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Little Agreement on How to Fix School Finance System

by **Ben Philpott**
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A teachers group has urged Gov. **Rick Perry** to call a special session to address education funding, but there's still plenty of disagreement on what fixing the school funding system would actually mean.

Some think lawmakers should eliminate the use of local property taxes and pass a constitutional amendment to create a statewide property tax. Others want a more immediate fix: Spend a couple of billion dollars to stop additional teacher layoffs — and call lawmakers back to Austin to do so.

“State government has the money to do that — it’s taxpayers’ money, called the Rainy Day Fund,” said Rita Haecker, president of the Texas State Teachers Association.

Haecker said at a news conference Wednesday that without that stopgap money, schools could be forced to continue slashing jobs.

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“An estimated 32,000 school employees, including 12,000 teachers, already have lost their jobs,” she said.

Bill Peacock with the conservative **Texas Public Policy Foundation** disagrees. “There are a lot of people calling for a special session, but we don’t see the need for one,” Peacock said.

Peacock said the Rainy Day Fund should only be used for one-time costs, not recurring expenses like teacher salaries. He said adding another patch to the heavily bandaged school finance system won't help anyone.

On that point, the **Equity Center**, a nonprofit group that advocates for middle- and low-income school districts, agrees. But it's focused on a big-picture fix to the system.

The center's Lauren Cook says lawmakers can do that by simply following the state's current education code.

“It should finance schools in a thorough and efficient way so that all students have the same opportunities,” she said, “and so that taxpayers that pay substantially similar rates are receiving substantially similar revenue in their school districts.”

While Cook seeks equity, Peacock and his crew are searching for efficiencies, like letting parents pick the type of education their children receive.

“Vouchers, public school choice, virtual education — with technology these days, there’s a whole lot of things that one could do to improve the efficiency and put more competition into the system of public schools and public education you have in Texas,” Peacock said.

Neither the Texas Public Policy Foundation nor the Equity Center thinks lawmakers will take up major changes to school finance until they are forced to do so by the Texas Supreme Court. And that’s not expected until the 2013 legislative session is over.

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