

PUBLIC EDUCATION

Education summit focuses on increased costs for schools

Inflation, finance system draw calls for change

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A school finance summit Tuesday offered a place to vent but little comfort to Texas education leaders frustrated by the soaring costs of running schools.

Ahead of the 2009 legislative session, Texas Education Commissioner Robert Scott gathered school leaders from across the state, along with other education and business groups, to discuss school finance priorities.

Scott made it clear upfront that significant changes to the school finance system, though necessary, would probably not come in the 2009 session.

School districts are already chafing under the finance system that was hammered out two years ago. The school finance deal increased state funding to school districts in response to a Texas Supreme Court ruling and reduced school property tax rates.

The system requires districts to get voter approval to go beyond a tax rate of \$1.04 per \$100 of assessed property value and froze the amount of per student spending at the 2005-06 level, which school leaders say hampers their ability to deal with the rising costs of fuel, food, construction and salaries.

The summit focused largely on short-term fixes that will keep the state's school districts operating and the state out of court for now.

Among the suggestions discussed at the summit were providing an inflation bump of up to 1 percent per year, which would cost almost \$950 million, and boosting the transportation allotment, which has not been changed since 1984.

Other possible changes are increases in money for technology, school buildings and teacher salaries. Raising teacher pay by \$1,000 per year would cost \$773 million for the 2010-11 budget.

State Sen. Steve Ogden, R-Bryan, said he is open to some increases in funding, given the state's financial health.

"We ought to be able to fund growth and inflation, but beyond that, we'll have to wait and see," said Ogden, chairman of the finance committee.

New students alone will cost \$1.5 billion for the 2010-11

budget.

State Rep. Diane Patrick, R-Arlington, said there is always more need than money, so the key is prioritizing those needs. The input from superintendents, education groups and the business community will help the Legislature to do so.

"We're not telling them what the priorities should be. They're going to tell us," said Patrick, a member of the House Public Education Committee who attended Tuesday's summit.

Round Rock Superintendent Jesús Chávez, who represented the Central Texas region at the summit, said the event was a welcome opportunity to lay out the education community's concerns before Scott prepares a budget to the Legislature.

Chávez said the current school finance approach is unfair and does not reflect the reality of what it costs to operate a school district.

Although there is wide agreement that significant changes to the finance system are needed, summit participants said the most likely approach in 2009 will be to set the stage for an overhaul in 2011.

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