

House Public Education Committee hears testimony from TEA and school finance commission

The House Public Education Committee met for two days this week, Tuesday and Wednesday, to hear testimony from the Texas Education Agency, the Legislative Budget Board and the Texas Commission on Public School Finance.

School finance commission members, including Todd Williams of Commit Partnership, Nicole Conley Johnson of Austin Independent School District (AISD), and Keven Ellis of the State Board of Education (SBOE), testified on Wednesday, Feb. 6, about their recommendations to the Legislature.

Todd Williams kicked off his testimony by reviewing the demographic profile of the Texas school population. He indicated that we rank 2nd in the country for the number of students who are English language learners. He also stated that NAEP ranks Texas ranks 46th out of 50 in early learning. The Commission saw compelling evidence that we have a third-grade reading problem. Part of the problem is that four in 10 kindergarteners are not ready to learn upon arrival. The Commission recommends a significant infusion of funds. \$1.4 billion, to increase funding for compensatory education and prekindergarten (pre-K).

The Commission recommends that \$400 million of these funds be used to create a third-grade allotment that would reward school districts for improving third-grade reading performance. Williams indicated a strong belief that “smart superintendents and smart school boards” can figure out how to re-direct resources, and he emphasized a notion of “equity in decision making.” While the original recommendation assumed that the districts can redirect resources in a way that improves performance, Williams indicated that he had further reflected on this assumption after many conversations with school administrators, and he indicated that he now believes that some schools would need an infusion of resources in order to improve performance.

The Commission also recommends an incentive-based allotment to attract and retain effective educators at a cost of \$100 million a year. Dallas ISD’s Accelerating Campus Excellence (ACE) was promoted as a model for improvement at a cost of about \$1,300 per student to provide a whole child support model. But concerns about scalability, especially in rural areas, were raised.

TSTA opposes incentive-based funding. If the results from the Dallas ISD program indicate that an infusion of resources amounting to about \$1,300 per student can significantly improve performance of struggling students, imagine how much overall student performance might improve if all schools were to receive an additional \$1,300 per student, or \$28,600 per classroom.

On Tuesday, Feb. 5, Education Commissioner Mike Morath discussed the implementation of House Bill (HB) 1842 and said he believed that this law caused fewer schools to be in “Improvement Required” (IR) status. HB 1842 provided the commissioner with more aggressive authority to close low-performing campuses by reducing the number of years a campus can be IR prior to closure from seven to five and by making campus closure mandatory rather than discretionary. Morath also pointed out that the accountability system had been changed from issuing pass/fail grades to issuing A-F grades and that the passing standards on STAAR tests had also changed.

Committee members had a number of questions about the passing standards, particularly with regard to third grade. There is a shared concern that the passing standard is too low. This concern has been raised by school administrators who believe the state’s assessment is less rigorous than some other

assessments. Committee members also asked the Commissioner a number of questions about the rule adoption related to the A-F grading system and the process for receiving input from stakeholders. Commissioner Morath described the process as long and arduous resulting in a product with which “no one is happy.”

Morath also described the Achievement School District (ASD) model, in which the state would take over low-performing campuses. The state would either directly run the campuses or contract with providers, such as charter school operators. This model has been implemented in Tennessee and Louisiana. Morath indicated that the results have been “uneven” in Tennessee but that Louisiana saw “significant outcome gains.” Morath did not provide sources for his conclusions, but scholars widely view the Tennessee ASD as a failure, and ASD outcomes in Louisiana are disputed in the academic literature.

Morath indicated that he did not believe Texas was well-suited to adopt the ASD model, and TSTA has opposed ASD legislation proposed in previous sessions.