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THE ISSUE

School finance has been a major focus of the Legislature for the past several regular and special sessions. Most recently, it took center stage during the May 2006 special session, when lawmakers successfully met the Supreme Court's directive to give local districts meaningful discretion over school property taxes.

While the Court's June 1st deadline was met, school finance will continue to be at the forefront of legislative and public debate. If history is any indication, increases in school spending will continue to outpace enrollment and inflation growth, and the state will find itself back in court in a few years.

Because the state's obligations for funding public education are only loosely defined in the Constitution, terms such as "general diffusion of knowledge," "suitable provision," and "efficient system" have been left to interpretation by the courts. As a result, the school accountability system has been turned on its head. Whereas the accountability system was originally created to ensure that taxpayer-funded schools produced results, that same system is now being used to demand more dollars from taxpayers. The Legislature has a great opportunity to define the constitutional terms in statute, thus restoring its authority over education funding, and protecting taxpayers from further school finance lawsuits.

Just as the flip side of revenue is costs, the other concern with regard to school finance is spending—the way schools use their money. Less than two-thirds of education dollars make it to the classroom in Texas. And while there is no demonstrated correlation between overall school spending and student achievement, there is evidence to suggest that *how* schools spend money can have an impact.

Unfortunately, parents and taxpayers are discouraged from examining how their tax dollars are spent. While financial data is plentiful, it is difficult to access, navigate, and comprehend. House Bill 1, signed into law in June 2006, made great strides in increasing financial transparency, and also improving efficiency through means such as shared services. When taxpayers fully understand how school dollars are being spent, school districts will be held more accountable for spending, and more dollars will reach the classroom. And when classroom spending is a priority, both students and teachers benefit.

THE FACTS

- ★ Texas' education system costs more than \$10,000 annually per student.
- ★ Texas ranks 2nd among the 10 most populous states, or 12th among all 50 states, in K-12 total revenues and receipts per student when adjusted for cost of living.
- ★ In each of the last three decades, spending per student in Texas has increased by at least 20 percent over and above increases for inflation and enrollment.



- ★ In 2003, Texas ranked third among the 50 states in public education expenditures as a percent of total state expenditures—27 percent of the total state budget.
- ★ In a four state study, including Texas, high performing districts spent more of total funds on student instruction than lower performing districts, and spent relatively less on general administration and staff.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ★ Define constitutional obligations for public education.
- ★ Protect and enhance local control.
- ★ Establish student-centered funding.
- ★ Tie new money for public education to enrollment growth and inflation.
- ★ Let scientific research on spending and learning guide school finance reform.
- ★ Continue increasing financial transparency so that parents and taxpayers can better hold schools accountable for spending and learning.

RESOURCES

- *Transparency for Taxpayers, Success For Students* by Jamie Story, Texas Public Policy Foundation (May 2006) <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2006-05-PB-edspending-js.pdf>.
- *Rhetoric Is Clouding the Facts: Legislature Must Be Cautious of Distortions* by Jamie Story, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Mar. 2006) <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2006-03-edspendingfacts-js.pdf>.
- *Spending and Learning: What Does the Research Say?* by Chris Patterson, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Nov. 2005) <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2005-10-25-65spending-pb.pdf>.
- *Effective, Efficient, Fair: Paying For Public Education In Texas* by Richard Vedder and Joshua Hall, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Feb. 2004) <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2004-02-25-vedderhall-all.pdf>.
- *Putting The Sides Together: Twelve Perspectives On Texas Public School Finance* edited by Chris Patterson, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Dec. 2003) <http://www.texaspolicy.com/PTST/>.
- *Four Myths Of Public School Finance* by the Texas Conservative Coalition Research Institute and Texas Public Policy Foundation (May 2004) <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2004-05-sf-TCCRI-TPPF-Myths.pdf>.
- *Report Card on American Education, A State-by-State Analysis, 1983-84 to 2003-04*, American Legislative Exchange Council (2005) http://www.alec.org/meSWFiles/pdf/Report_Card_on_American_Education.pdf.
- *Education Watch: Key Education Facts and Figures* Education Trust (2004) <http://www2.edtrust.org/edtrust/summaries2004/Texas.pdf>.

THE ISSUE

The public school system is a monopoly. Parents and students, as consumers, have no choice about where their tax dollars go, so schools face no economic incentive to provide a high-quality product. Faced with a poorly-performing local school, a family's only alternatives are to move or attend a private school. Parents who choose to send their children to private schools not only pay tuition, but forego the taxpayer-funded school dollars originally designated for their child.

With this entrenched monopoly, it is no wonder schools have failed to significantly improve, despite a host of expensive reforms. The deadweight loss produced by monopoly cannot be regulated or legislated into productivity. Competition is the ultimate means of improving public education, and competition is best implemented through school choice. School choice must be understood to include both those who choose a non-traditional public school, as well as those who remain within the current system.

The effects of school choice must be measured for both groups. The preponderance of data from research in the United States and abroad indicates positive effects across-the-board.

Random-assignment studies of voucher programs in Charlotte, SC, Dayton, OH, Milwaukee, WI, New York, NY, and Washington, DC, all demonstrate positive benefits for voucher recipients. Similarly, the evidence suggests that public schools facing competition from vouchers and/or charter schools also improve, a positive development for students remaining in those institutions. Most evidence actually finds that school choice improves, rather than discourages, racial integration.

Not only is school choice good for students, it can also revolutionize the teaching profession. The public school monopoly ensures that all teachers are paid essentially the same, regardless of excellence or effort. In order to receive a pay raise, a teacher must move to a higher-paying district or private school, attain an additional degree, or leave the profession. With school choice, teachers would—as other professionals do—have more flexibility to choose schools with the philosophy of education, schedules, students, and salary they desire.

THE FACTS

- ★ The first system of Texas public schools created by the 1876 Constitution was essentially a voucher system, allowing parents to redeem government dollars at municipal or private schools.
- ★ In existing voucher programs, African-American students reduced the achievement gap by one-third within just two years.
- ★ Students who use vouchers in private schools have higher academic achievement and a higher likelihood of high school graduation, college enrollment, and attaining a post-secondary degree—even after controlling for differences in race, ethnicity, and income.



- ★ Per-pupil operating costs of private schools participating in voucher programs were about half the cost of public schools, indicating that school choice could lower overall public education costs while getting better results.
- ★ Research demonstrates that Texas students attending charter schools perform better than if they had remained in traditional public schools.
- ★ Texas students attending traditional public schools facing charter competition generally demonstrate higher academic gains than do students in schools that do not compete with charters.
- ★ Sixty percent of Texas voters support a school choice program in which scholarships would be given by the state to pay for a child's education at any public, private, or parochial school, according to a 2003 Baseline & Associates Poll.
- ★ School choice is strongly supported by African-American and Hispanic voters.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ★ Introduce publicly funded vouchers as a pilot program for under-performing schools and disabled students.
- ★ Inject competition into the public school system, beginning with public school or inter-district choice.
- ★ Establish student-centered funding and offer school choice as the new form of public education for all children.

RESOURCES

- *What You Should Know about Charter Schools in Texas* by Chris Patterson, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Sep. 2005) <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2005-09-29-charterschools-pb.pdf>.
- *Texas Charter Schools: An Assessment in 2005* by Dr. Timothy J. Gronberg and Dr. Dennis W. Jansen, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Sep. 2005) <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2005-09-29-charterschools-rr.pdf>.
- *School Choice: Fact vs. Myth* by Chris Patterson, Texas Public Policy Foundation (testimony given Apr. 2005) <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2005-04-05-voucher-testimony-cp.pdf>.
- *An Education Monopoly: The Calculable Cost to Texas* by Byron Schlomach, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Jan. 2005) <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2005-01-monopoly.pdf>.
- *Choice is the Best Choice for Texas Education* by Chris Patterson, Texas Public Policy Foundation (June 2004) <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2004-06-07-choice.pdf>.
- *A Summary of Results from School Choice Research* by Jay P. Greene, Ph.D., The Manhattan Institute for Policy Research (Jan. 2006) <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2006-01-pogreene-voucherresults.pdf>.

THE ISSUE

After decades of expensive reforms, including class size reductions and across-the-board teacher pay raises, Texas public school students are still at or below the national average in many areas of academic performance. Some explain below-average scores on national tests by pointing out that Texas has a different demographic makeup than other states. Others feel it is a disservice to hold certain student groups to lower expectations based on their ethnicity or economic situation.

One thing is certain: Texas high school dropout rates are alarmingly high, with some estimates approaching 40 percent. Even those students who do graduate from high school and attend college are ill-equipped when they get there, with approximately 50 percent of Texas college students requiring remedial classes. As a result, Texas industries are growing increasingly concerned about the supply of high school and college graduates, especially in mathematics and science.

A major factor in the quality of Texas public education is the state curriculum, or the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). Unfortunately, an analysis by ACT found that the curriculum promotes mastering lower-level skills, and the Texas proficiency standards (as measured by the TAKS) consistently receive one of the lowest grades in the country. Replacing the TAKS with end-of-course exams at the secondary level could help improve the curriculum, increase post-secondary readiness, close the achievement gap, and provide greater data by which to measure student achievement and implement performance-based pay for teachers.

In the 2006 special session, House Bill 1 raised high school graduation requirements to include four years of each of the four core subjects: language arts, math, science, and social studies. This reform could make a great impact on college readiness, considering that curriculum is a better indicator of post-secondary success than socioeconomic status, standardized test scores, or high school GPA.

House Bill 1 made great strides towards holding low-performing schools accountable, but additional accountability is still needed for specific programs such as bilingual education and DAEPs.

THE FACTS

- ★ Nineteen of the 25 fastest-growing occupations in Texas require some post-secondary education, with half requiring at least a bachelor's degree.
- ★ Only one quarter of Texans aged 25 to 65 have a bachelor's degree or higher, while an almost equal number do not even have a high school diploma.
- ★ Twenty-five percent of Texas 8th graders exhibit proficiency on the math NAEP, and 23 percent in science—versus national averages of 36 percent and 42 percent, respectively.



- ★ Texas students scored 5th lowest in the nation on the math section of the SAT; over the past 10 years, the average SAT score in Texas has dropped one point, while the nation's average has increased by 18 points.
- ★ While 82 percent of Texas 4th graders exhibited proficiency on the math section of the TAKS in 2005, only 40 percent exhibited proficiency on the math NAEP.
- ★ A recent survey of its members by the Texas Federation of Teachers reported that 72 percent of respondents supported replacing the TAKS with end-of-course exams at the secondary level.
- ★ For a public school to be accredited, only 35 percent of students must pass the math TAKS, and only 25 percent must pass the science TAKS.
- ★ There is no evidence as to whether most DAEPs improve academic and behavioral outcomes of students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ★ Strengthen the state curriculum, aligning it with college readiness standards.
- ★ Couple or replace state assessments with a standardized, nationally norm-referenced test and/or end-of-course exams.
- ★ Establish high standards for graduation, post-secondary readiness, and closing the achievement gap as the basis for school accreditation.
- ★ Create meaningful state standards for specialized programs such as DAEPs and bilingual education.

RESOURCES

- *Texas, We Have a Problem: The Math/Science Education Deficit and the Need for High School Reform* by Jamie Story, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Mar. 2006) <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2006-03-PP-mathscience-js.pdf>.
- *Rhetoric Is Clouding the Facts: Legislature Must Be Cautious of Distortions* by Jamie Story, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Mar. 2006) <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2006-03-edspendingfacts-js.pdf>.
- *Accreditation of Texas Public Schools: Increasing the Value* by Chris Patterson, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Feb. 2006) <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2006-02-PP-accreditation-CP.pdf>.
- *Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs: What Is and What Should Be* by Marc Levin, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Dec. 2005) <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2005-12-DAEPs-pb.pdf>.
- *Private Sector Solutions for Failing Schools* by Chris Patterson, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Nov. 2005) <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2005-11-EMOs-pb.pdf>.
- *Testimony on Post-Secondary Readiness* by Chris Patterson, Texas Public Policy Foundation (May 2004) <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2004-05-10-testimony-patterson-pp.pdf>.
- *Texas Public Education Facts* by Chris Patterson, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Feb. 2006) <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2006-02-edfactsheet-cp.pdf>.

THE ISSUE

Research shows teacher quality is the most important in-school factor relating to student achievement, especially for low-performing students. It is vital, therefore, to place an emphasis on improving teacher quality.

At the same time, the teaching profession is attracting fewer high-ability individuals. Students with low standardized test scores enter teaching at higher rates than students with high scores. While there is no overall teacher shortage, Texas does face shortages in specific schools and subjects such as math, science, bilingual, and special education.

Why are high-ability individuals steering away from the teaching field? Limited pay and career opportunities are two commonly cited reasons. However, state and national surveys show that working conditions—including student discipline, administrative problems, and school district policies—are more important to teachers than pay. In a Public Agenda survey, a majority of teachers said they would choose schools with well-behaved students and supportive parents and administrators over schools that pay higher salaries.

While working conditions are important, pay is still a common concern of educators. Many educators tout an across-the-board pay raise as a means to increase teacher recruitment and retention. But, there is no evidence that across-the-board pay increases based on the current single-salary schedule reduce turnover or improve teacher quality, and in fact they serve to further cement the inequities in teacher quality and supply among districts. Despite its \$800 million price tag, the Legislature's recent \$2,000 across-the-board teacher pay raise will do little to address teacher quality or turnover.

Fortunately, lawmakers also created the largest teacher incentive pay system in the country, at an average of \$1,000 per Texas teacher. These funds will allow local districts to design specialized incentive programs in order to attract quality teachers where they're needed most, and to reward highly effective teachers.

Another concern is the existence of statutory job protections for teachers. It is time-consuming and expensive for districts to fire teachers who don't do their jobs. As a result, many ineffective teachers are merely transferred to other schools rather than being remediated or asked to leave the profession. Tenure laws in Texas must be reformed to enable principals to remove poor teachers from public schools.

THE FACTS

- ★ Texas teachers will be paid more than \$43,000 on average in 2006-07. They will rank about 24th in the U.S., before adjustment for cost of living.
- ★ According to the American Federation of Teachers, Texas average teacher salaries, adjusted for cost of living, ranked 16th among the 50 states in 2001-02.



- ★ The existing minimum salary schedule rewards seniority, not effectiveness. Studies show the two to be only mildly related, with seniority having no effect on teacher quality after the first few years.
- ★ Increasing teacher salaries across the board has no discernable effect on student performance in Texas public schools.
- ★ If the student-to-teacher ratio (currently 15:1) were increased to its 1969 level (24:1), the average Texas teacher could make \$70,000 per year with no increased spending.
- ★ Since 1995, if average teacher pay had increased at the same rate as per-student spending, Texas teachers would be making an average of \$48,000 per year.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ★ Phase out the state minimum salary schedule to allow more freedom for differentiated pay.
- ★ Phase out laws and regulations limiting schools' ability to make employment decisions.
- ★ Implement any future teacher pay raises in the form of differentiated, rather than across-the-board pay.
- ★ Enact policy aimed at improving the school environment and teacher working conditions.
- ★ Develop the capabilities to assess "value-added" by individual teachers, for use in fair and effective performance pay programs.

RESOURCES

- *Better Salaries for Teachers in Texas Public Schools* by Chris Patterson and Jamie Story, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Nov. 2005) <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2005-11-teacher-pay-rr.pdf>.
- *Great Teachers Deserve Greater Pay: How To Raise Teacher Salaries Without Spending More Money* by Jamie Story, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Apr. 2006) <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2006-04-PB-teacherpay-js.pdf>.
- *Lifting Teacher Performance* by Andrew Leigh and Sara Mead, Progressive Policy Institute (Apr. 2005) http://www.ppionline.org/documents/teachqual_0419.pdf.
- *Increasing the Odds: How Good Policies Can Yield Better Teachers* National Council on Teacher Quality (2004) http://www.nctq.org/nctq/images/nctq_io.pdf.

THE ISSUE

The question of who governs independent school districts is a complicated one. Many mandates are created at the state level by elected representatives, with other decisions left to local control. At the local level, authority is shared by the superintendent and board of trustees. Ultimately, however, school district officials must answer to local taxpayers.

The primary ability of local taxpayers to impact district policy is through school board and bond elections. Unfortunately, most school elections have historically been held on separate dates and/or at separate locations from general elections, leading to extremely low turnout numbers. House Bill 1 in the 2006 special session made some improvement in this area, requiring school elections to be held on the same dates and in the same locations as city elections. This is especially important now that rollback elections, as a result of HB1, are automatic at effective tax rate increases of four cents or higher. However, city elections are held separately from the general elections in November, when voter turnout is generally highest.

School board members serve as the elected representatives of local taxpayers. Unfortunately, the responsibilities of most board members are little more than hiring the superintendent, hearing appeals by terminated employees, and approving tax rates and bond issues.

School leadership—encompassing both principals and superintendents—is one of the most important factors in the academic and financial well-being of schools. Today's superintendents and principals shoulder politics, security, public relations, finances, personnel, and technology—essentially serving as CEOs and CFOs. Therefore, they should be recruited from among successful business executives, military officers, and non-profit managers—not just from existing teachers. Unfortunately, there is no alternative pathway to school leadership certification in Texas, regardless of an individual's proven experience and success. Current law requires prospective principals to serve for a minimum of two years in the classroom before becoming eligible for certification.

Another governance concern is the classroom authority of teachers. Working conditions are of utmost importance to teachers—even more important than salary in teacher polls—so attention must be paid to ensure teachers have adequate control over discipline and other classroom policies.

THE FACTS

- ★ Among registered voters in Texas, 57 percent voted in the November 2004 general elections; as a comparison, local election turnout percentages often dip into the single digits, with school elections typically even lower.
- ★ Voter turnout would be higher if school elections were held in November.
- ★ In 1983, *A Nation at Risk* identified educational leadership as both a leading cause of American educational malaise and a key to reform.



- ★ A recent survey of school superintendents found that fewer than 2 in 5 were satisfied with their principals' ability to make tough decisions, delegate responsibility, engage teachers in developing policies, or spend money efficiently.
- ★ State policies linking teacher salary to academic degree attainment have contributed to growth in the number of certified administrators, but only one-third of certified individuals are actively seeking administrative positions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ★ Require school elections to be held concurrently with November general elections.
- ★ Provide school boards more authority over organizational decisions.
- ★ Establish an alternative path to superintendent and principal certification.
- ★ Allow proven leadership credentials to take the place of the required two years of classroom teaching experience for prospective principals coming from outside of public education.
- ★ Give teachers expanded authority over classroom policies and discipline issues.

RESOURCES

- *Education Reforms of the Special Session: the Great, the Good, and the Not-So-Good* by Jamie Story, Texas Public Policy Foundation (May 2006) <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2006-05-PB-edreformspecial-js.pdf>.
- *Alternative and Conventional Certification for Education Administrators: A Look at the Debate* by Lars G. Bjork and James Rinehart, AEL, (June 2004) (<http://www.ael.org/newael/page.htm?&cid=920&cpd=res8721,sea3557>).
- *Inside American Education* by Thomas Sowell (The Free Press: New York, NY, 1993).

THE ISSUE

The notion of universal pre-K—publicly-funded preschool for all 4-year-olds—is gaining momentum throughout the country. Georgia implemented the first statewide universal pre-K program in 1993, and Oklahoma, New York, West Virginia, and Florida are in various stages of implementation. However, in June 2006, California voters handily defeated a proposition to fund universal public pre-K for all 4-year-olds. Clearly there is disagreement about the benefits of universal pre-K.

Advocates cite a variety of reasons for instituting universal pre-K. They claim positive returns on investment in pre-K due to decreased incarceration costs, reduced welfare dependence, and increased future wages for children who participate in pre-K. However, these conclusions are largely based on studies over the past several decades that focused on small groups of extremely disadvantaged children, and it is inappropriate to assume that these benefits apply to all children. Advocates also cite universal pre-K as a solution to our public education woes, because it will ensure that children are prepared for school upon kindergarten entry. Recent studies, however, show that any academic benefit from pre-K has “faded out” by the third grade.

On the other hand, there are several arguments against universal pre-K. One argument is economic: the vast majority of Texas 4-year-olds already participate in public or private preschool. Universal pre-K, then, would do little more than subsidize parents who already choose, and can afford, to send their children to private preschool. Not only would universal pre-K cause the cost of preschool to skyrocket, but it would likely force many private sector providers out of business.

Some studies even find negative effects on children who enroll in universal childcare. A study of Quebec’s universal preschool program suggested that children demonstrated increased anxiety, hyperactivity, and aggressive behavior in the years following introduction of the universal program. Researchers from UC Berkeley have found similar results.

In summary, universal pre-K is an expensive proposition with uncertain, even negative, results.

THE FACTS

- ★ In 1965, only 11 percent of 3 and 4-year-olds in the U.S. enrolled in school; that number rose to 55 percent by 2001.
- ★ In the 2003-04 school year, more than 160,000 Texas 4-year-olds enrolled in public pre-K, at a cost to taxpayers of \$488 million.
- ★ Forty-three percent of Texas 4-year-olds participate in state pre-K, 11 percent in Head Start, and approximately 35 percent in private preschool or childcare. This totals 94 percent of Texas 4-year-olds, although the actual percentage is likely lower due to overlap among programs.



- ★ The TEA estimates 75 percent of qualified children (economically disadvantaged, homeless, and/or LEP) are enrolled in public pre-K. The rest either choose not to participate, or live in the minority of school districts where pre-K is not offered.
- ★ Quebec started a universal pre-K program eight years ago. The program now costs \$1.7 billion each year—33 times the original projection—and has actually caused supply to decrease, crowding out many of the lowest-income students.
- ★ In the California universal pre-K plan, three-quarters of the funding would have gone to children who attended preschool without the initiative.
- ★ Two school districts in California hold the Ready to Start program, a five-week preschool program taking place in the summer before kindergarten. It costs \$350 per student (rather than \$8,000 for year-round preschool), and it's short-term success is similar to that found after one year of preschool.
- ★ Although U.S. students fall behind in later grades, our 4th graders routinely outscore their international peers—including those from Germany and France, which have higher preschool enrollment rates than the U.S.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ★ Rather than implement universal pre-K, legislators should look at ways to ensure that all children who already qualify for state pre-K (economically disadvantaged, homeless, and/or limited English proficient) are able to access it.
- ★ Similar to K-12, pre-K should be held accountable for success. Effectiveness should be measured in terms of kindergarten readiness so that parents and taxpayers know their money is being spent effectively.

RESOURCES

- *The Early Bird Misses the Worm: Evidence on Early Childhood Education* by Jamie Story, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Jan. 2006) <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2006-01-ECE-JS.pdf>.
- *No Magic Bullet: Top Ten Myths About the Benefits of Government-Run Universal Preschool* by Lance T. Izumi and Xiaochin Claire Yan, Pacific Research Institute (May 2006) <http://www.pacificresearch.org/pub/sab/educat/2006/magic-bullet.html>.
- *Assessing Proposal for Preschool and Kindergarten: Essential Information for Parents, Taxpayers and Policymakers* by Darcy Olsen with Lisa Snell, Reason Foundation (May 2006) http://www.reason.org/ps344_universalpreschool.pdf.