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EDUCATION

Major school funding repairs unlikely this session

Legislative leaders say 2011 is when they plan to tackle system.

By [Kate Alexander](#)

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How Texas divvies up money for public schools has created confusion among taxpayers and frustration for school officials who say the system is unfair and inflexible.

But lawmakers are unlikely to change the school finance system substantially in the 2009 session, despite warnings that a legal challenge could be on the horizon.

Instead, key lawmakers want to continue with the current system, which was enacted in 2006 as a short-term fix, and tackle the issue in the 2011 session, when they plan comprehensive reforms.

State Sen. Florence Shapiro, R-Plano, chairwoman of the Senate Education Committee, and Rep. Rob Eissler, R-The Woodlands, who chairs the House Public Education Committee, both have said repeatedly in recent months that they are not looking for major changes this session, which begins Jan. 13.

Maintaining the status quo will probably mean that more school districts, which have been digging into their reserves to pay for rising costs, will be asking voters to approve higher property tax rates.

Sixty percent of the 116 tax rate referendums held in 2008 passed, including Austin's, according to TexasISD.com. But some taxpayers expressed consternation about why districts need more money when tax bills are rising along with property values.

The state, not local districts, benefits from that additional tax revenue because it reduces how much state money must be sent to the districts.

Because a major overhaul is not going to come right away, the Legislature must provide a measurable infusion of money to help each of the approximately 1,100 school districts deal with rising costs and tougher standards from the state, said Catherine Clark, associate executive director of the Texas Association of School Boards.

Too many districts are using their reserves to pay for ongoing costs, which is not sustainable, Clark said. At the same time, some school districts have been getting significantly less funding per student than other comparable districts under the 2006 plan, and those districts need an extra lift, Clark said.

For example, the per-student funding in Williamson County ranges from \$4,600 in the Granger district to almost \$6,300 in the nearby Jarrell district. The different funding levels, based on a snapshot of per-student

funding in 2006, stem from variations in local property values at that time.

Bringing all the districts to a floor of \$5,000 per student would cost the state \$1.8 billion , according to the school finance consulting firm Moak, Casey & Associates.

Legislative leaders have said \$2 billion in new education money will be in the 2010-11 base budget when the session begins, in addition to the \$1.5 billion needed to pay for growth in enrollment at Texas schools.

That amount pales in comparison to the nearly \$5 billion that some school finance experts have said is needed to address disparities that could make the state vulnerable to a legal challenge. And it does not leave much room for new education spending, such as a \$600 million proposal to bolster pre-kindergarten classes.

Jason Sabo , senior vice president of the United Ways of Texas , said pre-K advocates do not want to take away money from districts. Putting money into educating these younger children will reap benefits in the long term, he said.

"If you invest in kids, and you invest in them well, then you achieve big returns," Sabo said.

Legislators are tired of districts asking for more and want them to use existing dollars more efficiently, said Brooke Dollens Terry , an education policy analyst with the small-government Texas Public Policy Foundation .

"We just don't think that there is a need for new money in the system," Terry said.


Texas A&M University education professor Anthony Rolle said the Legislature can wait another session to enact significant changes to school finance, which tends to be a difficult and costly endeavor.

But, Rolle asked, "the real question is: Should it?"

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