



Public Education Funding Must Focus on Classroom, Instructional Materials

by Ken Mercer

Negotiations on the state budget are down to the final days – if not hours - and, once again, public education funding remains the outstanding issue.

Whether Texas lawmakers write the 2012-13 budget prior to the regular session's end later this month or whether they have to return for a special session, a rising chorus of voices is calling for the bulk of public education funding to go directly into the classroom. The state comptroller made that job a little easier by recently telling lawmakers they have an extra \$1 billion to fund the budget.

In this budget debate, let's not forget instructional materials are one of the most basic of classroom items. When the state pays for textbooks and other instructional materials, 100 percent of that money goes into Texas classrooms. This is one of the most tangible contributions the state provides to public education.

The funding of instructional materials is important for several reasons, not the least of which is the requirement in the Texas Constitution that the state provide public school students with free textbooks.

The Permanent School Fund (PSF), commonly known as the "Children's textbook fund," was created by the state in 1854 and is an educational endowment that benefits the schools by helping to pay for basic education costs, including the purchase of textbooks and other instructional materials. Even at that time the state of Texas wanted to ease the tax burden on its citizens by helping to pay for public education and textbooks.

More recently, the State Board of Education (SBOE) answered the calls of educators, parents and legislators, to raise educational standards and stop teaching to the test.

Our reform efforts to bring back the basics of education are reflected in the new stronger standards and new end-of-course exams which are set to begin at the end of the next school year. New instructional materials have been developed in accordance with the curriculum required by the new standards; they have been printed and are waiting in warehouses to be delivered to classrooms.

These new textbooks will replace materials that are anywhere from 8 to 18 years old. The new materials are for core subjects like reading, writing, and grammar, and or subjects designed to get students to a position where they can do well in these subjects.

Not funding new instructional materials, aligned with our new higher education standards, is essentially an unfunded mandate. It is also a travesty because earlier this year the SBOE provided budget writers with \$3 billion of non-tax revenues from the Permanent School Fund. The price tag for the new instructional materials is under \$500 million, one sixth of the amount we transferred to legislative budget writers.

And if all this is not enough, these outdated materials could result in legal action against the state. A lawsuit many of my colleagues agree the state would lose.

All this can be avoided by buying the textbooks Texas school children deserve and for which money has been previously allocated.



Of course, instructional materials encompass both traditional textbooks and electronic delivery options. How students read the textbooks is not nearly as important as having up-to-date material for them to learn from, material that matches the new curriculum.

Even as a very young state, Texans understood that there are few things more basic to a successful society than educating its children. That sentiment still runs strong today.

According to a statewide poll, 78 percent of Texans, regardless of political affiliation or geographic location, support funding for new instructional materials.

The importance of adequately funding education has been consistently underscored this session by Texas business groups. They are concerned about the long-term effects that a drastically reduced education budget will have on the state's ability to produce an educated workforce.

The Texas Legislature needs to do the right thing and put up-to-date instructional materials in the classroom and avoid creating another unfunded mandate.

Ken Mercer of San Antonio represents District 5 on the State Board of Education and is chair of the board's Committee on School Initiatives. Mr. Mercer is also a businessman and former member of the Texas House of Representatives.