

BILL ANALYSIS

Senate Research Center
821R10200 KYF-D

S.B. 1020
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Higher Education
3/21/2011
As Filed

AUTHOR'S / SPONSOR'S STATEMENT OF INTENT

The shortage of dental health care professionals in Texas has been well documented. In 2007, 110 Texas counties had a health professional shortage area (HPSA) distinction. The shortage is most serious in the southern and western parts of the state, especially in the 32 counties along the border. The border region has an inadequate supply of dental health professionals, including both dentists and dental hygienists. In fact, the Texas-Mexico border has one of the highest rates of dental provider disparities in the United States.

The shortage is primarily caused by a lack of schools with dental programs. Texas has three schools of dentistry and 21 dental hygiene programs. Together, the three dental schools graduate approximately 230 students per year. Even if every graduate were to practice only in one of the 32 border counties, Texas cannot meet the existing shortage in the border region—approximately 250 additional dentists are necessary to alleviate the current shortage in the 32 border counties.

In addition, none of the dental schools are located in the western half of the state and only three hygiene programs are located along the border. However, almost 20 percent of individuals from Texas who applied to one of The University of Texas System dental schools stated that their hometowns were either in the border region or west of San Antonio (the westernmost city with a dental school). More applicants are from El Paso than from any other area in the 110 counties of West Texas or along the border, despite the average distance between these students' hometown and dental school being over 640 miles.

The insufficient numbers of professionals providing care has major implications for those living in HPSAs. Accessing dental health care can be difficult or even impossible for many individuals living in El Paso and in other areas in West Texas and along the border. In addition to regional disparities, there are also racial disparities impacting access to care. For example, 77 percent of white children have received preventative dental care within the last year, while only 61 percent of Hispanic children and 66 percent of African American children received similar care.

Limited access to dental care adversely affects individuals' quality of life. Studies have shown a link between oral health and other diseases such as ear and sinus infections, weakened immune systems, diabetes, and heart and lung diseases as well as arteriosclerosis, heart attack, stroke, and birth defects. Periodontal organisms can enter the bloodstream and cause inflammation in certain organs, including the liver, major blood vessels, and the placenta.

In addition to serious illness, oral disease can cause debilitation, significant pain, interference with speech and eating, along with poor self-image, nutrition, social development, overuse of emergency rooms, valuable time lost from school and, in the worse cases, death. It is estimated that children with oral disease miss over 51 million hours of school each year, and dental cavities are the leading cause of school absenteeism in Texas. Tooth decay is the most prevalent chronic disease among children in the United States.

The establishment of a dental school in El Paso, Texas, offering degrees in dental hygiene, dentistry, and advanced dentistry would increase access to dental care and improved health outcomes and quality of life for residents of West Texas as well as along the U.S.-Mexico border.

As proposed, S.B. 1020 amends current law relating to a feasibility study regarding the establishment of a dental school at the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center at El Paso.

RULEMAKING AUTHORITY

This bill does not expressly grant any additional rulemaking authority to a state officer, institution, or agency.

SECTION BY SECTION ANALYSIS

SECTION 1. Amends Subchapter C, Chapter 61, Education Code, by adding Section 61.0666, as follows:

Sec. 61.0666. STUDY REGARDING ESTABLISHMENT OF DENTAL SCHOOL; EL PASO. (a) Requires the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) to conduct a study to examine the need for and feasibility of establishing a dental school in El Paso as a component of the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center. Requires THECB to consult with the board of regents of the Texas Tech University System in conducting the study.

(b) Requires THECB, not later than November 1, 2012, to report the results of the study required by this section to the governor, lieutenant governor, speaker of the house of representatives, and presiding officer of each legislative standing committee with primary jurisdiction over higher education.

(c) Provides that this section expires January 31, 2013.

SECTION 2. Effective date: upon passage or September 1, 2011.