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Key education reform still has a way to go

Our View: Key education reform comes off the rails

A couple of key votes this session of the Legislature show that full-blown education reform remains hostage to teacher unions and the perhaps good but soft-headed intentions of legislators.

The most recent vote came this week when the House passed House Bill 2785, which gave Texans a \$2.5 billion tax cut - and then eviscerated it by insisting on an across-the-board \$6,000 raise for teachers that would cost more than \$4 billion.

The pay raise was a problem not just because of its size and that it wiped out any benefits of the proposed tax relief, but that it points the state in exactly the wrong direction when it comes to identifying and rewarding excellent teachers. Instead of across-the-board pay raises, what the state needs most is to implement a broad-based merit pay system for teachers around the state that would reward our best. In addition, school officials need more latitude to fire or reassign teachers who aren't getting the job done.

Legislators typically are easily cowed by advocates who misuse teacher pay statistics to argue that Texas teachers are paid at the low end of the scale compared with their counterparts across the state. But most salary comparisons fail to take into account the cost of living; when that is factored in, Texas teachers are compensated adequately.

That's why any additional money should go toward rewarding the best and brightest - and most effective - teachers. But legislators shot down merit pay earlier this session, voting in March to shut down what had been the nation's largest teacher merit pay program. According to a paper on teacher pay produced by the conservative Texas Public Policy Foundation, citing research published in a U.S. Department of Education presentation, "Researchers now attribute roughly 40 percent of differences in annual academic achievement to teachers and to schools." In addition, according to the TPPF paper, "the academic benefit of switching from an average teacher to a highly effective teacher is twice as large as the effect of a 10 percent reduction in class size."

Merit pay is a common-sense approach to schools that mirrors the way private enterprise tries to identify, reward and retain its best workers. But opponents of education reform want to keep teaching mired in a bureaucratic, union-based system that will keep demanding more money for public education while trying to weaken any true accountability when it comes to student performance. The votes cited above show that some key aspects of education reform still have a long way to go.


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