

Lawmakers want to hold pre-K accountable

By Gary Scharrer

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Pre-K/early education enrollment for 2010-11

San Antonio ISD — 5,142

Northside ISD — 3,688

North East ISD — 1,433

Harlandale ISD — 1,256

Edgewood ISD — 1,213

Bexar County — 17,925

Statewide — 249,086

Source: Texas Education Agency

AUSTIN — Reacting to criticism over a plan to outsource pre-kindergarten accountability, a state Senate committee decided last week that it would be better for the [Texas Education Agency](#), rather than a commercial vendor, to ensure that 4-year-olds are ready for kindergarten.

The change of heart blunts strong feelings from some educators and pre-K advocates who howled over a plan to use a private company to collect pre-K data without knowing the methodology used to assess student and school performance.

Senate [Education Committee Chairwoman Florence Shapiro](#), R-Plano, instead decided to give this new task to the TEA, which brought relief to some school officials.

Texas spends about \$2.5 billion a year — mostly in federal funds — to prepare youngsters for kindergarten.

Lawmakers and education leaders said accountability is needed to ensure that tax dollars aren't wasted on pre-school programs. They want pre-K programs to prepare children for kindergarten and beyond and not serve as glorified baby-sitting services.

“School readiness is the cornerstone of success. We need to make that a transparent system that is also accountable,” Shapiro said before the [Senate Finance Committee](#) rolled the pre-K amendment into a school finance bill, which likely will go to the full Senate this week.

Her original bill would have steered accountability for all pre-K classrooms in the state to the Children's [Learning Institute](#) at the [University of Texas Health Science Center-Houston](#), which uses [OZ Systems](#) to collect data as part of its certification process.

The debate last week was lively.

Critics protested that it could force some school districts with established pre-K programs to abandon them. Instead, they would be pressured into the Children's Learning Institute's uniform program, which relies on an assortment of commercial vendors, including OZ Systems.

School districts do not know the methodology used to determine certification because of an attorney general ruling that OZ Systems' information is proprietary.

And there were questions about conflicts of interest. OZ Systems' lobbyist, [Erin Jones](#), is married to Deputy Texas Education Commissioner [Adams Jones](#). He filed a document with the agency's ethics officer Jan. 6, 2009, recusing himself from all matters involving early-childhood education.

“For my taste, it was too vendor-specific,” Sen. Leticia Van de Putte, D-San Antonio, said of the original plan.

But she wonders if the TEA can handle the pre-K accountability, considering big budget cuts at the agency and a dubious record “of monitoring the programs we already have.”

The pre-K community often fights between those pushing for expansion and others focused on higher quality.

“I think we can do both,” Van de Putte said.

The state offers pre-K instruction for low-income children. Van de Putte noted “irrefutable data” showing benefits for low income-youngsters who attend a high-quality pre-K program.

Eventually, pre-K programs will become universal, and middle-class family participation will result, she said, “in the quality piece taking care of itself.”

TEA Commissioner Robert Scott said the purpose of accountability is to ensure that pre-K children are ready for school when they reach kindergarten.

“We’re trying to make sure kids can read. We’d like them to know their letters and numbers and colors and shapes and how to write their own names,” Scott said. “That’s the goal.”

Shapiro’s amendment would require school districts to pay \$64 to help finance the pre-K accountability system but allow those with strong pre-K programs to apply for a waiver from the education commissioner.

Some educators consider the \$64-per-child cost an unfunded mandate. But that cost is less than 2 percent of what schools get per child, Texas Association of Business executive director Bill Hammond said.

“I’d take that deal any day of the week if I were a school district and not be over here complaining about it,” he said.

Texas must hold pre-K programs accountable, he said, because the state is spending \$250 million a year on children who must repeat the first grade “because they didn’t (reach) kindergarten ready to go.”

Keeping the school accountability system with the TEA makes sense because the agency handles accountability for all other grades, said Susan Kellner, a board member of the Spring Branch Independent School District.

“It definitely will help with the transparency. I always believed that it should be under the agency. School districts don’t need to be confused by who they report to,” she said.

Read more: <http://www.mysanantonio.com/default/article/Lawmakers-want-to-hold-pre-K-accountable-1350091.php#ixzz1KjUOFagf>