

Commentary: Why money matters in public education

By Wynn Rosser - Special to the American-Statesman

Texas, like much of the country, is struggling with funding for public education. Some state leaders point out that Texas is putting in more money than ever before. So, what's the problem? Texas' funding per student is still below 2008 levels despite the fact that we're demanding more from our schools. This is especially true in funding levels for small and rural districts, special education services, services for English-language learners, and career and technical education.

The Texas Legislature used to fund a greater share of the cost of public education. And then there were cuts, a painful choice the Legislature made back in 2011 — from which we've not fully recovered. The result has been a shift toward local taxpayers shouldering a greater amount of the cost.

It was not so long ago that the state provided about 50 percent of the funding for public schools, but now that percentage has dropped to 38 percent. As the state's per student amount has stagnated, local taxpayers have been left to shoulder a disproportionate amount of the burden. It's time for the state to step up and increase funding for public education.

Higher state investment in our schools would mean lower property taxes — and that is something Texas voters agree on.

As the School Finance Commission — with members appointed by Gov. Greg Abbott, Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, Speaker Joe Straus, and the State Board of Education Chair Donna Bahorich — continues its work, there's already some worry that the outcome is predetermined: Public schools should do more with less. That's a position that runs counter to many of the commission members' own viewpoints — and, as a new statewide voter survey shows, is out of step with the Texas electorate.

The proponents of a "lean and mean" approach to public school funding say the focus should be on "efficiency" and the "quality" of education, rather than the quantity of funding directed to our public schools by the state.

The problem with that is studies from across the ideological spectrum have shown that the quality of education delivered is, in fact, directly related to the quantity of resources a district has. That news grabbed headlines most recently in another state, when Texas A&M's Dr. Lori Taylor told Kansas lawmakers that a link *does* exist between spending and a student's educational attainment.

Money matters in public education — and that money should be well-spent.

We know that well-funded, high-quality public schools shape our future, ensuring a well-trained, highly skilled workforce and better quality of life for Texans. And, Texas voters seem to agree with a bipartisan majority voicing support for increasing state funding of Texas public schools.

More local taxpayers are beginning to understand that real property-tax relief is only possible when the state increases its share of public school funding. Seventy-one percent of Texans favor increasing the state's share of funding to provide property tax relief, according to results from a statewide voter poll by the Texas Education Grantmakers Advocacy Consortium.

The same survey found 86 percent of Texans — after learning that local education tax dollars sent to the state aren't always used for public education — favor a requirement that education tax dollars be used for education.

Whether it's our ability to attract new businesses, prepare the workforce of tomorrow, or bring jobs to our communities, there is vital importance in addressing school finance. We all have skin in the game, whether you have children, own or rent your home, pay property or business franchise taxes, all of the above, or none of the above.

Texas' school finance system is complicated. It's antiquated. It's going to take political courage to fix, but Texas voters are making their opinions clear. The time to act is now.

Rosser chairs the Texas Education Grantmakers Advocacy Consortium.

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