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## Why it's 'so doggone hard' to fix school finance, and what DFW businesses are doing to help

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When Fidelity Investments was searching for the first place to set up a base outside of its headquarters in Boston, the financial services giant chose the Dallas-Fort Worth area because the company wanted a deep, well-educated workforce.

And when Fidelity brings employees or job candidates from other parts of the country to their picturesque campus in Westlake, the first question they typically ask is, "What are the schools like?" Scott Orr, the company's vice president of government relations and public affairs, said at a meeting of business leaders in Dallas on Wednesday.

Quality schools are of utmost importance to the business community and to the DFW region's ability to compete for top talent and corporate headquarters and expansions, Orr said at the meeting at the Dallas Regional Chamber's headquarters.

The Westlake campus has grown to 5,000 workers since its opening in 2001 and is now the biggest of Fidelity's 10 regional operations.

"It's important that the schools from (kindergarten) through 12th (grade) and leading to higher education are well financed, well structured, and there's an environment where kids are being taught in a good way," Orr said. "We have some issues, and it's important that the business community is at the table."

About half of the state budget goes to fund public schools, said Jimmie Don Aycock, former chairman of the Public Education Committee of the Texas House of Representatives. Yet Texas school districts have repeatedly sued the state over the past few decades, arguing it hasn't provided enough money to ensure public school students get an adequate education, as required by the state constitution.

During the 2017 session, lawmakers made no changes to the way the state allocates money to public schools, but created a commission to study the matter further.

"Why is it so doggone hard to fix school finance?" Aycock asked. "What makes it so difficult?"

The answer, he said, starts with the constitution, which requires legislators to provide a "free and efficient" system of public schooling and to do so without a statewide property tax. The courts have interpreted



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It's critical for the business community to get more involved in education, especially in public school funding, advocates said.

“efficient” to involve the concept of the equalization of resources among school children throughout the state, Aycock said.

“Then it gets even more complicated,” he said. “If basically everybody in the state is paying one property tax, then you’ve got a de facto state property tax, which is prohibited in the constitution.”

Aycock turned to demographics.

Texas is adding enough students to fill Fort Worth ISD every year, Aycock said. Sixty percent of those students are poor, 52 percent are Hispanic and 20 percent don’t speak English.

“This is a different world of education than most of us grew up in,” he said.

Missy Bender, president of the Plano ISD Board of Trustees, said it’s critical that the business community get more involved during the upcoming legislative session..

“There is a big case as to why we need to solve school finance,” she said, “and we need to do it in 2019.”

**Bill Hethcock**

Staff Writer

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