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# Panel tackles public policy issues on public education

*Education, budget deficit discussed at Texas Tribune event*

By Laurel L. Scott

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SAN ANGELO, Texas — A former district state judge who presided over Texas public school finance cases of the 1990s told an audience in Austin that the state is in a struggle between a growing minority population of students with high needs and an "aging Anglo population unwilling to share" in the cost of education.

"In the last decade, Texas alone is responsible for over half the increase in child population nationwide," he said.

Judge F. Scott McCown, executive director of the Center for Public Policy Priorities, was part of a panel, "How to Pay for Public Education," at the inaugural Texas Tribune Festival, meeting Saturday and Sunday on the University of Texas campus.

The Texas Tribune is a nonpartisan, nonprofit online media organization founded in 2009 to report on and promote discussion on public policy, politics, government, and other matters of statewide concern.

The Texas Tribune Festival brought together policy experts in the fields of education, health, energy and immigration.

Nate Blakeslee, senior editor of Texas Monthly, moderated the panel, which included state Sen. Dan Patrick, a Republican from Houston; state Rep. Scott Hochberg, a Democrat from Houston; Talmadge Heflin, director of the Texas Public Policy Foundation's Center for Fiscal Policy and a former state representative from Harris County; and McCown.

Blakeslee asked the panel about the "unprecedented" cuts in public education funding in the past legislative session.

"Did it have to happen that way?" he asked.

Patrick said the Legislature had to cut education — which, with higher education, is 60 percent of the state budget — because state law requires a balanced budget.

"We spend so much on education because we spend so little on anything else,"



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McCown said, referring to the state's ranking near the bottom in spending on education, health care and human services, compared with other states. "Living within our means doesn't mean living within our antiquated tax system."

Patrick also said teacher layoffs — estimated at one time this summer as likely to be 100,000 teachers statewide — were not nearly as bad as expected, especially compared with layoffs in the private sector.

Hochberg disputed the comparison.

"When the private sector lays people off, it's because they don't have the demand," he said. "That's not the case with education. The kids are there, and more all the time."

Hochberg said the problem is not just how much is spent on education but how it is spent.

"We put more into education, but we don't focus it on the problems we know we have," he said, citing students from low income families, students who don't speak English and special needs students.

The panel zeroed in on the state's budget deficit, which it said was in part because of an earlier reduction in business-related taxation.

Heflin said taxes need to be kept at a level that enhances job creation and so people have the ability to buy houses, which boosts property tax funding for school districts.

"Districts are supposed to manage their own house," he said, indicating it is the school districts' responsibility to decide whether to raise or lower property taxes.

He warned the next legislative session in 2013 will be "just as rough or worse" for balancing the budget.

McCown said the Legislature failed to deal with the projected increase in the number of students statewide.

"We've got this exploding child population; we knew there'd be this deficit; and the Legislature didn't deal with it," McCown said.

"The reason we didn't deal with it," Patrick said, "is the economy went into the tank in 2008, and the last thing you want to do is raise taxes on businesses."

However, Patrick did propose a tax increase.

"What we have to do is increase the sales tax base by 1 or 2 cents, offset that by reducing the property tax," he said. "The sales tax increase, dedicate it to education.

"We have to make homeownership affordable in Texas. You cannot continue to raise property taxes on homeowners."

McCown said increasing the sales tax hits the poorest hardest, but Patrick said the increase he is proposing would cost a family with an income of \$40,000 about \$80 to \$100 per year. He also said the poorest Texans could be exempt from paying sales tax.

Patrick also said the Legislature needs to meet annually for 90-day sessions to create a budget, instead of six months, then not returning for 18 months.

"Part of the problem is we can't predict 18 months out," he said.

Hochberg said the past session resulted in too many short-term fixes.

"My biggest frustration with this Legislature is there were no long-term solutions, no

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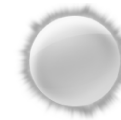
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super committees appointed" to work on the problem of funding public education, he said.

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