

Quorum Report

BILINGUAL EDUCATION ADVOCATES RING THE ALARM ON TEXTBOOK PURCHASES

Warn that not purchasing ESL materials could exacerbate achievement gap between Hispanic students and the rest of the state

EDITOR'S NOTE: This post has been expanded from the original version to include further input from a source in the story.

Bilingual education advocates are ringing the alarm bell about a proposed textbook distribution schedule for the fall that leaves out English as a Second Language and pre-K instructional materials. Jesse Romero of the *Texas Association for Bilingual Education* said at a morning press conference that the failure to fund those materials would exacerbate the achievement gap between those students who require ESL classes and those who don't. The long term implication is higher dropout rates as those students approach high school age.

The base budget bills did not include funding for new textbooks in the fall. In his latest funding request, Education Commissioner Robert Scott has requested money to cover the textbooks in all of this year's scheduled subjects except ESL from kindergarten through grade 8 and pre-K. Romero said that he did not understand why some subjects were being left out if there's enough money in the Available School Fund to buy all of the scheduled textbooks.

"If you're going to go 85 percent, you should go all the way," he said.

Texas Education Agency spokeswoman Debbie Graves Ratcliffe said funding all of the textbooks scheduled for fall distributions remains a high priority for Scott. "In an ideal world, we want all the students to have the resources that they need," she said. Because "the budget situation is so stark" and because of the many demands for limited funding sources, the agency's latest approach is to prioritize those textbooks where a STAAR test is administered at year's end. STAAR, or State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness, is the new system of end of course exams replacing the TAKS tests. The relative newness of the ESL materials (Ratcliffe said they are about two years old) was also a factor.

Romero disagreed with the TEA's description of the ESL materials as relatively new. He said that those materials date from 2003 and are due for replacement since textbooks normally are used for eight years. But regardless of the relative age of the materials, Romero said that the new ESL materials are needed because are the ones that reflect the newest teaching standards in the subject. To persist in using the older materials would leave students poorly prepared for testing and further exacerbate the achievement gap.

Funding all of the materials would cost \$461 million. With ESL and pre-K materials removed, the revised exceptional budget item costs \$314 million.

Texas Association of Business President Bill Hammond shared Romero's stance that the full textbook schedule should be funded because there is sufficient money in the ASF. Budget writers have \$1.9 billion from the ASF to help fund education. Hammond, a former legislator, said that the state constitution puts textbook funding first in line when it comes to spending money from the ASF.

Ratcliffe said that Scott has two top priorities for any new money – funding the *Foundation School Program* and then funding textbooks. She adds that budget writers have other textbook expenses than the new textbook schedule. Counting purchase of new copies of existing textbooks, the state needs \$600 million for textbooks alone in the budget. She said that the agency has already looked at other ways to reduce the overall cost of textbook purchases, including going back to publishers to lower costs and maximizing electronic materials.

By John Reynolds