

AUSTIN (AP) — The Senate Education Committee approved a bill Monday to shift hundreds of millions of dollars in local prop-

Senate committee OKs school finance phase-in

erty tax revenue from rich to poor school districts, but agreed to phase in the change over four years.

Sen. Carl Parker, committee chairman and sponsor of the school finance reform bill, said

the transition period would "sugarcoat the pill" for school districts with high property wealth.

"In fairness to the wealthy districts, we didn't give them any reason to believe for many years that that (revenue) wouldn't continue forever," said Parker, D-Port Arthur. "The tragedy of it is we're going to disrupt some really great programs."

The bill would redistribute an estimated \$480 million in local tax money when fully implemented, according to a Texas Education Agency analysis. About one-quarter of the money would be shifted each year under the phase-in plan.

Every school district would be required to tax at the same minimum rate, and they could tax

more to pay for facilities or to raise extra money for programs. No school district could earn more than another at a given local property tax rate.

The state faces an April 1 Texas Supreme Court deadline to make equitable funding available to poor school districts or face an order to cut off state public education funds. The system declared unconstitutional by the court relies on state aid, local property taxes and some federal money.

Under Parker's bill, local property tax money would be redistributed among districts within 20 regions. If a constitutional amendment is approved, the money could be redistributed among school districts statewide.

The bill, approved 9-2 by the committee, might be taken up Tuesday or Wednesday by the full Senate, Parker said. The proposed constitutional amendment is on Tuesday's Senate schedule.

A constitutional amendment requires approval by two-thirds of lawmakers before being placed before voters.

Sens. Teel Bivins, R-Amarillo, and Greg Taylor Krier, R-San Antonio, voted against the bill in committee.

Bivins said he preferred another plan, which has support from a wide range of school districts, that would continue to allow some districts to raise more money than others.

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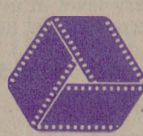
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