

COMMISSIONER SCOTT TELLS EDUCATORS THE SYSTEM HAS BECOME A PERVERSION OF ORIGINAL INTENT

"I cannot and will not certify the ban on social promotions unless there are resources to provide interventions to students who need to pass the test."

Robert Scott, in a speech before superintendents and school board trustees this afternoon, pulled the biggest gun out of the education commissioner's arsenal to guarantee lawmakers will start sending new money to schools next session.

Scott's speech to the *Texas Association of School Administrators' Midwinter Conference* was probably the best speech ever has given to the group during his years as interim and permanent commissioner. In it, he included an apology for the recent \$4 billion in education funding cuts, plus the \$1.4 billion carved out of the state education agency, much of which went to raising student achievement.

Too much has been loaded onto the state's current accountability system, Scott said, a system which is dominated by a growing number of high-stakes tests that Scott generally supports. That includes a new requirement that high school students pass 12 end-of-course tests in order to graduate, starting with the Class of 2015.

"I believe that testing is good for some things, but the system that we created has become a perversion of its original intent," Scott said, to thunderous applause from the school officials. "The intent to improve teaching and learning has gone too far afield, and I look forward to reeling it back in."

So how does the education commissioner do that, when the power to broaden graduation requirements is given to the Legislature, and the power to set standards and curriculum is shared with the *State Board of Education*? In this case, Scott is going to turn to a provision in law added by Democrat Sen. Royce West when the accountability system recently was overhauled and new requirements added.

"As we move into implementation of end-of-course exams and *STAAR*, I believe that additional resources will be needed in the future," Scott said. "And I will tell you that the legislative appropriations request that the agency makes to the next Legislature will reflect that, and I will say this as well, and this is going to get me in trouble when I tell you but the law says it anyway, I cannot and will not certify the ban on social promotions unless there are resources to provide interventions to students who need to pass the test. That is the law. And I cannot and will not do so unless those resources are appropriated by the next legislature."

That's one long complicated quote, right? And it's hard to know, on its surface, exactly what it means without putting in a call from West, who has a clear understanding what such a decision might mean.

“When we passed the legislation several years ago – the legislation with all the social promotion consequences when kids failed to pass high-stakes testing – the state agreed that it would provide the resources necessary in order to make certain all students could pass the test,” West said. “I made the point that if the state doesn’t live up to its part of this partnership, then the children shouldn’t be held accountable for the passage of those tests. That’s what’s meant by certifying.”

So this is how it would go down: Scott would carry an appropriations request to the Legislature. The Legislature would choose to either fund or partially fund that request. If Scott’s not sufficiently confident that the funding will cover the cost of higher standards in classrooms around the state, then he can choose not to certify and render the state’s entire testing system null and void.

How that would play out is hard to imagine and possibly a huge headache for lawmakers, many of whom are not enamored of the current testing system. Would tests count for school ratings but not for student performance? If that section of law is voided, even temporarily, how will students graduate?

“I wouldn’t say that takes the accountability system off the table, but if we’re not providing the resources, the kids shouldn’t be responsible for passing the tests,” West said. “We need to have the revenue necessary to provide the resources.”

How Scott, possibly in conjunction with higher education commissioner Raymund Paredes, would determine the magic number that constitutes sufficient funding is still an open question. West’s amendment was silent on that issue, possibly giving Scott broad latitude to decide sufficient funding levels.

For his part, West, who fought for additional education funding last session, is happy to hear Scott’s commitment to funding.

“I applaud the commissioner for recognizing and taking this responsibility seriously,” West said. “He needs to make certain that the state does its part to get the resources to the classroom for this high-stakes testing that we’re doing in Texas.”

By Kimberly Reeves