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Business advocates seek changes in public schools

By JIMMY ISAAC

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State business and workforce advocates have toured Texas this fall, hoping to build a tide of support for changing what public school students are expected to learn and how schools are held accountable for teaching those lessons.

Local officials agree changes are needed and already have put their own plan into action.

Leaders of Texas Coalition for a Competitive Workforce met with officials in 16 cities, including Longview, to discuss public school reform, spokesman Andy Erben said in the past week.

The coalition brings together the Texas Association of Business, the Texas Public Policy Foundation, the Governor's Business Council, the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce and the Texas Institute of Education Reform, in which Erben serves as president.

Texas' accountability system leads teachers to focus on students who are on the bubble of passing the TAKS, Erben said. Students well above or below that bubble are neglected, and that could burst much of the state's future workforce.

"We don't have a comprehensive way to judge how students are learning," Erben said. "The TAKS test is a test of the lowest common denominator."

Erben told Longview News-Journal editors on Nov. 20 that more flexibility is needed in the state's "four-by-four" system, which requires students — beginning with this year's ninth-graders — to take four years of math, science, English/language arts and social studies in high school before graduation.

Once core subjects are mastered, students should be allowed to choose career/technology courses that teach core subject material in an applied way, he said. Career/technology courses should either contribute to college- or career-readiness by qualifying for college credit, leading directly to industry-recognized credentials or fulfilling a state licensing requirement, he said.

"We would like to see the state continue to fund these courses to the extent that they can," Erben said, "but we will also need partnerships not only between two-year and four-year colleges and public schools, but also industry."

Erben said the coalition's vision sounds similar to efforts of a local task force organized by Longview Mayor Jay Dean and chaired by Longview Independent School District Superintendent James Wilcox.

Since coming together in December, the task force of superintendents, business leaders and higher education officials has opened workforce training courses in welding, medical terminology, computer drafting and electric circuitry to students on several East Texas high school campuses — mostly through dual-credit options from Kilgore College and Texas State Technical College. The group also has lobbied state lawmakers for changes in the

four-by-four system to make way for more workforce training.

Julie Wiersig, workforce development director for the Longview Economic Development Corp., said the group's lobbying efforts might hit a higher level Dec. 9. That's when Texas Higher Education Commissioner Raymund Paredes meets with task force members in Longview to discuss East Texas' economic and educational needs.

Paredes and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board recently made recommendations regarding how grade-point averages are determined in public high schools. Paredes is against weighted averages on career and technical courses, Wiersig said.

"That scares all of us," Wiersig said, "because no kids would take (career and technical courses) if they didn't get weight for it academically."

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