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Several Efforts Under Way to Measure Effect of Texas' Budget Cuts on Schools

By MORGAN SMITH

Since well before the 2011 legislative session began, one question has dominated conversations about the state budget cuts to public education: How will they affect public schools?

There are many answers.

In March, the Texas Education Agency will release the official numbers on school district employment for the 2011-12 school year, including job losses. The figures will be a reckoning in some ways — the first time the state will actually measure the effect of a historic reduction in financing. But several groups, including nonprofit organizations and professional associations, and at least one lawmaker, would like to have a better idea before then — to help shape their own policies and in some cases to be able to control how the discussion is framed.

The Texas American Federation of Teachers, the state branch of the national teachers association, recently released a survey that showed that budget cuts had resulted in widespread layoffs and low morale among public school employees. Linda Bridges, the branch's president, emphasized the strength of the study's findings, but because it was an online survey, she said, it was "unscientific" in nature.

The KDK-Harman Foundation, a private nonprofit, is working with Children at Risk, an education advocacy group in Houston, to conduct a comprehensive study on how schools are managing with less money. Jennifer Esterline, the foundation's executive director, said a lack of both quantitative and qualitative information on the effects of the cuts prompted the study, which was expected to cost just over \$100,000. (The Texas A.F.T. and the KDK-Harman Foundation are major donors to The Texas Tribune.)

After a statewide assessment, the study will focus on 25 districts chosen to represent an array of schools. The goal is to determine which programs, employees and other costs they have chosen to eliminate and how that is affecting the classroom.

"It will allow us to get really deep into what are the kinds of decisions superintendents are having to make," Ms. Esterline said, from learning to do more with less to choosing which programs and employees to cut.

Representative Dan Huberty, Republican of Houston, decided to canvass the state's 1,000-plus school districts after he heard that one superintendent in his area had laid off several teachers and then rehired them once final state budget cut numbers came out.

Mr. Huberty's office is not planning to release the results of the survey publicly, said Maggie Irwin, Mr. Huberty's legislative director. It is more of a "self-imposed interim project," Ms. Irwin said, to help shape his understanding of the budget cuts.

Lynn Moak, whose school finance consulting firm, Moak, Casey & Associates, has kept track of

job-loss estimates since the start of the session, said the figure of layoffs could vary widely by source, depending on which employees are counted.

For instance, if only teachers are included, it may be a much smaller number than if all employees are included, because many districts are trying to cut everywhere except in the classroom. Mr. Moak said that depending on their financial status, districts may face the greater bulk of their budget cuts in the 2012-13 school year — which could cushion the numbers districts report this year.

Mr. Moak cautioned against overstating the effect of less money in public education.

“It’d be incorrect to characterize it as a huge impact, except in the concept of what does it mean for the future,” he said. “It means the Legislature can cut and will cut money to public education if the circumstances are right.”

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