

**SUBJECT:** Studying the need for a dental school at Texas Tech at El Paso

**COMMITTEE:** Higher Education — favorable, without amendment

**VOTE:** 7 ayes — Branch, Alonzo, Brown, D. Howard, Johnson, Lewis, Patrick  
0 nays  
2 absent — Castro, Bonnen

**SENATE VOTE:** On final passage, March 31 — 31-0

**WITNESSES:** No public hearing

**DIGEST:** SB 1020 would require the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board to conduct a study to examine the need for and feasibility of establishing a dental school at the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center at El Paso. The bill would require the coordinating board to consult with the board of regents of the Texas Tech University System in conducting the study.

By November 1, 2012, the coordinating board would be required to report the results of the study to the governor, the lieutenant governor, the speaker, and the presiding officers of each legislative standing committee with primary jurisdiction over higher education.

The provisions of the bill would expire January 31, 2013.

The bill would take immediate effect if finally passed by a two-thirds record vote of the membership of each house. Otherwise, it would take effect September 1, 2011.

**SUPPORTERS SAY:** It is time to begin the process of officially determining if El Paso needs and can support a dental school at the health sciences center at Texas Tech in El Paso. SB 1020 would be the first step in the process. Since the construction of a new school is intertwined with state public policy, it is necessary for the coordinating board to evaluate the need for the school

before moving forward. The Legislature still would have the final say in whether or not to establish a dental school. According to the fiscal note, the coordinating board could conduct the study using existing resources.

Establishing a school of dentistry in El Paso that offered degrees in dental hygiene, dentistry, and advanced dentistry would increase access to dental care and improve health outcomes and quality of life for residents of West Texas and areas along the U.S.-Mexico border.

The Texas-Mexico border region has one of the highest rates of dental disparities in the nation. The border region has a severe shortage of both dentists and dental hygienists, and all of the border counties have been designated by the federal government as dental professional shortage areas. As a result, accessing dental health care can be difficult or even impossible for many individuals living in El Paso, other areas in West Texas, and along the border. El Paso County has 28 dentists per 100,000, while the state average is 45 per 100,000.

The lack of access to health care providers contributes to poor health outcomes for residents of those areas. The data clearly demonstrate that Texas' population is growing faster than almost any other state in the nation, and the number of health care providers is not keeping pace with the growth. In addition, the number of health care practitioners varies widely across the state. Border and rural areas face the greatest shortages in health care professionals. Research also shows that more dentists are employed in metropolitan counties than in nonmetropolitan counties, and the gap between metropolitan and nonmetropolitan counties has been widening over the last decade.

There are three schools of dentistry in the state – at the University of Texas at Houston, the University of Texas at San Antonio, and Texas A&M Baylor in Dallas. Notably, the last dental school opened in 1970, 41 years ago. Even if every dental school graduate in Texas practiced in one of the 32 border counties, Texas could not meet the existing shortage in the border region. Approximately 250 additional dentists would be necessary to alleviate the current shortage. New dentists will have to be imported from other states if Texas does not address this problem.

OPPONENTS  
SAY:

No apparent opposition.

NOTES:

The companion bill, HB 2090 by Marquez, was considered in a public hearing on April 6 by the House Higher Education Committee and left pending.