

Funded math mandate new territory for state schools

Feb. Feb. 5, 2012

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Killeen Daily Herald

For the first time, members of the state's Board of Education are asking lawmakers to provide funding to implement new curriculum standards in Texas schools.

The recent decision by the board to tie the funding of textbooks to the implementation of new math standards raised the issue of how school districts cope with unfunded or underfunded state mandates.

"It's a basic fairness issue," said Thomas Ratliff, one of the board's members. "If you are going to require new standards, then you need to equip (districts) with the tools to help students meet those standards."

Ratliff proposed an amendment to the standards at a Jan. 27 meeting, which stated that the math standards would not take effect until new textbooks and other materials were purchased for students in Texas schools. The Texas Education Agency estimated the cost of the books at about \$350 million. The amendment passed 13-0 and the standards are set to be approved at the board's next meeting in April.

The new standards are based on a draft of the Texas Essential

Knowledge and Skills, as well as math standards from other states and countries. The new standards are set to take effect in the 2014-15 school year for all kindergarten through eighth-grade students.

Ratliff said it was the first time the board made the implementation of new standards contingent upon funding from state legislators.

"I was talking with my colleagues, and some of them said that they were embarrassed that they have never done this before," said Ratliff, a Republican who was elected to the board in 2010.

Contentious issue

The board's vote brought to light concerns by local school boards and administrators about the contentious issue of unfunded or underfunded mandates, which occur when the state or federal government passes rules or regulations that apply to school districts without providing additional funding.

"It's frustrating because it's basically asking you to do something without giving you the resources to do it," said Corbett Lawler, a member of the Killeen Independent School District board. "It can really drive you up a tree."

A 2010 report by the Texas Association of School Administrators and the Texas Association of School Boards identifies 76 state mandates that school districts in Texas are required to follow. The mandates include academic requirements, such as providing accelerated instruction for students struggling with reading and accountability and reporting requirements, such as maintaining an electronic database of student records.

"Many of those mandates are underfunded, what we would call cost drivers," said Jacqueline Lain, the association's director of governmental affairs. "They aren't completely unfunded because (districts) get money per-student with the funding formula, but the cost to comply with all of the mandates is higher than funds they are getting."

Randy Hoyer, superintendent of the Lampasas Independent School District, said much of the cost of mandates comes from the need to hire personnel.

"It takes people, and people are expensive," said Hoyer. "You can get the resources to assist students, but most of the time it takes manpower."

Hoyer referenced the state's "4X4" mandate, which requires high schools to offer classes in English, math, science and social studies at all four grade levels.

"You needed to hire more teachers, but there was no additional funding," Hoyer said. "I don't think anyone is against holding students and districts to high standards, but you need to make sure (districts) have the funding to do what they need to do to get (students) there."

Another added cost school districts face this school year is related to the transition to a new state assessment test. As districts begin phasing in the more rigorous State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness, they will have to adjust or replace some curriculum and materials.

"There's a cost embedded in implementing a new testing regime," said Lain. "It's not that schools are opposed to rigid accountability, but how can you hold students to higher standards when you don't have resources to prepare them to meet those standards? That's unfair to the kids."

Creating hardships

For superintendents like Hoyer and board members like Lawler, the Legislature's decision to cut more than \$4 billion in education funding over the next two years hasn't made complying with the mandates any easier during a time when the enrollment in Texas schools is estimated to be growing at a rate of more than 80,000 students annually.

Texas Rep. Jimmie Don Aycock, R-Killeen, said he was well aware of districts' concerns about mandates.

"We think about (the cost) every time a piece of legislation comes across our desk," he said.

Aycock said the Legislature had "poured billions" into education, and stressed the need for a balanced approach to funding education.

"The problem is we made cuts in funding while increasing expectations, and that causes a lot of discussion," said Aycock.

While lawmakers, administrators and advocacy groups continue the debate, districts are still tasked with educating their students and adhering to the rules and regulations set by state and federal governments.

"In the end, you turn to your people and work to meet the challenge," said Lawler. "We can fuss about it all we want to, but you do the best with resources you've got, and give those kids the very best education."

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