

Senate panel approves school-finance bill

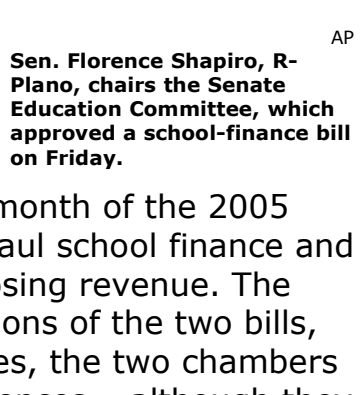
Measure would boost funding by \$2.8 billion over two years

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By TERRENCE STUTZ / The Dallas Morning News

AUSTIN - School finance legislation that would trim property taxes, raise teacher salaries, increase state oversight of charter schools and launch a merit pay program for teachers won approval Friday from the Senate Education Committee.

The measure, which now heads to the full Senate, also would boost funding for public schools by about \$2.8 billion over two years and introduce a state property tax to pay for education. Voters would have to approve a constitutional amendment to establish the statewide tax.



Sen. Florence Shapiro, R-Plano, chairs the Senate Education Committee, which approved a school-finance bill on Friday.

The committee acted as the Legislature neared the final month of the 2005 session, still hoping to overhaul school finance and cut property taxes without losing revenue. The House has approved its versions of the two bills, and once the full Senate votes, the two chambers will try to resolve their differences - although they are numerous and time is short.

In addition, most education groups opposed the House school finance measure and are expected to oppose the Senate bill because, they say, it does not contain enough money for schools.

Several senators remained optimistic, though, that a deal could be struck.

"We can still get this done," said Sen. Kip Averitt, R-McGregor, who voted for the bill Friday and noted that the Senate Finance Committee will take up the property tax cut measure Monday.

Differences among committee members that threatened to stall the bill on Thursday were worked out Friday as Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst met through much of the day with senators.

One change key to the bill moving was the committee's agreement to increase state funding for poorer districts that raise property taxes for local programs under a section of the Senate measure. That section would allow districts to raise their local tax rate 5 cents every two years - up to 15 cents over six years. The measure is designed to help poor districts, which have a lower tax base, to raise their overall school spending and bring it closer to property-rich districts.

The cost of the change will be about \$75 million - the additional money that would flow to lower-wealth districts as a result of the compromise.

"All children are required to take the same test. All our schools are under the same standards. Why wouldn't we want 100 percent of our kids to have funding levels that enable them to compete academically?" said Sen. Todd Staples, R-Palestine, who offered the amendment.

Committee members approved several other changes, including a measure to give more money to small and medium-sized districts. That amendment had been sought by rural senators.

The overall measure would trim school property taxes about \$4.5 billion a year, with a phase-in that would start this fall, saving taxpayers about \$2.2 billion. The maximum school property tax rate would drop from \$1.50 per \$100 valuation to \$1.30 this fall and to \$1.10 the following year.

To offset those reductions, the Senate would revamp the business franchise tax, increase the state sales and motor vehicle sales taxes and bump up state taxes on cigarettes and alcohol. The sales tax would go up half a percent to 6.75 percent.

Teachers would receive a \$500 raise next year under the Senate bill, but they could get another \$2,500 in the 2006-07 school year if a constitutional amendment passes authorizing a state property tax for education. Teachers could earn more if they qualified for bonuses under a new incentive-pay program based mostly on student test scores.

The bill also would rewrite state regulations for charter schools with the goal of weeding out low-performing campuses and beefing up academic standards at other charter schools. Once the new standards are developed, charter schools would have one year to measure up or lose their state licenses.

In terms of new funding, the bill was scaled back slightly from an earlier version to \$2.8 billion in new money over the next two years. The House bill calls for additional funding of \$3 billion. Both amounts are far less than what the judge indicated was necessary to fix the school finance system.

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