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Community college veto confounds lawmakers

by **Christine DeLoma**

In the aftermath of an unpopular \$154 million gubernatorial veto, community college leaders told a Senate subcommittee Aug. 14 they can't recover revenue shortfalls without raising tuition, increasing school property taxes, or cutting educational programs.

Gov. **Rick Perry's** solution? More money in financial aid in return for giving back a portion of the vetoed funds.

So far, lawmakers are skeptical.

Perry's veto message in May charged community colleges with violating a budget rider provision by using state funds to pay health benefits to employees whose salaries are not paid from state funds and falsifying appropriations requests.

The veto rankled college leaders throughout the state, affecting nearly every lawmaker's district.

"This is a statewide issue of huge magnitude that caught everybody by surprise," said Sen. **Judith Zaffirini** (D-Laredo), whose higher education subcommittee heard the leaders' complaints.

Lt. Gov. **David Dewhurst** and Speaker **Tom Craddick** have previously called for swift resolution to the problem.

However, the governor's office says the state shouldn't have to pay so much for community college employees' health benefits. "Without question the governor believes that we ought to pay for the benefits of the employees that we owe benefits for... it's just a question of amount," testified **Mike Morrissey**, Perry's budget director. "We believe that amount instead of \$154 million is closer to \$92 million."

Perry vetoed the second year of funding (fiscal year 2009) for community college benefits, contending the proportion of ben-

efit cost paid by the state should have mirrored the portion the state paid in salaries.

Herein lies Perry's solution: Pass his previously failed higher education incentive program in return for releasing a portion of the vetoed funds.

While details are scarce, the governor's office would like the Legislature to sign off on a \$200 million program for fiscal year 2009 that includes incentives and technology grants for community colleges.

Despite the commitment to invest in financial grants, lawmakers expressed doubt about creating an incentive program when community colleges need to pay the ever-rising costs of employee health care.

"Financial aid is great, and we all support it," said Zaffirini, "but given this set of circumstances, putting more money into financial aid is not going to help community

See Veto/5

In this issue:

To talk or not to talk 3

School groups and some lawmakers have a difference of opinion on whether school districts should have a public forum for student speech

Murchison Opinion..... 6

When it comes to public education, the good ol' days really were good.

Campaign roundup..... 8

Races are beginning to materialize for the 2008 campaign

Issues In-Depth 3

Around Texas 4

Opinion 6

Education in Texas decentralizing, says TPPF panel

by **Mark Lavergne**

If a home school industry leader, a charter school superintendent, a top urban school district official, and an upper-level state agency official can be made to agree on anything, it's that one size does not fit all in Texas education.

Such was the case Aug. 15 at a forum sponsored by the Texas Public Policy Foundation. The panel emphasized the importance of school choice, and of cooperation among the different educational formats.

"There's a place for each of the segments in the education industry," said House Education Committee Chairman **Rob Eissler** (R-The Woodlands) following the forum.

"There's not a one-size-fits-all, especially when you've got a state the size of Texas," said Rep. **Donna Howard** (D-Austin), who also attended. "I think we've got to have options to best educate our

children throughout the entire state," she said.

Charter Schools

Rollie Ford, superintendent of Star Charter School in Austin, presented an alternative model for budgeting time during a school day—specifically cutting the day virtually in half.

"...[W]e have two school days every day," Ford related. "First group of students come in from 8 to 12, the second group comes in from 12 to 4. Classes are limited to 15 students, both in the elementary, middle school and high school..."

Ford said the school keeps its standards "very high" and wastes no classroom time.

"It's short," he said. "Here's the lesson, here's what it's about, does everybody understand? Okay, end of class."

See Education/2

Education/from 1

Ford said the model has been “very successful.” But he made no bones about the importance of parental involvement in order for the model to work properly.

“Can a school do this in less hours? Yes,” Ford said, “if you have the parents that are committed ... I call it ‘kitchen table time.’ You have to sit down with your kids and make sure that you see that they’re getting their homework, getting tutoring if they need that, and staying in constant communication with the teachers.”

The students are often involved in outside activities like gymnastics or bike racing, and other sports. One of their students is an actress in the TV show “Friday Night Lights,” Ford said.

“The thing about the charter schools is that they are a part of the public school system,” Howard observed. “And they do allow for opportunities for choice, and I think that most of us would support that.”

Open Enrollment in Public Ed

Houston Independent School District Chief Academic Officer **Dr. Karen Soehnge** said that most of HISD’s over 200,000 students live in the inner city. When she first came on, there were 33 unacceptable schools. This year there will be fewer than 15. “I won’t be rude,” she said, “but we’re beating Austin and Dallas ...”

One of the keys to this success, Soehnge argued, was HISD’s open enrollment policy. “We fundamentally as an organization embrace choice.” A student can go to any school in the district where there is space available. The district spends “millions and millions and millions of dollars on transportation,” Soehnge said.

Accordingly, HISD funds each school based on enrollment. If a school is declining in number of students, it will decline in its funding, Soehnge said.

Howard observed afterward that Austin has an open enrollment policy as well.

Soehnge said that HISD is “very careful” with its external charters. “In our contracts with them,” she said, “if they have more than two years of unacceptable performance, we no longer contract with them.” Not unwise, in light of much publicized ill-managed charters in Texas in the late 90s

and following.

HISD is ever expanding its portfolio to provide more options to students and parents, Soehnge said.

“We are not threatened at all by competition,” Soehnge emphasized. “We’re not threatened at all by state charters. We’re not threatened by home schools, by any other group like that. We believe there’s lots and lots of opportunity to partner. We don’t have all the answers. We’re on a very fervent search for solutions, and we believe that we can learn from each other.”

Online and Virtual Learning

The Texas Education Agency began experimenting with online learning in 1999 with the “virtual school pilot,” recalled the Texas Education Agency’s education technology director, **Anita Givens**. As the internet was really taking off, TEA discovered that many of the things that are true of a live classroom are also true of a virtual classroom.

“...[Y]ou have to engage the students in what they’re learning,” she said. “You have to hold them accountable for their class work, for their homework, for all of those things that make up good instruction.”

“...[W]hatever the form of distance learning, you still have to meet the TEKS ... It’s not setting a student down in front of a computer and saying ‘Good luck and we’ll see you at the end of six weeks and see how you did.’”

Givens said that online teachers recognize the work of their students much the same way teachers in a live classroom can recognize legitimate versus counterfeit work.

The currently ongoing “Electronic Course Pilot” is designed to figure out how one counts attendance in a virtual class.

SB 1788 was passed in the 80th session to create a statewide virtual school network. The legislation requires TEA to establish quality criteria for online courses, to review the courses against those criteria, and produce a list of the approved online courses that can be offered over the network. That list would be posted on the TEA website.

TEA is also seeking feedback on the

quality guidelines from all the stakeholders who are interested in online learning. TEA plans to have the guidelines finalized by January and start measuring online courses according to them starting in June.

SB 1788 calls for TEA to make online courses available starting in Fall 2008. Givens called that a “huge challenge.” The first step is providing the criteria for online courses, she said.

Home School

Home School Coalition President **Tim Lambert** said that Texas leads the nation with about 100,000 families, with 300,000 children all told, getting home schooled. “We have come a long way in the last 20 years,” Lambert said.

When the home school movement first started, he said, private curriculum providers would not sell to home teachers because they “did not consider us to be schools.”

Yet it is not uncommon, he observed, to see a home school student win the national spelling bee or national geography bee. “I’m happy to say our relationship with the TEA is much more positive today than it was 20 years ago,” Lambert said.

For him, it boils down to “the tutorial method of education,” meaning that the teachers can focus their energies on individual students—their own kids.

HB 1844 passed the 80th Legislature, requiring public schools to allow home school students to take the PSAT in their schools.

Said Eissler after the forum: “These parents are paying the same taxes whether their kids are in school or not, or if their kids are in another school or not. So I think you have to consider that.”

Home school advocates are also currently working to allow home school students to participate in extracurricular activities at public schools, Lambert said.

“Obviously they’re doing a great job of educating their kids,” Howard said. But “I think there definitely are some arguments to be made about whether or not home school kids could participate in University Interscholastic League activities. I think there’s still some debate going on there. I’m waiting to hear more about that.”

