

# Texas House adds extra \$1B to schools in budget

**PAUL J. WEBER, Associated Press**  
AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — Public schools gutted of \$5.4 billion two years ago would recapture about half of that lost funding under spending plans offered by the Texas House on Thursday, and top Republicans have not ruled out restoring even more before Gov. Rick Perry signs a new state budget.

Teachers groups that have marched on the Capitol, demanding the Legislature reverse historic classroom cuts that resulted in thousands of layoffs, applauded another \$1 billion for schools in a 2014-15 state budget plan approved by the House Appropriations Committee.

School districts are hopeful lawmakers can cough up even more money following the unexpected moves by the House, which came after education emerged as the dominant issue of the 140-day session.

Republican Rep. Jim Pitts, the chief budget-writer in the House, didn't dampen that optimism.

"It's not over 'til it's over," Pitts said.

Yet there are realities. Although the extra \$1 billion approved Thursday is on top of \$1.5 billion the House and Senate previously committed toward undoing the 2011 cuts, Pitts cautioned that it was unlikely that all funding slashed two years ago would be restored in the final two months of the session.

Democrats and teachers say the money is there — notably in the projected \$12 billion socked away in the state's Rainy Day Fund. But Perry and Republicans who control the Legislature are opposed to tapping that piggybank for anything other than one-time expenses, and school funding is a recurring tab.

The Senate did not include

the extra \$1 billion in the budget plan it overwhelmingly passed earlier this week.

"The more I talk to the House members, it is the priority of the Texas House, both Republicans and Democrats, to restore public education," Pitts said. "We challenge the Senate to have that same priority."

Pitts also revealed Thursday that he wants to slip schools another \$500 million immediately with a supplemental spending bill. That would let the House boast of putting a total of \$3 billion extra toward education, though the extra money in the supplemental bill wouldn't repeat in the 2014-15 budget.

"We like what Chairman Pitts is talking about. It's certainly a step in the right di-

rection," said Clay Robinson, spokesman for the Texas State Teacher Association.

The House budget spends a total of \$93.5 billion in general revenue, which comes largely from sales taxes collections and is the pot of money that lawmakers wield most control over how to spend. The Senate budget passed Wednesday spends about \$600 million more than the House version.

Included in the House budget is \$10.9 million for the Texas Department of Public Safety to begin whitening a backlog of sexual assault kit analyses in criminal investigations. Pitts called the spending the "first significant funding of this program by the state."

Although the House budget unanimously passed

through committee, the hearing was not without tense exchanges over how the state is spending money.

Democratic Rep. Sylvester Turner, vice chairman of the committee, asked colleagues why the unpaid \$161 million tab for fighting wildfires in 2011 would not come out of the Rainy Day Fund when it was clearly a one-time expense.

Turner argued the money could otherwise go toward putting even more money to education. But using the Rainy Day Fund is a tough thing to get through the legislature, and Democratic Rep. Donna Howard said areas hard-hit by the wildfires need money by April.

"I think I know how to add, and I think I know how to read and I think I under-

stand what the rules are," Turner said. "But what is the Rainy Day Fund for? Are we just building a reserve just to say we have a nice reserve?"

Are we never going to touch it?"

Pitts expects the full House to take up the budget in early April.

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