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School leaders say they're hurting

Gary Scharrer - Express-News

AUSTIN — Educators meeting Tuesday with Texas Education Commissioner Robert Scott about the perils facing public schools pretty much agreed with Cypress-Fairbanks Superintendent David Anthony's contention that "you can't have a world-class education system with Third World funding."

Most Texas public schools are reeling from legislative action two years ago that reduced school property taxes while, in effect, freezing per student revenue at 2005-06 levels.

Local property value increases benefit the state, which reduces funding to schools by a corresponding amount.

Without voter approval for higher tax rates, schools are struggling with higher fuel, utility, insurance and food costs.

"We're all hurting," Grapevine-Colleyville Independent School District Superintendent Kay Waggoner said at the end of a daylong summit involving nearly 40 school district leaders and education groups.

They want Texas lawmakers to give school districts enough money to cover inflationary costs and to return the money from property value increases to those schools.

The Legislature returns to a regular legislative session in January.

Educators also advocate an interim study on the true costs of education and formula funding to cover those costs as a more permanent solution.

But state leaders are not including school funding on their list of priority issues for the upcoming session.

Without major changes, education leaders say they will be forced to file another school funding lawsuit.

"We'll probably be back in court pretty soon," San Antonio's Northside Superintendent John Folks said during a break.

The state of Texas has not increased the transportation allotment for public schools since 1984. Texas schools spent about \$990 million for transportation in 2006-07, with the state only picking up \$300 million of that expense. And it's not simply a problem for rural school districts with many miles to cover.

The Northside district, for example, transports 4,500 students twice a day spread over 355 square miles, Folks said.

"The transportation allotment needs to be increased. All of us are hurting with the transportation costs of fuel," he said. "This is a critical issue for all of us."

The new school funding system has deprived local school boards of meaningful discretion, said North East Independent School District Superintendent Richard Middleton.

“We find ourselves powerless to act. That’s part of my great frustration,” he said.

Some school districts are dipping into reserve funds to meet their operating needs and say they could face insolvency if their finances don’t improve.

“We’re not going to close the doors because we have a moral responsibility to the kids, but there will be diminished opportunities if we don’t address this (funding problem),” Anthony said.

The only non-educator attending the summit was Bill Hammond, president of the Texas Association of Business. School districts should reduce more of their expenses, he said: “It’s not just more money.”

“Funding is always an issue for public schools, but it’s also an issue for every taxpayer in the state and every business in the state,” Hammond, a former Dallas GOP lawmaker, said later.

Per student funding in Texas has nearly doubled over the past 10 years, he said: “The state has put more and more money into public education.”

One reason for the extra cost is the growing number of low-income children attending Texas public schools. They cost more to educate. The number of low-income children attending Texas schools 10 years ago was about 1.8 million compared to nearly 2.6 million last year.