

# Lasting impact of '84 special session still unchallenged

State lawmakers on Wednesday started a special session to keep some agencies alive — probably no cliffhanger. But special sessions occasionally mean much more.

Twenty-five summers ago, Texans beheld a session with life-changing significance.

By that July 4, lawmakers had approved House Bill 72, changing how Texas schools operate, along with tax increases to fund it.

Among the results: preschool for disadvantaged students, smaller elementary-school classes, mandatory standardized tests before graduation and "no-pass, no-play," meaning students must pass classes to participate in extracurricular activities.

Also, the school finance system began to seek equity among districts. And teachers got big pay raises that Gov. Mark White had failed to achieve in 1983.

Lt. Gov. Bill Hobby, House Speaker Gib Lewis and state Comptroller Bob Bullock served on a select committee that White had named after Lewis told him the Texas House wouldn't upgrade teacher pay until schools seemed on the upswing.

Lewis recalls telling White about his Fort Worth company: "I was not able to hire people who could read, that were literate enough that they could spell and compose a sentence."

Dallas computer tycoon Ross Perot chaired the touring panel; he implored legislators to embrace its recommendations and hired lobbyists to coax them.

Lawmakers complied — to the chagrin of some teacher groups upset enough at a one-time teacher literacy test to spurn White in the 1986 election.

Hobby recalled fielding a visit from education lobbyists: "They were just (complaining) about the greatest thing that ever happened to them. I told them to get ... out of my office and not come back."

White joined Hobby in walking the final plan from the Senate to the House, where members cheered.

"Seldom will you ever find a standing ovation for a tax increase," Hobby said.

I'd suggest no governor since has called such a meaningful session, though there might be opportunities ahead to act in realms where Texas lags and leaders get a firm bead on what to do.

Hobby said Democrats deserve credit for ponying up money for education while Republicans vote against such hikes.

Lobbyist Bill Hammond, a House member in '84, suggested Republicans deserve credit for championing school accountability.

"Quite an accomplishment," Hammond said of HB 72.

No one has organized an anniversary party.

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