

Unfunded mandates reduce efficiency; Local control improves effectiveness

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The practice of unfunded school mandates is, unfortunately, a common one in Texas public education and our elected officials seem to have no problem in continuing this trend. It seems they rarely consider what actions or resources will be required to implement the laws they enact. It is obvious to think of costs of equipment and materials, but other costs are necessary for any new initiative, requirements or tasks that are mandated by law. Consideration has to be given to the **human costs**—it takes personnel to accomplish the work. Also, it costs **time** from other duties to perform a new task; therefore, other responsibilities are squeezed out or reduced resulting in less effective results. Productivity is frequently compromised when a new duty is assumed. Unfunded mandates are not simply the obvious costs but often require retraining and restructuring of current processes.

Most of the time, the new requirements of a law have some beneficial value, but there is no system for determining the value or priority of the new task compared to the current work. A new mandate may result in a more important responsibility being eliminated or reduced. The long list of unfunded mandates is not listed in priority order, which would give indication of which mandates are more important than others. Consequently, it is difficult to determine the return on investment of new requirements, since the costs may far outweigh the benefits.

While I acknowledge that some laws or mandates are necessary and worthwhile, I am opposed to forcing them on school districts during a state of economic crisis. Funding public education is the most costly, arguably the most important, part of state government but tacking on unfunded mandates to add to the burden of school districts during a time of economic duress is difficult to comprehend. This is the time to reduce the requirements that school districts have been fulfilling. It is a simple business concept—when the funds are not available, the service level is reduced. Therefore, we must carefully evaluate HB 400 in its final form to determine if, in fact, mandates are reduced or if some are eliminated and others substituted in their place.

Often the discussion of unfunded mandates ends in a demand for more local control. The reality is that these are two threads of a debate that the Legislature has been having—efficiency and effectiveness. The concern over unfunded mandates is a focus on efficient use of resources. Every unfunded mandate requires that the district pull valuable resources from somewhere else to fulfill these requirements deemed important by the state. On the other hand, the local control concept is based on how each district can be more effective. Every district is different with its own circumstances, issues, and values. Our nation was built on the value of the local citizenry making decisions for the local community. In its infancy, the United States of America rejected the mandates of the national government in order that individuals and communities could make better decisions for themselves. This value was recognized and the pioneers of our nation fought a revolution on the belief that local decision-making resulted in better outcomes. In Texas, the early Legislature organized our public education system as independent school districts governed by a locally elected board of trustees.

Our legislators should resist making blanket laws in a one-size-fits-all mentality and take a lesson from our early history—better outcomes and impact result when local communities govern themselves. Local school district trustees are elected to work as a Board to adopt any new requirements, taking into account each school district's budgetary constraints and community values.

As our current Texas Legislature seeks to improve efficiency and effectiveness, it can do so by reversing many mandates from the state-funded and unfunded--to improve efficiency, and allow local Boards of Trustees to govern the public schools in their communities to improve effectiveness.