

Viewpoints

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Education: state of crisis

By RICHARD COLLINS

THE public education system in Texas is undeniably in a state of crisis. In Texas today, there are as many as 3.5 million functionally illiterate adults, according to a report in *The Dallas Morning News*.

The deterioration of education is not an overnight phenomenon. There has been a steady decline in student performance over the past several years — average achievement scores have continuously declined and are at the lowest point since 1957.



Why is it that only now has public and media attention been focused on the decline of public education?

In Texas, the answer is simple — economics.

During the last election, Mark White, in an apparent exchange for the teachers' union support, promised to push for a substantial across-the-board pay increase for teachers without regard to merit.

AFTER THE ELECTION, as expected, White asked for a 24 percent across-the-board pay hike for teachers, to be paid for by higher taxes.

But this is not the answer. The answer is better teachers. To recruit better teachers we must pay them more. However, we should not reward mediocre teachers, which is the governor's proposal. Of course, many of our teachers deserve more money, but many do not.

The Texas Foundation for Conservative Studies, a private research and education organization, recently commissioned a statewide survey.

An overwhelming majority of Texans — 83 percent — want more money spent on education, and 80 percent think more money should be spent on teachers' salaries. By the same large majority — 80 percent — they also approve of merit pay for teachers.

Our survey also showed that 62 percent of Texans are opposed to raising taxes simply to give teachers an

across-the-board pay increase.

Texans for Conservative Government, legislative lobbying and advocacy arm of the foundation, has published a plan to restore excellence in Texas' public schools. We strongly support both merit pay and a "master teacher" plan. As in any profession, criteria for excellence in teaching must be established and those who excel must be rewarded.

In our plan, local school districts would determine who would receive merit pay bonuses. The criteria could include: peer review, outstanding attendance, professional growth, campus assignments in areas of usually low student performance, and most importantly, student performance.

The second phase would be the establishment of a "Master Teacher" program. This program would have certain levels of certification. Bonus pay would be awarded to teachers through peer review, graduate degrees and other accomplishments.

THE HIGHEST LEVEL of certification a teacher could reach is that of "Master Teacher," comparable to a full professor at college level.

The emphasis must be on rewarding excellence, not mediocrity. Earlier this week, Gov. White presented a new education plan, including a 12 percent pay hike for teachers next year — without any merit provisions. We should remember that in Houston, 62 percent of the teachers failed a simple college sophomore reading test. It is hard to justify giving these teachers a 12 percent across-the-board increase — on top of the 9 percent awarded this year, that makes 21 percent.

Either in a special session in 1984 or during the regular term in 1985, the Texas Legislature will deliberate the question of a teacher pay raise and a tax increase to pay for it. In the meantime, we must all recognize that Texas, as well as the rest of the nation, needs to keep pace with the world in an increasingly technological age. Good teachers and a good education available to all children are not luxuries — they are necessities.

Richard Collins is president of Texas Foundation for Conservative Studies.