

## Education Reforms of the Special Session: *The Great, the Good, and the Not-So-Good* by Jamie Story, Education Policy Analyst

Lawmakers met the Texas Supreme Court's June 1 deadline for providing local school districts meaningful discretion in setting their property tax rates. Of course, it remains to be seen if the Court will accept the legislature's solution to the *de facto* statewide property tax the majority of justices found unconstitutional.

After three years of debate through regular and special sessions, lawmakers focused primarily on using state dollars to reduce local tax burdens.

But the Special Session's package did include a number of school reforms. These reforms carry a hefty price tag—more than \$1.4 billion in the first year—and it is uncertain what role some of them will play in improving student achievement. But many of the reforms are grounded in research, and have been long supported by the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

The best reforms are those clearly based on sound economic principles structured to allow parents, students, and educators to respond in ways that provide for the best possible academic achievement for each individual's situation. Other reforms may be driven by good intent, but are less clear in their design, and could fall short of the goal if not implemented properly. Finally, there are those not-so-good reforms based on the false idea that more money is the solution to our educational woes—these generally throw money at the problem and rarely have a beneficial impact on student achievement.

The following is a brief review of some of the great, the good, and the not-so-good school reforms resulting from the Special Session's House Bill 1 (HB1).

### The Great

**Intervention for low-performing campuses.** Under HB1, campuses (both charter and regular) designated academically unacceptable for two consecutive years would be reconstituted and assigned a campus intervention team. The team would assist the campus in developing a school improvement plan, and would also decide which educators may be

retained. If after another school year the campus is still rated academically unacceptable, the commissioner of education may order closure of the campus or pursue alternative management by a private, non-profit organization. Given that many students don't have the opportunity to move or transfer out of a failing school, measures must be taken to improve those schools in which they are held captive.

**Incentive pay for teachers.** The Texas Public Policy Foundation has long supported the concept of results-based teacher pay, and has worked to encourage its implementation in Texas. HB1 has created the largest incentive pay plan in the country, and one of the first statewide plans. The bill appropriates an average of \$1,000 per teacher for performance-based pay programs, to be designed and implemented at the local level. While funding will come from the state, districts will be able to tailor the plan to fit their specific needs.

Teacher quality is the most important in-school factor affecting student achievement, yet the current system compensates excellent and ineffective teachers equally. The incentive pay program in HB1 breaks new ground towards professionalizing teacher compensation, increasing teacher quality, and improving student outcomes.<sup>1</sup>

**Financial accountability and transparency.** HB1 empowers taxpayers and parents by increasing their ability to access and evaluate school financial data. HB1 creates an online database of financial and academic performance information that will allow taxpayers to more easily understand how their money is being spent, and will allow parents to see the academic results. The bill also encourages the use of data to improve student achievement, and improved efficiency through shared services and an electronic student records system. As adults use the data to demand that more dollars are shifted from overhead to the classroom, students and teachers will benefit.<sup>2</sup>

**Joint school district/local elections.** HB1 requires school board elections to be held on the same date and at the same polling location as local government elections. As a result,

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voter turnout for school board elections will increase, giving more taxpayers a voice in the governance of their local school districts.

**Student transfers.** Throughout the state, districts often assign students to campuses they would not normally attend based on residence, in order to provide special education services to those students. HB1 allows the siblings of those special education students to also transfer to the assigned school where their brother or sister attends. While this is a positive outcome for the families of special education students, hopefully one day all children will have the opportunity to transfer to the school of their choice.

## The Good

**Curriculum rigor.** The rigor of the high school curriculum is the best predictor of whether a student will obtain a bachelor's degree, and curriculum improvement can play a significant role in closing the achievement gap between minority groups.<sup>3</sup> Recognizing these facts, HB1 will soon require nearly every student to complete four courses in each subject of the foundation curriculum—mathematics, language arts, science, and social studies. However, many schools may be challenged to find enough qualified, effective candidates to teach the additional advanced classes that will be required. In preparation for implementation beginning with the 2007-08 freshman class, schools should begin considering ways to attract excellent teachers through performance-based pay and subject-specific stipends.

**Curriculum alignment.** Approximately 50 percent of students in Texas public colleges must take remedial classes.<sup>4</sup> One potential cause of this alarming statistic is the lack of curriculum alignment between high school and higher education. Recognizing the costs involved in remediation, HB1 has created an official partnership between the TEA and the Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB) in order to better align coursework between high school and college. While curriculum alignment is vital, the TEA and HECB must strive to reach an end result where the rigor of the high school curriculum is increased to meet the college curriculum, not the other way around.

**School leadership.** The school leadership pilot program for principals will be a joint partnership between the TEA and a nonprofit organization, in collaboration with business schools and other institutions of higher education. The need

for increased management skills in the leadership of public schools is great, and to the extent that this program reduces the barriers to entry for principals from non-traditional routes (i.e. from outside of public education), it will help deepen the pool of potential school leaders.

## The Not-So-Good


**Across-the-board teacher pay raise.** Texas does not face an overall teacher shortage. Schools face acute shortages in particular regions, grade levels, and subjects such as math and science. In addition, many schools face a shortage of excellent teachers—those most effective at improving student achievement.

HB1 provides a \$2,000 across-the-board pay raise for Texas teachers. Unfortunately, this raise does nothing to address shortage or quality issues for public schools. In addition, this raise will cost Texas taxpayers approximately \$800 million per year, with no promise of results. Any future teacher pay increases should take the form of differentiated pay, not arbitrary across-the-board raises.<sup>5</sup>

**High school allotment.** Under HB1, every school district will receive an additional \$275 per year, per high school student, for programs intended to increase high school completion and college readiness rates. While these are laudable goals, the legislation includes no standards by which schools will demonstrate positive results from the increased funding, and no sunset date at which effectiveness of the program will be assessed. Despite this lack of standards and accountability, taxpayers will pay \$319 million for the initiative in 2007.

## Conclusion

While the public debate centered primarily on reducing local property taxes, the Special Session did address issues of accountability—academic and fiscal. Of each reform—the great, the good, and the not-so-good—the truest measure of effectiveness will be found in the degree to which they pave the way for even greater reforms in the 80<sup>th</sup> Session of the Legislature.

Texas, be they taxpayers, parents, or teachers, must not be content with these small—though important—steps toward creating an educational environment that rewards success in the classroom and promotes high levels of academic achievement. 

<sup>1</sup>Chris Patterson and Jamie Story, "Better Salaries for Teachers in Texas Public Schools," Texas Public Policy Foundation, Austin, TX (Nov. 2005).

<sup>2</sup>Jamie Story, "Transparency for Taxpayers, Success for Students," Texas Public Policy Foundation, Austin, TX (May 2006).

<sup>3</sup>Jamie Story, "Texas, We Have a Problem," Texas Public Policy Foundation, Austin, TX (Mar. 2006).

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Chris Patterson and Jamie Story, "Better Salaries for Teachers in Texas Public Schools," Texas Public Policy Foundation, Austin, TX (Nov. 2005).