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## **Budget crunch coming for Texas school districts**

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AUSTIN — School districts across Texas are likely to face extreme fiscal hardships over the next two years as transportation costs spiral out of control, enrollments continue to grow and the transition from textbooks to technology progresses.

That was the word from a panel of educators and advocates at the Texas Education Agency's school finance summit Tuesday. They and Texas Education Commissioner Robert Scott began laying the groundwork for what they would seek from lawmakers when the 81st Legislature convenes in January.

"We just don't have enough money, basically, to provide a quality education experience to our students," said Sharon Shields, superintendent of the tiny La Vega school district near Waco.

Like several of her counterparts who participated in the six-hour discussion, Shields said her district needs more financial aid from the state and greater flexibility to raise and spend the money it receives from local taxpayers.

Most of the educators agreed that the school finance overhaul enacted by lawmakers two years ago — an attempt to settle the ongoing dispute between rich and poor school districts — is already falling short on generating the funds needed to sustain public schools.

"We always pull up with a penny-wise, pound-foolish solution," said Richard Kouri, who represents the Texas State Teachers Association.

Added John Folks, superintendent of San Antonio's Northside school district: "It's one [state] mandate after another that's being put on us."

### **The concerns**

**Transportation:** The high cost of getting students to and from school dominated much of the discussion. During the 2006-07 budget cycle, districts statewide spent nearly \$1 billion on transportation. The state's share of the tab came to just over \$300 million. But fuel costs have nearly doubled since then, and the state has not adjusted its rate for sharing transportation costs with school districts in nearly 25 years.

Bill Grusendorf, who represents the Texas Association of Rural School Districts, complained that under the formula instituted in 1984, urban districts receive a far larger state reimbursement than those out in the country.

"Wear and tear on buses in rural Texas is tremendous," he said.

Technology: Scott said he intended to ask lawmakers to pony up more money for technology-based learning materials such as laptops and software. For 19 years, school districts received about \$30 for each child according to average daily attendance. That cost the state about \$130 million a year, compared with the \$800 million spent on textbooks.

It would cost an additional \$22 million a year to boost the rate to \$35 per student, Scott said.

"It's about \$50 too low," said David Anthony, superintendent of the Cypress-Fairbanks school district near Houston, arguing that instructional material stored on a computer is far more up to date than traditional textbooks.

Inflation: Lawmakers should tweak funding formulas under the 2006 school finance plan to make allowances for sudden spikes in the cost of education, several officials said.

"We need help," said Wichita Falls Superintendent Dawson Orr.

### **Looming costs**

Teacher pay: Scott predicted that lawmakers will grant at least some salary increases for teachers and key support staff members such as librarians, counselors and school nurses. The salaries might be tied at least in part to performance standards, he said.

Even a modest increase of just \$1,000 for those on the low end of the salary scale would cost the state about \$380 million.

Again, Cypress-Fairbanks' Anthony said that is "too low."

"Every one of our teachers needs a raise across the board. The job gets tougher every day," he said. "We're not making widgets and we're not selling elevators."

Higher high school allotment: Increasing state funding for secondary schools from \$275 per student under the average daily attendance formula to \$500 a day would cost upward of \$275 million a year.

Mid-size districts: A plan to boost the state's payment to school districts with 1,600 to 5,000 students would cost upward of \$50 million a year.

### **Reality check**

State Rep. Diane Patrick, an Arlington Republican and former school board president, said afterward that lawmakers will have to weigh each of the suggestions carefully next year.

"As always, it's a balancing act," said Patrick, who was an observer at the summit. "There's always more good ideas than there is money to spend."

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superintendent of the Cypress-Fairbanks school district