

SUBJECT: Educational aides revised tuition exemption and certification eligibility

COMMITTEE: Higher Education — committee substitute recommended

VOTE: 8 ayes — Rangel, F. Brown, Farabee, J. Jones, Morrison, E. Reyna, Uher,
West

0 nays

1 absent — Goolsby

WITNESSES: For — Charles Scott Baker, Jennifer Caesar, Evelyn Gonzalez, Olga Ramirez; *Registered but did not testify*: Jack Campbell, Texas Association of Business and Chambers of Commerce; Ann Fickel, Texas Classroom Teachers Association; Eleanor Gonzalez, Victoria Federation of Teachers; Rene Lara, Texas Federation of Teachers; Teresa Enoch, Terrance Jackson, Cynthia Kennedy, Canetra S. Winn

Against — None

BACKGROUND: The 75th Legislature enacted HB 571 by Rangel, et al, which established the Educational Aide Tuition Exemption Program (Education Code, sec. 54.214). This program exempts eligible teacher aides from paying tuition and fees, other than classroom or laboratory fees, at public institutions of higher education in Texas.

To be eligible for the program, individuals must be residents of the state and be certified as educational aides by the State Board for Educator Certification (SBEC); demonstrate financial need; have at least two school years of experience as a certified educational aide working directly with students in a school district; be employed as a certified educational aide during the entire term or semester for which they receive the exemption; be enrolled in classes necessary for certification as teachers at the institution of higher education granting the exemption; and maintain an acceptable grade point average. According to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), there are currently 1,700 certified teacher aides receiving the exemption.

Education Code, sec.54.213 states that institutions of higher education are not required to fund exemptions beyond those funded through appropriations specifically designated for the program.

DIGEST:

CSHB 1130 would amend eligibility requirements for the Educational Aide Tuition Exemption Program (Education Code, sec. 54.214). CSHB 1130 would require one year of teacher aide work experience rather than two. It would eliminate the requirement that an applicant be currently employed as an aide, and instead would require that the applicant currently be employed as a “school employee serving in any capacity,” so long as one of the preceding five years was spent working as an educational aide. Finally, CSHB 1130 would eliminate financial need requirements and allow otherwise eligible teacher aides to qualify regardless of their income.

CSHB 1130 also would amend Education Code, sec. 21.050(c) to exempt qualified aides from the current requirement that they participate in field experience or a student teaching internship to receive a teaching certificate.

Finally, CSHB 1130 would add planning obligations for local school districts and the governing boards of institutions of higher education that offer courses required for teacher certification. School boards would be required to establish local plans to encourage the hiring of educational aides who are willing to attend an institution of higher education to become certified teachers. As part of the plan, CSHB 1130 would require local school districts to consider providing financial incentives to currently employed aides who enroll in courses required for teacher certification. CSHB 1130 also would require governing boards of institutions of higher education to consult with local school districts in developing plans to make teacher certification courses more accessible to educational aides. Finally, CSHB 1130 would require both the school district’s and the governing board’s plans to be reviewed and re-adopted, with or without revisions, every two years.

CSHB 1130 would take effect on September 1, 2001. The changes made by CSHB 1130 to Education Code, sec. 54.214(c) and 21.050(c) would take effect beginning with the 2001 fall semester. School boards and governing boards of higher education institutions would be required to establish plans no later than January 1, 2002.

SUPPORTERS
SAY:

CSHB 1130 would help Texas redress an increasingly serious shortage of certified teachers due to rising student enrollment, rapid turnover, and the growing number of teachers reaching retirement age. Providing an incentive to increase the flow of certified teachers into Texas public schools is essential to remedy this shortage and ensure a high quality of education for our students.

The pool of individuals most qualified and available to meet this need includes teacher aides, many of whom want to become certified teachers and have the classroom experience essential to make them good teachers. Most teacher aides, however, earn low salaries and have trouble paying tuition for college programs that lead to a teaching certificate. Easing restrictions on eligibility for tuition assistance would allow more teacher aides to meet their career goals while safeguarding their valuable expertise in education.

A teacher aide with a bachelors degree and one year of classroom experience would be more than qualified to earn a teaching certificate and lead a classroom. Removing the additional student teaching internship requirements for experienced teacher aides would save them money and allow them to begin teaching in understaffed schools as quickly as possible.

CSHB 1130 would not place an undue financial burden on public higher education institutions. Because institutions are not required to fund exemptions beyond those funded through program appropriations, they would lose no revenue, and would benefit from attracting teacher aides to their teacher certification programs. Furthermore, although the THECB estimates that the number of participants in the program would double from 1,700 to 3,400 under the new guidelines, the costs associated with the increase have already been provided for in the filed version of the general appropriations bill.

Although CSHB 1130 would impose some planning obligations on local school boards and governing boards of certain public higher education institutions, it would allow them total discretion as to the specifics of their plans. In this regard, they would be able to use existing plans or could borrow liberally from plans developed by other school boards or institutions. In addition, CSHB 1130 would not require school boards to provide financial incentives to eligible educational aides, but rather would require them only

to “consider” providing such incentives. CSHB 1130 would impose no special penalties for failure to comply with any of these provisions. Finally, the benefits to the state in terms of recruitment and retention of qualified teachers far outweigh any costs that this program might incur.

OPPONENTS
SAY:

CSHB 1130 would result in less-qualified and less-experienced teachers by eliminating eligibility requirements that teacher aides be certified by SBEC, that they have two school years of experience as a teacher aide working directly with students, and that they currently work directly with students in a school district.

CSHB 1130 is based upon a misconception that all teacher aides have the classroom experience and background necessary to make them good teachers. Some teacher aides have no experience with classroom instruction and perform exclusively clerical tasks. In addition, some teacher aides are attracted to the profession not for the love of teaching but by the flexible hours and implicit job security.

The problem of ensuring that the best-qualified aides are the ones who earn their teaching certificates would be compounded by exempting them from the field-based training requirement for their teaching certificate. This would deprive teacher aides and students of the invaluable benefits of field-based teaching experience.

CSHB 1130 also would impose burdensome administrative obligations on local school boards and governing boards of public higher education institutions. Requiring these entities to develop plans, then review and readopt the plans every two years, would be costly and would detract from their primary focus.

Furthermore, providing increased accessibility to courses required for teacher certification would result not only in higher administrative costs for institutions of higher education, but also increased faculty costs.

The requirement that school boards consider providing financial incentives to educational aides who enroll in courses required for teacher certification would result in increased cost to the school districts. Such financial incentives would be better funded by the state either through a state-

administered grant program directly to individual recipients or to public higher-education institutions that have designed programs to address the specific needs of these students.

The requirement that school boards develop a local plan would be redundant, because if recruitment of teacher aides is a local priority, it will most likely already be a feature of the school district's annually established goals and objectives and need not be regulated by the state and articulated separately in this type of a local plan.

OTHER
OPPONENTS
SAY:

Eliminating the financial need requirement for eligibility would place an undue fiscal burden on the state and would result in limited state dollars being spent on those who can afford to pay their own tuition.

A proliferation of bills this session would exempt certain groups either wholly or in part from tuition requirements. These proposals would result in a loss of operating revenue to institutions of higher education that eventually would have to be made up by the state or by other students. This piecemeal approach could endanger the stability of our tuition system. The Legislature must exercise prudence and consistency in granting exemptions. Such caution is necessary to hold down the financial pressure on our already-strapped institutions of higher education and to maintain the quality of the education provided to students in Texas.

NOTES:

The fiscal note estimates that school districts may realize additional costs to provide financial incentives to educational aides. A rider was included in the filed version of the general appropriations bill to increase the annual transfer from the Texas Education Agency to the THECB Educational Aide Program from \$1 million to \$2 million.

The committee substitute made a non-substantive change to correct a drafting error.

Rep. Uher plans to offer a floor amendment to address the requirement in CSHB 1130 that school boards consider providing financial incentives to these educational aides.