Statement on Senate passage of HB 3, school finance and education

Austin - The following statement was released by State Sen. José Rodríguez:

HB 3 is a significant achievement for the Texas Legislature, and I commend Chairman Taylor for his hard work, dedication, and willingness to work with every member of the Senate on this bill. While I voted today in favor of HB 3, I did so with concerns.

It has many important features; most importantly, increasing the basic allotment. This represents hundreds of dollars in new money per student, which is sorely needed. It provides an allotment for all-day pre-K. It increases compensatory education weights, and adds weights in a new category, dual language, in which El Paso schools have been statewide leaders. It adds funding for teacher pay raises. And it will provide some measure of property tax relief.

This bill is an important step for the Texas Legislature. It is the first time in more than a generation that this body has substantively addressed school finance without a court so ordering, and we are doing so at a time when the state budget is healthy.

These are all positives, and frame the discussion.

With that, however, it has been concerning that the Senate has focused on property taxes first, and education second.

Further, this bill does not add as much as the House did for the basic allotment - at $5,880, it is $150 less per student than the House's $6,030 - and it comes with strings attached. Those include teacher merit pay, in part based on a state test, and additional standardized student assessments. The bill also concentrates even more authority with the
Commissioner of the Texas Education Agency, something that will need to be monitored carefully.

Teacher merit pay is a flawed idea. It failed to live up to expectations when they tried it in the mid-1980s in Texas, and has come up periodically since then. It has been criticized for hurting the collaborative approach necessary for a strong campus team, while not truly measuring teacher effectiveness. In its current form, it is being modeled after Dallas ISD’s program, which has received mixed reviews. The Superintendent gave a strong presentation, as did a teacher invited to discuss how it worked for him. However, we also heard from three other teachers, who raised significant questions about whether it is working as advertised. Even the Superintendent raised the concern that every community is different, and the criteria for evaluating teachers should be locally driven, not a one-size-fits-all state design. This bill fails to heed that concern.

We are moving away from standardized tests for many reasons. Whether it is the high-stakes application that often leads to unintended negative consequences, or recent reporting indicating flaws in the grade-level appropriateness of the current tests, it does not make sense to add more tests at this point.

The House version of HB 3 is better on these points. It also is better on spreading the money through the system, so not only do our teachers and librarians get raises, but other essential support staff do as well.

However, in both versions of HB 3, funding for English Learners remains woefully inadequate. Today, about 20 percent of the student population -- over one million students -- are English Learners. About 25 other states have weights for English Learners; Texas is dead last in its investment. Our neighbors Louisiana, New Mexico, and Oklahoma have weights of 22, 50, and 25 percent, respectively. When the current 0.1 weight was put in place in 1984, experts actually recommended a 0.4 weight. Today, experts indicated that 0.5 is what it costs to educate English Learners in Texas. By increasing the weight for students in dual language programs, only 20 percent of English Learners will benefit, leaving the remaining 80 percent without. If we truly believe it is important for students to achieve biliteracy, we would be increasing the weights for all English Learners.

We are rarely, if ever, given perfect choices in the legislative process. That is especially so with this Texas Legislature when it comes to investments in the social infrastructure that is critical for our future - education.

In 2011, I voted "no" on a budget that cut $5.4 billion from education, the only budget I have voted against in five sessions. In subsequent budgets, we have done better for education, but instead of the full investment we need, the Legislature has chosen to spend our available funds on other priorities like water and transportation.

Now, we are finally prepared to invest in education. We cannot miss this opportunity, and it should be looked at as a beginning, not an end. I am hopeful that a bill that emerges from conference will address the deficiencies noted above, and that future legislatures will build upon what works in this bill and improve what does not. For these reasons, I voted for the Senate substitute for HB 3.
José Rodríguez represents Texas Senate District 29, which includes the counties of El Paso, Hudspeth, Culberson, Jeff Davis, and Presidio. He represents both urban and rural constituencies, and more than 350 miles of the Texas-Mexico border. Senator Rodríguez currently serves as the Chairman of the Senate Democratic Caucus, and is a member of the Senate Committees on Agriculture (Vice Chair); Natural Resources and Economic Development; Transportation; and Water & Rural Affairs.