

# Hudson ISD superintendent talks school funding woes

Whiteker urges voters to elect politicians who support education

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In the midst of a major public school funding crisis in Texas, Hudson Independent School District Superintendent Mary Ann Whiteker presented information and asked for help at the Lufkin Host Lions Club luncheon on Tuesday.

Whiteker showed a PowerPoint presentation that highlighted the funding woes and frustration with the state legislature that local school districts share with much of the state. She urged those in attendance to help take action against what she said could be a grim future for public schools.

“We need help,” Whiteker said. “Thousands of superintendents are not having an impact in Austin. It is up to you, our parents and people voting to elect politicians who support public education. I have testified before more committees than you can imagine, and they don’t listen to me. They listen to you.”

With the state mandating an increase in standardized testing, a decrease in funding and a higher level of accountability, Whiteker said it is time for public education to be controlled in large part at the local level. State Board of Education representative Thomas Ratliff, who attended the luncheon after meeting with local superintendents and administrators to discuss curriculum, agreed with Whiteker on the issue of local control.

“All of these things that the legislature is doing, they are doing in the name of accountability,” Ratliff said. “But it’s the local taxpayers who the schools should be the most accountable to, not Austin, and not Washington, D.C.”

Ratliff said that schools should be accountable to their state and federal government, but that those levels of accountability should be secondary to those of local tax payers.

The state legislature cut school funding by over \$5 billion during its last session — an action that would have most likely been viewed unfavorably by school districts if taken by itself. However, with what Whiteker calls a much more rigorous standardized testing system being implemented at the same time, local administrators feel that there is “no light at the end of the tunnel.”

The new STAAR test will consume 30 percent of the school year for testing and re-testing days. According to Whiteker, it also handicaps the ability of teachers to focus on content other than what will be on the standardized test.

“The reality is that the education system in Texas is totally test-driven,” Whiteker said. “Teachers are having to spend more time preparing students for the test, and it leaves little time for what we consider quality education.”

The new test also comes with new accountability ratings. All students will be tested in multiple subjects. Students will be divided by grade level and by five different ethnic or socioeconomic categories. A campus' rating on the test is determined by the student group with the lowest score at any grade level on any test.

“They basically rate you on the weakest link,” Whiteker said. “One sub-group from one grade level in one subject is going to establish the rating for the entire campus.”

Those ratings, if poor, could lead to teachers being fired and schools being closed or privatized by the state.

Ratliff said the legislation was going to have to make a decision on what they are trying to accomplish, because higher accountability and less funding is like asking someone to make brick with no straw.

“The legislation is going to have to back off of its requirements,” Ratliff said. “Either that, or they are going to have to pay for what they want the outcome to be.”

Ratliff and the SBOE do not control funding, but they do have a say in curriculum, which according to Ratliff is moving into the same category as standardized tests when it comes to limiting a teacher's ability to promote a broader education.

“The board has a bad habit of increasing curriculum each year, that asks the schools to do more and more,” Ratliff said. “The teachers spend so much time on all of these things that they are being told to do, that there is no room for them to focus on other areas that may interest their students. Essentially we have turned teachers into order takers, with an education policy that is bad for public schools.”

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