



## School tax elections were successful elsewhere

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AUSTIN — Voters in nearly eight of every 10 Texas school districts seeking higher property tax rates Tuesday approved them.

The overwhelming support reflects and reinforces the public's acceptance of the importance of a quality education and willingness to pay for it, some education experts said Thursday.

Advocates for limited government, however, expressed doubt that voters fully understood the proposals, which some school districts described as "rollback" elections.

Of 118 school districts that asked voters to approve higher property taxes, 92 saw them pass and 26 failed. The only places where more school districts rejected tax rate proposals than approved them were the San Antonio and San Marcos areas.

"This underscores the fact that communities understand that the state has not provided adequate funding and that the only recourse is for them to bite the bullet and do it themselves through a tax increase," said Wayne Pierce, executive director of the Equity Center, a consortium that represents hundreds of mid-wealth and property poor Texas school districts.

The consensus is clear, said Joe F. Smith, a retired school superintendent, who runs a Texas public education Web site at [www.texasisd.com](http://www.texasisd.com).

"If you identify needs in your local school district, the taxpayers are willing to raise their taxes to meet those needs — if the school administrators can show the taxpayers how it's going to help their children," Smith said. "That's the key.

"I don't think you can say that the people in Bexar County do not support their school districts," he added.

Forced by the Texas Supreme Court to create a new school-funding system, state lawmakers 18 months ago reduced maximum property tax rates and generally restricted school tax rate increases to 4 cents per \$100 valuation without voter approval. Higher increases require voter approval and, generally, cannot exceed \$1.17 per \$100 valuation for maintenance and operations.

Most of the school districts that asked voters this year to approve higher rates have flat or declining enrollment, Smith said, adding, "They're the neediest of the needy."

Because districts can no longer benefit from increased property values, the only way to get additional money is with higher tax rates or student enrollment.

"Every year it's going to make the pressure more intense on school districts," Smith said. He and others predicted many more districts will seek tax rate elections unless the Legislature significantly increases public education funding when it meets again in 2009.

But more money is not always necessary, some contend.

"Taxpayers across the state will need to learn more about how their schools are spending their money and whether their schools are truly producing positive results," said David Guenther, spokesman for the Texas Public Policy Foundation, an Austin-based group that supports limited government and school vouchers.

"School districts continue to push the notion that schools can't succeed without more money. The research simply does not back that up," Guenther said.

Besides school bond and tax rate elections, Texans approved nearly \$10 billion worth of bonds for cancer research, roads, student loans, prisons and state parks.

"Less than 9 percent of the voters turned out in an election that placed tremendous debt on current and future taxpayers," said Peggy Venable of Americans for Prosperity, a group that advocates lower taxes.

"We recognize that the voters have spoken, but we aren't sure they know what they have said," Venable said. "Many taxpayers could have gotten a greater property tax cut if they had voted 'no' even though the literature disseminated by some ISD's said 'vote yes' for a rate cut."

The only urban school districts seeking a tax rate increase were in San Antonio and one in El Paso. But most urban districts eventually will seek higher tax rates, predicted Buck Wood, a school finance expert and lawyer.

"They are not going to be able to live with this much longer," he said. "There's always this feeling that there's some sort of magic bullet out there, and if we could just find it, we could educate kids on the cheap."

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