

374 districts now subject to Texas' 'Robin Hood'

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AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — Texas has added 23 school districts to a now-record list of those required to give some of what they raise in local tax revenue to the state for distribution to poorer schools.

As a result, the number of districts considered property-wealthy has increased to 374. The funding scheme is the centerpiece of Texas' "Robin Hood" school finance system which began in 1993 with just 35 districts statewide considered wealthy enough to share portions of their tax revenues.

In less than 20 years, the number has increased more than 10-fold and now represents more than a third of the state's 1,000-plus total school districts. Property-wealthy districts give back to the state more than a combined \$1 billion annually.

Debbie Ratcliffe, a spokesman for the Texas Education Agency, said that while some districts have increased property-tax rates or seen their tax bases grow due to population booms, a key reason the list of property-wealth districts keeps growing has been increasing property wealth in certain parts of Texas.

Some of it has been fueled by increased natural gas exploration or a rise in commercial property development, she said.

The Texas School Coalition represents dozens of property-wealthy districts and is one of the plaintiffs that have sued Texas over the way it funds public schools.

Many districts in wealthy areas say they are uniquely punished since they can put property-tax increases to their local tax base, but voters are often wary of approving them since they know much of the money raised may be given back to the state under "Robin Hood" rules.

Legal fights over school finance have been exceedingly common since the 1970s in Texas. But the state Legislature cut \$5.4 billion from the school finance formula and public education grant

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programs in 2011, prompting the latest round of lawsuits charging that the system is inefficient and inequitable.

The suits have been consolidated into a single case that is set to go to trial Oct. 22 in Austin.