

# Legislators bet that school funding isn't voters' top concern

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Nearly every Republican in the Texas House placed a bet Sunday night that the residents of their district will support taking billions of dollars out of the public school system.

In voting for the House's proposed state budget, 98 of the chamber's 101 Republicans supported a plan giving school districts about \$7.8 billion less than the state owes them under current law. That's about \$870 less per student for schools to spend each year.

The budget cuts funding for pre-kindergarten, school technology, teacher incentive pay and programs that aim to stoke student interest in math and science. Most significantly, it is the driving force behind the elimination of thousands of jobs in school districts across the state.

Lawmakers made deep cuts across state government because the state faces a huge budget shortfall caused by a variety of factors, some of them outside state lawmakers' control and some a result of their decisions. The House's decision to leave more than \$6 billion sitting in the state's rainy day fund added to the severity of the cuts.

That a majority of lawmakers supported such reductions shows that they think voters, first and foremost, want them to cut spending and fight tax increases.

It's the logical conclusion to draw from the 2010 elections. Republicans in Texas and across the country didn't beat Democrats because they promised to do the most for public education. The national Republican wave that swept into Texas was driven by voter anxiety about high unemployment and the Obama administration's spending habits.

It's also important to remember that most legislators, because districts aren't usually meant to be competitive between the parties, only have to worry about winning their primaries. A reasonable legislator could easily conclude that Republican primary voters will applaud a budget that cuts overall spending by \$23 billion.

But electorates can change, and teachers and parents who don't usually vote in the Republican primary could decide that 2012 is the time to get engaged. Furthermore, a number of new Republican legislators represent districts that were held by Democrats just five months ago. Some in the GOP will be able to draw districts that protect them from Democratic challengers next year, but others won't be able to, and they will face general-election opponents who will loudly proclaim that schools got shortchanged.

By the time this legislative session concludes at the end of May, schools will likely get more state funding than the House proposes because senators — including some Republicans — won't support cuts as severe as those made by the House. Any extra money the Senate adds will matter a great deal to schools.

But it may not matter at all politically. House members have now gone on record either supporting or opposing what would be the first reduction in funding for the Foundation School Program, the main source of state money for education, since the program was created in 1949. Some will seek to justify their vote as necessary to keep the budget process moving so that the Senate could weigh in with a more generous plan. They may have a point, but the campaign trail has little use for legislative nuance.

The legislators have made their bets.

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