

(School Start Date Poll Results Highlighted, Near Bottom of Article)

Texans back current school finance plan, poll shows

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AUSTIN -- The state's often-maligned school-finance system, which has been nicknamed the Robin Hood plan, enjoys more support among Texans than many of the political leaders who for years have vowed to end it, a new poll shows.

The Scripps Howard Texas Poll of 1,000 residents found that nearly six in 10 support the funding plan, which requires the state's wealthiest school districts to share the property tax revenues with poorer ones to ensure equitable funding.

By contrast, Gov. Rick Perry, who has called three unsuccessful special legislative sessions urging lawmakers to scrap the plan, enjoys the support of only about four in 10 Texans, the poll shows.

"I think what we found out during the special sessions on school finance was that [top elected officials] were trying to lead the folks to a place they did not want to go," said Harvey Kronberg, the political analyst who publishes the online *Quorum Report*.

Perry's spokesman Robert Black said that despite what the poll shows, the governor believes that the "Robin Hood school finance system is broken and it needs to be fixed."

The Texas Poll is conducted for several media outlets in the state including the *Star-Telegram*. Respondents were contacted by phone at random during 11 days ending Sept. 2. The poll has a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.

Support for the Robin Hood school-finance system has stayed consistent in recent months, the poll found. The current survey shows that 57 percent agree with the plan and 38 percent disagree. A similar Texas Poll in May showed that 60 percent agreed with the system and 35 percent disagreed.

But even though most respondents said they support the Robin Hood plan, even more -- 65 percent -- say they pay too much in property taxes.

And despite the promises made by Perry and other top statewide officials that they would lower property taxes as they overhauled the school-finance system, few people believed them, the poll shows.

Just over six in 10 said they would expect to pay more in overall taxes if lawmakers eventually pass a new school-finance plan. Only one in 10 said they would expect to pay less in taxes.

The poll shows that Texans are almost equally divided over whether a state income tax should be levied to pay for public schools.

Forty-five percent said they would support an income tax if it reduced property taxes and the revenue funded public schools. Forty-seven percent said that they oppose an income tax.

State Sen. Eliot Shapleigh, an El Paso Democrat who argues that an income tax would be the fairest way to collect money for the state, said such a tax might not be as unpopular as many politicians seem to believe.

"If people knew that school property taxes go down 90 percent, I expect that the 45 percent vote goes to 65," Shapleigh said. "If they knew both the income and property tax rates are then capped, then the vote goes higher."

Nearly two-thirds of the poll's respondents said they supported moving the school start date to after Labor Day.

If there was political blame to be assigned for the failure of the special sessions to find a new way to pay for schools, it was scattered.

The Legislature was blamed by 25 percent while 14 percent blamed Perry. The top two legislative leaders -- House Speaker Tom Craddick and Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst -- were blamed by only 3 percent and 1 percent, respectively.

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