

Education commissioner calls for money to implement STAAR

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AUSTIN — Something unusual happened in the capital last week.

Addressing more than 4,000 school officials at the midwinter conference of the Texas Association of School Administrators, state Education Commissioner Robert Scott said bluntly that the Texas Legislature must give more money to public schools to implement a new test debuting this spring.

“As we move into the implementation of the end-of-course exams and STAAR, I believe that additional resources will be needed in the future,” Scott said in reference to the new State of Texas Assessment of Academic Remedies test, which replaces the TAKS test.

“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,” Scott said.

The commissioner received a standing ovation at the end of his speech because it became clear during the four-day conference that educators remain unhappy with the way the Legislature funds public education and with the \$5.5 billion in school funding cuts the lawmakers made last year to offset a \$27 billion state budget shortfall.

Scott’s address came an hour after school finance expert Lynn M. Moak predicted at a public education forum that the four education funding lawsuits recently filed against the state will last at least three and a half years.

“We probably won’t have a (Texas) Supreme Court ruling until the summer of 2015, if not later,” Moak said.

Some lawmakers such as Rep. John Smithee, R-Amarillo, had already predicted that the litigation would last as long as three years.

But it was a different story with Scott’s comments because he is an appointee of Gov. Rick Perry, who insisted on balancing the two-year state budget with massive spending cuts instead of revenue increases.

All of this suggests that in next year's legislative session, and possibly in 2015 as well, public education is going to be a much bigger issue than what the lawmakers anticipated when they adjourned last summer, some legislators and Austin watchers say.

The day before Scott's speech, Steve Ogden, the retiring chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, suggested a special session of the Legislature — after the spring primaries — to start tackling the complexities of school funding.

As he and Sen. Robert Duncan, R-Lubbock, have previously proposed, the Bryan Republican renewed his call for a statewide property tax to fund public education.

On the flip side of the coin, two days after Scott's remarks, the influential Texas Association of Business published a full-page ad in the Austin American-Statesman to blast his proposal, though without mentioning him by name.

“At a time when we should be adhering to the accountability and testing standards established by the Texas Legislature, we instead are witnessing a concerted effort to retreat from the very reforms that could improve our state's public education system and deliver a brighter future for Texas,” the ad, signed by TAB president and CEO Bill Hammond, said.

Departing Rep. Warren Chisum, the author of a bill educators blame for the current school funding woes, said there is no doubt public education — along with another massive revenue shortfall projected for next year — will be the biggest issues the Legislature deals with when it is back in session.

“I agree with Ogden that if we are going to need to fix the system it's never too early to start,” said the Pampa Republican who is now running for railroad commissioner.

“But the problem is that we don't know how the courts are going to rule,” Chisum added. “So, that's what we're facing. Not everything is going to be easy.”

Rep. Four Price, R-Amarillo, who also sees public education as a major issue shaping up for the next two legislative sessions, said if there is something to be gained from the lengthy lawsuits — which are expected to be combined into one once the trial starts in the fall — is that it will give the Legislature time to get to the bottom of the issue.

In addition, the Sunset Advisory Commission — the joint legislative body which reviews the performance of all state agencies — will soon examine the functions of the Texas Education Agency, said Price, who was recently appointed to the panel. The review would allow the commission to see what, if anything, needs fixing.

Rep. Jim Landtroop, the only member from the Panhandle/South Plains legislative delegation who voted against the school funding bill, said he also sees the school funding litigation and the growing concerns over the implementation of the STAAR test as an opportunity to reform public education.

“There are a lot of problems with the way the testing is going to be implemented,” said Landtroop, who — along with Chisum, Smithee and 20 other House members — filed a bill that would have delayed the implementation of the STAAR test. House Bill 2491 never got out of committee, though.

“This is an issue we need to visit because we need to make sure that it’ll work,” Landtroop, R-Plainview, said.

However, not everyone is convinced the Legislature will properly address public education issues.

“I would love to think that’s what is going to happen, that the Legislature really thinks about its role in funding public education in Texas with an equitable system that makes sense,” said Anette Carlisle, president of the Amarillo Independent School District board of trustees.

“They’ve had this opportunity every day, every two years and since I have been paying attention, they have not done it,” she said.

Carlisle is a longtime critic of the way the Legislature funds public education and is highly critical of the upcoming STAAR test as well.

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