

Fixing Texas school finance may mean big price tag

Written by Administrator

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AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — Before declaring Texas' public school finance system unconstitutional, state District Judge John Dietz offered a hypothetical.

He said a vast majority of Texans want the state's students to have an education system challenging enough to prepare them for the high-tech jobs of tomorrow. But, he said, if those same Texans were told doing so would cost an additional \$2,000 per student — or between \$10 and \$11 billion extra in every two-year budget — that support would quickly evaporate.

"Now what I begin to hear from my vast majority is, 'you can't solve the problems of education by throwing money at it,'" Dietz said.

He ruled in favor of more than 600 school districts statewide that sued in response to \$5.4 billion in cuts to public education the state Legislature approved in 2011. The figure Dietz offered could mean Texas will have to find additional funding to cover more than double the cost of the cuts — and that was simply a hypothetical. The actual number may be even larger.

The case before Dietz was the sixth of its kind in Texas since 1984 and in the past, courts have sometimes ordered the state to spend a specific amount per pupil to meet its constitutional obligations. Dietz offered no such figure. Instead, he simply ruled that the way Texas funds its schools violates the state constitution because the Legislature has raised academic standards while simultaneously cutting education funding, and hasn't ensured that that funding is equally distributed to school districts in wealthy and poorer parts of the state.

Still, if his decision holds, Texas may have to find many billions of extra dollars for its schools.

"We would have to modernize our tax system," said Scott McCown, executive director of the progressive think tank the Center for Public Policy Priorities. He said finding even the additional revenue Dietz suggested would mean applying the state sales tax to services and collecting more business taxes.

Indeed, \$10 billion is more than the state has recently collected annually from its entire business tax. But former Democratic state Rep. Scott Hochberg, a school finance expert, said such a tally still might now require drastic overhauls: "the Legislature's used to big numbers."