state's performance pay program and instead giving schools enough money for an additional pay raise of about \$800 each for teachers, counselors, nurses and librarians.

The proposal was one of two unexpected victories for educators in the two-year state budget approved early Friday in the House.

But Republican leaders warned Friday that the proposal could backfire on teachers.

That's because the budget allocates the money to districts but doesn't necessarily require them to use it on teacher pay, said Republican Rep. Lois Kolkhorst of Brenham, who worked on the education section of the House budget.

Teacher advocates played down the concern.

"It's just really blowing smoke," said Rob D'Amico, a spokesman for the Texas Federation of Teachers. "The legislative intent is pretty crystal clear."

It's not certain that the measure will be in the final budget. The budget next moves to the Senate Finance Committee, which will send a version to its full chamber for a vote.

After that, selected members from each house will negotiate a compromise budget between the two versions in a conference committee.

Both Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst, the Republican who presides over the Senate, and House Speaker Tom Craddick, R-Midland, have supported merit-pay plans, as does Republican Gov. Rick Perry.

Lawmakers last year budgeted \$583 million for incentive pay programs to be phased in by the end of the year.

That was the money redirected in this week's budget vote.

Of the 1,161 campuses awarded merit pay grants this year, a small percentage rejected the state money, arguing that the extra focus on test scores and pressure to do well would be a distraction.

Conservative policy analysts said the House vote would punish high-performing teachers.

"They slashed the pay of our best teachers, precisely the ones we need to encourage to stay in the classroom," said Jamie Story, an education policy analyst for the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

In another unexpected move during the budget debate, the House voted, 129-8, to prohibit any state education dollars from being spent on school vouchers, a highly contentious issue that was influential in last year's legislative elections.

Both vouchers and merit pay initiatives have been Republican policy staples in recent years. But the budget action reflected a decided change of tone, as about two dozen Republicans voted to scrap merit pay and most voted to disallow vouchers.

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