



# TSTA NEWS

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## **School Finance: Another Chance to Meet the Challenge**

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Educators always try to keep an open mind about new ideas, and we are trying to keep an open mind about the state's new school finance study. Although previous studies have failed to produce results for Texas' 5.3 million public school children, we still have hope. But at the outset, we have reasons for concern.

The two main drivers behind this study were Gov. Greg Abbott and Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, who, during last year's legislative sessions, were more interested in siphoning tax dollars for private school vouchers than providing adequate and equitable state funding for neighborhood public schools.

They promoted the creation of the Texas Commission on School Finance during last summer's special session instead of supporting legislation overwhelmingly approved by the House to appropriate an additional \$1.9 billion for public education and take a first step toward improving the school finance system.

The governor and the lieutenant governor weren't ready to do the right thing for our students and educators then, and it remains to be seen if this new study will be any different. In the time since they were elected in 2014, the state's share of the Foundation School Program has slipped from 45 percent to a projected 38 percent in 2019, forcing local property taxpayers to foot more of the bill. And per-student funding in Texas is \$2,555 a year below the national average.

Patrick also tried to pass a voucher bill for a limited number of special education students. But the House refused, recognizing that Patrick's proposal, supported by the governor, would have been a waste of tax money because most private schools aren't staffed or equipped to give special education students the services they need.

The 13-member school finance commission is a mix of legislators, a State Board of Education member and public members, including educators, and is chaired by former Texas Supreme Court Justice Scott Brister. Judging from remarks at its first meeting, the sharp differences over funding between the House and the Senate remain.

House members, including Public Education Chairman Dan Huberty, made it clear they wanted more state funding for public education and changes in law to distribute it more fairly among rich and poor school districts. But Senate Education Chairman Larry Taylor spoke of finding “efficiencies” and getting the “most bang for the buck.”

This kind of political jargon has forced districts to foot more of the bill and, as a result, local taxpayers will pay 62 percent of Texas’ basic public education costs (excluding federal funds) next year, according to the Legislative Budget Board. The only way to relieve that property tax burden is for the Legislature to increase state education funding and pay its fair share for schools, instead of imposing crippling limits on local governments and school boards, as Abbott and Patrick have proposed.

The Texas State Teachers Association hopes the commission’s work doesn’t become a revitalized campaign to promote vouchers, corporate charters and other privatization plans that would undermine the public schools, where the vast majority of Texas children will continue to be educated. We can’t help but be suspicious, and we will continue to fight those efforts.

We challenge the commission and lawmakers to find equitable ways to spend our education dollars and to recognize that more resources are needed when student enrollment is growing by about 80,000 a year. We hope our challenge will be heard, because we work every day to give every child an opportunity to succeed.