

Texas House to consider bill that would ease class size limits, allow teacher pay cuts, furloughs

By TERRENCE STUTZ

AUSTIN — Teacher groups are calling it the “death star,” a piece of legislation they see as a direct assault on Texas teachers that will result in larger classes, severe pay cuts and layoffs.

Sponsors of the legislation paint a different picture, saying the Republican-backed bill will help financially strapped school districts deal with unprecedented funding reductions next year and possibly save some jobs.

The House will take up the bill Thursday, crystallizing a debate that has roiled the state since the Legislature outlined deep budget cuts to public schools for the first time: How much of the brunt should Texas teachers and schools bear?

The measure by House Public Education Committee Chairman Rob Eissler would authorize an array of cost-saving steps that school districts could use to weather funding cuts that will average at least 6 percent and as much as 11 percent over the next two years.

The bill would allow larger classes in elementary schools, give districts the right to cut employee salaries, authorize up to seven unpaid furlough days for teachers and eliminate layoff protections for veteran teachers. It would also repeal minimum pay levels for teachers.

“This bill basically declares war on Texas teachers, classrooms and, ultimately, the kids,” said Richard Kouri of the Texas State Teachers Association. “They say their hands are tied because of financial problems, but it is disingenuous politics at its worst. They want to severely cut the money for schools and then force school districts to do the dirty work.”

Senators would allow fewer cuts and have yet to approve the class size limits. The two chambers will have to negotiate an agreement before legislation can be final.

Dallas schools Superintendent [Michael Hinojosa](#), who testified for Eissler’s bill before the committee approved it on a party-line vote, said the measure contains “tools that school districts need to manage this crisis.”

“This is about flexibility, giving us the opportunity to manage a situation that none of us wants to be in,” he said.

More students in class

The most controversial provision of the bill — dropping the quarter-century-old class size limit of 22 pupils in kindergarten through fourth grade — would put an extra three students per class in those grades. The measure would permit an average of 22 students per class with up to 25 allowed. Under the 22-pupil limit, the average class size is just over 19.

Hinojosa said that without the change in elementary class sizes, the Dallas district will be forced to lay off more teachers from middle schools and high schools after the state cuts its funding.

“It would be unjust to make our upper grade classes so large,” he said. “The House bill will help us reduce the number of layoffs in secondary schools and let us keep our average class size in those grades at 28 or 30.” The current average is around 25 students.

Hinojosa also represented the Texas School Alliance, made up of the state’s largest urban districts, which supports the legislation. The Texas Association of School Boards and Texas Association of School Administrators also back the bill.

But the 5,800-member Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association has taken a stand against “dilution” of the class size law, which it called “one of the most significant educational reforms in Texas” that research has shown has had “a profound impact on student learning.”

Eissler, R-The Woodlands, said changing the class size limit and allowing salary reductions and furloughs provide new options for school districts to avoid layoffs. Under current law, firing teachers is the only alternative.

“This bill is all about protecting teacher jobs, and that’s what it will do,” he said, though he acknowledged that the changes “are not universally popular.”

Democratic lawmakers and teacher groups continue to argue that the Legislature should be looking for more revenue to protect schools from funding cuts, but Eissler said the state’s revenue shortfall precludes that. In addition, state GOP leaders have ruled out any tax increases this year.

“More money for schools is not an option right now,” he said. “We have to play the hand we’ve been dealt. These are hard choices, but they’re necessary.”

‘Relics of the past’

Eric Hartman of the Texas AFT contended that [Republican](#) legislators and school administrators are using the state’s budget dilemma to get rid of requirements they’ve been trying to wipe out for years, such as the class size limits in elementary grades.

“Things that were considered major reforms and drew national recognition for Texas, like the class size limits, are now being attacked as if they were the opposite of reform and relics of the past that no longer work,” he said, noting that test results in elementary grades show the state has gotten results from such changes.

Switching to a 22-pupil average was initially suggested by state Comptroller Susan Combs last December as a way for school districts to save money.

Combs said districts could save an estimated \$558 million a year by easing the long-standing class size standard, but her agency’s analysis also indicated that nearly 12,000 teaching jobs in elementary schools would be slashed under the proposal.

Former Lt. Gov. Bill Hobby, who led the Senate when it passed the 22-pupil class size limit and other reforms such as the no-pass, no-play rule, has been a vocal opponent of the change, contending it would “gut” a reform that has been shown in “study after study” to improve achievement.

“This change would inevitably lead to teacher layoffs, crammed classrooms, and, eventually, poorer student performance,” said Hobby, a [Democrat](#).

A school finance plan adopted by the Senate on Wednesday would cut funding for public schools by at least 6 percent next year, while a budget passed by the House this month would reduce funding more than 11 percent. School districts estimate that 65,000 employees would lose their jobs under the House version.

COMPARISON

Bills that would let school districts cut personnel expenses:

HOUSE

Class size: Would ease standard in elementary grades from limit of 22 per class to average of 22, allowing three more students per class in those grades.

Salaries: Districts could reduce teacher pay, and all current state minimum salaries for teachers would be eliminated.

Furloughs: Teachers and other employees could be furloughed up to 7 non-instructional days each school year.

Layoffs: School districts could lay off teachers where necessary and could not use a last-in, first-out policy that protects teachers with more seniority.

Contracts: Teacher contracts could be renewed the last day of school instead of 45 days before the end of the school year

SENATE

Class size: Would leave class size standards in place in kindergarten through fourth grade.

Salaries: Districts could reduce salaries for teachers and other employees, but the reductions — in combination with furloughs — could not be greater than funding cuts for the district over the next two years.

Furloughs: Furloughs of up to 6 non-instructional days for teachers and other employees would be allowed, but reductions would be limited to funding cuts for the school district set by the Legislature

Layoffs: Layoffs could only be implemented if a district can't offset funding cuts with salary decreases and furloughs. Any reduction-in-force could not use a last-in, first-out policy.

Contracts: Teacher contracts could be renewed 10 days before the end of school year, instead of 45.