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Lawmakers should not gamble with education

By **Robert Durón** - Express-News

Legislators are gambling with the future of Texas school children. If they lose, our kids will be left without the textbooks they need.

State House and Senate draft budgets do not include funding for new reading instructional materials. Instead, Texas budget writers have taken the unprecedented step of placing the fate of textbooks and other up-to-date instructional materials on the stock market.

The Texas Constitution requires the Available School Funds to “provide free text books” for children, but the Legislature is ignoring this mandate. At this point, the funding of instructional materials is included only as a contingency: Textbooks, including new digital components for 21st century learners, will be purchased only if the Available School Funds earn at least \$1.4 billion in the stock market.

With America in the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression, now is not the time for lawmakers to bet on the stock market to pay for the textbooks and other instructional materials.

This is the most important textbook purchase in more than a decade. The Texas Education Agency has budgeted \$894 million to purchase the state's first new reading and language arts books in 10 years, along with other obligations such as materials for 160,000 new students enrolling in Texas schools and annual purchases of elementary math workbooks. The new reading materials will be expected to serve more than 4.5 million students for at least seven years.

Currently, the House version of the legislation funds instructional materials only after \$538 million is appropriated to the Foundation School Program and the Technology Allotment. In the Senate version of the legislation, the funding for textbooks and other instructional materials is only a rider to the budget, dependent on stock market investments.

The Legislature should act immediately to restore full, guaranteed funding for the purchase of textbooks and other instructional materials.

Textbooks are critically important to the academic success of Texas students. The reading and language arts textbooks in use in Texas classrooms today are nearly a decade old, and do not align with the new and more rigorous Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills standards — standards that already have been endorsed and adopted by the state to ensure that all of our children learn how to read and stay on grade level. Students across Texas have made strong academic progress in recent years. But without new instructional materials aligned to the new standards of learning for college readiness set by the state, we face the very real danger that our academic gains will stop and our children will start losing ground.

If the new textbooks aren't funded, classroom teachers would bear the responsibility of teaching a much more comprehensive and stringent reading curriculum with old and outdated materials. The technology that supplements new textbooks would have to wait another decade. The data-driven instruction and student assessment components in new textbooks and instructional materials would have to be put aside for years to come, regardless of statewide accountability efforts. Educators would have to scramble to foot the bill and find other ways to equip their classrooms with the critical supplies needed.

Reading is the foundation for all other learning. We cannot take shortsighted measures and risk allowing the stock market conditions to widen our children's achievement gap.

The Texas Legislature has always stood up strong when it counted and made the tough decisions and funded the needs of our school children. Certainly, everyone understands that difficult economic times make legislators' jobs much more difficult.

Texas school children, however, deserve better than a spin of the wheel of fortune to determine whether they get new textbooks. Let's stop the gambling now.

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