

- SUBJECT:** Allowing school districts to develop character education programs
- COMMITTEE:** Public Education — committee substitute recommended
- VOTE:** 6 ayes — Sadler, Grusendorf, Hardcastle, Oliveira, Olivo, Smith
0 nays
3 absent — Dutton, Dunnam, Hochberg
- WITNESSES:** For — Joe Ramos, Texas Association of School Boards; David Dewhurst, Texas General Land Office; Linda Holcombe, Texas Industrial Vocational Association; Dana B. Allamon; Martha Koch; Jo Anne Hughes; Susan Eaves, Texas Recreation and Park Society; Tricia Taylor; Matthew Kempen, Texas Future Farmers of America Association
Against — None
- BACKGROUND:** Education Code, sec. 28.002 establishes the required curriculum for public schools in Texas. Local school districts may use state curriculum frameworks and standards but also may adjust curricula to meet local district needs.
- DIGEST:** CSHB 946 would amend the Education Code by adding sec. 29.903 to allow public schools to provide character education programs. A character education program would have to emphasize positive character traits such as courage, honesty, integrity, courtesy, fairness, accountability, citizenship and respect for the law. CSHB 946 would require school districts that wished to develop character education programs to consult with parents of district students, educators, and community members. CSHB 946 would prohibit proselytizing or indoctrinating any specific religious or political beliefs.

CSHB 946 would require the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to maintain a list of character education programs implemented in the state and to designate annually schools that meet outlined criteria as Character Plus Schools. TEA also would be required to report any data gathered from local districts on the impact of character education programs on student discipline

and academic achievement. This and any other relevant data would be included in TEA's comprehensive biennial report to the Legislature, governor, lieutenant governor, and Legislative Budget Board.

CSHB 946 would permit TEA to receive money from the federal government and private sources to help school districts implement character education programs that meet the specified criteria.

CSHB 946 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, 2001. It would apply beginning with the 2001-2002 school year.

SUPPORTERS
SAY:

CSHB 946 is necessary because schools are an appropriate place to teach children character education and civic responsibility. This bill would recognize that parents have the primary responsibility for teaching values to their children while helping schools to reinforce those messages in the classroom. The bill would be permissive, not mandatory, for schools, but would establish clear standards for implementing a character education program.

Teaching positive character traits such as honesty, integrity, accountability, and self-control as an integral part of the standard curriculum could help reduce disciplinary problems and promote student achievement. Escalating violence in the public schools points to the need for character education. Providing a method for collecting outcomes data would allow the program to be evaluated periodically for success.

Because programs would be developed and run locally with guidance from parents, teachers, and community members, they would fit the specific needs of the community. This would help school districts to target programs toward specific problems that they see arising locally.

CSHB 946 would create an integrated program that would teach consistent values across all academic disciplines. Therefore, it would be effective way to help children incorporate positive character traits into all aspects of life.

OPPONENTS
SAY:

Public schools are an inappropriate place to teach character education. A family's personal values may differ from what the school would choose to teach. It should be the parents' prerogative to teach or not teach whatever values they see fit.

Some districts draw from neighborhoods that are far from homogeneous. A committee that did not fully represent the diversity of the district could develop programs that do not represent the wishes of parts of the community.

Even though CSHB 946 would not make character education mandatory, by establishing guidelines and giving special designations to schools that teach character education, it would encourage schools to pursue this type of education program at the cost of other more important subjects, such as reading, math, and science.

OTHER
OPPONENTS
SAY:

The recent school shootings around the nation create an urgent need for character training for young people. Character education should be mandatory rather than optional.

NOTES:

The committee substitute modified the original version of the bill by requiring school districts that implement character education programs to consult with educators and community leaders in addition to the parents of district students. It also added the requirement for TEA to designate schools that implement character education programs as Character Plus Schools. Additionally, the committee substitute would permit TEA to accept money from federal and private sources to use in the implementation of programs.

The substitute removed requirements that school districts be required to include character education in their alternative and juvenile justice alternative education programs. It also removed an authorization for school districts to recognize a character education program, class, teacher, or student with money or any other type of award.

Six House bills related to character education have been referred to the House Public Education Committee, and one Senate bill has been referred to the Senate Education Committee. HB 86 by P. King and HB 1668 by Miller would include business and religious organizations in the program development committee. HB 911 by Delisi would require a character

education program to contain at least one hour of instruction per week, and would provide a financial reward from the governor for excellence. HB 1960 by Shields would require performance indicators related to character education programs. HB 2952 by Giddings and SB 130 by Cain would make character education programs mandatory, would require that they emphasize the ideals of the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, and would require that they teach human rights issues. HB 3565 by Christian also would make character education programs mandatory and would allow school districts to apply to TEA for funding.