

Capitol will be battleground over education this session

Voucher fight ahead, but funding system overhaul unlikely

By [Lauren McGaughy](#)

December 5, 2014 Updated: December 11, 2014 10:49am

AUSTIN - Public education promises to dominate the 2015 legislative session, as advocacy groups prepare yet again for a struggle over vouchers and lawmakers decide whether to tweak an outdated, complex school finance system.

With nearly 40 percent of the state's \$200 billion budget going to education, school finance is always a major driver of debate during Texas' biennial legislative sessions. The nature of the debate in next year's session is harder to anticipate, however, as new leaders with resolute education stances flood the upper chamber.

"I think there will be some - I hate to use the term 'nibbling around the edges' - but tweaks and specific measures" to how Texas funds public schools, said Rep. Jimmie Don Aycock, R-Killeen. "But do we have a full revamp of the school finance system? I would be surprised if that happened before the Supreme Court ruled."

Aycock, who chairs the House Committee on Public Education, has been meeting with a small ad hoc group of lawmakers since state District Judge John Dietz of Austin struck down Texas' method for funding public schools in late August, citing problems of equity, adequacy and efficiency. Attorney General Greg Abbott has appealed Dietz's ruling to the state Supreme Court.

The legislative group likely won't yield any cohesive policy recommendations, but Aycock said he plans to file legislation to tweak the system and he expects others will, too. The changes will fall far short of what many teacher groups want, however.

Wish list

"We would like to see the Legislature finish restoring all of the funding that was cut in 2011," said Texas State Teachers Association spokesman Clay Robison. "We would also like to see the state drop the appeal of the school finance decision."

That's unlikely. With months before the Supreme Court will even hear the case, lawyers for the 600 school districts that sued the state don't expect a ruling until late 2015 at best. This means wholesale school finance reform could be pushed off until the 2017 session, experts said.

"There is a perception that a special session (on school finance) is a foregone conclusion. I think that's an erroneous conclusion," said Dale Craymer, president of the business membership group Texas Taxpayer and Research Association. "Given past traditions and past decisions of the

Supreme Court, it is unlikely they would mandate the Legislature would have to do something before they meet again in regular session."

That leaves lawmakers to "nibble around the edges." One area from which they'll likely take a bite is preschool funding.

Multiple bills to expand the state's free pre-K program to all 4-year-olds have been filed, and the K-12 advocacy group Raise Your Hand Texas is making "funding for full-day quality pre-K" its top issue, said CEO David Anthony.

Efforts to lower local property taxes, the largest pot of money that keeps public schools running, will encounter intense opposition from educator groups and charter school operators. But the fiercest battles this coming session likely will be waged between proponents of school choice and those advocating for the so-called "community school" model.

Vouchers, scholarships, school choice: Whatever you call the effort to allow public school students to attend private and parochial schools using state money, it's likely to suck the oxygen out of every public school debate this year.

"Parents in Texas want school choice, so I intend to bring that up and support that," said Donna Campbell, R-New Braunfels, who is on the short list to chair the Senate Education Committee this session.

'Choice' argument

Through voucher proponents like Campbell and her close political ally, Lt. Gov-elect Dan Patrick, powerful advocacy groups like Texans for Education Reform will frame "choice" as essential for ailing public schools.

"I don't think there's any way short of injecting school choice into the system to make this more efficient," said Kent Grusendorf, a director at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a conservative think tank. Increased competition would force public schools to begin performing better, he said, or risk losing their best students.

In addition to traditional vouchers, lawmakers will debate allowing local takeovers or charter conversions of failing schools - called the "parent trigger" - and limited "neo-traditional" vouchers for pre-K kids or students with disabilities.

Teacher groups plan to counter these efforts with a push to again make public schools the center of the local community. They're pointing as examples to Austin's Webb Middle and Reagan High School, where local advocacy leaders have made the campuses a focal point of the community.

By providing "wrap-around services," like tutoring and career training for students as well as parents, the model touts to a "no cookie-cutter" grass-roots approach to school improvement.

"This could be one of the most exciting issues discussed during the session," said Linda Bridges, who heads the Texas chapter of the American Federation of Teachers. *"It could mean real change and positive change."*

Policy debates

Education groups also indicated their intention to further study methods to lessen the state's reliance on high-stakes testing to measure student and teacher performance, and on better health care funding. Sen. John Whitmire, D-Houston, will renew the focus on easing rigid school discipline measures, such as harsh truancy fees and penalties for students and their parents. He and Rep. James White, R-Hillister, have filed bills to change the system.

And expect heated debate over several other bills, such as one allowing the concealed carrying of handguns at sporting events and school board meetings and another requiring the Sunset Advisory Commission to review whether the Texas State Board of Education, an elected body, should be subject to periodic review.

Aycock hopes lawmakers can turn their eyes away from these "politically more glamorous discussions" and keep the focus on methods to help failing schools, improve teacher quality and increase the number of college counselors.

"What we're hearing politically and what we're hearing from members is not necessarily where I want to go," said Aycock. "All of the other discussions sort of detract from the core measure of educating kids."