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Testimony to the Senate Education Committee Regarding Interim Charge #4

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Texas AFT and our more than 63,000 education employee members are committed to establishing sound policy and making available necessary resources to provide every student in our public schools the opportunity to succeed in the classroom and beyond. Our members have witnessed first-hand how the stagnation of state aid has left districts in a budget squeeze just to cover the basics, without enough state funding even to catch up with inflation.

It is time to reinvest in Texas public education and Texas schoolchildren. Texas school districts are in dire need of more state funding. Before the current economic downturn, our school districts already faced major difficulties in providing a quality education for more than 4.6 million students with available resources. State school aid has been essentially frozen since 2006 under the target-revenue system, shifting costs to school districts even as state law has made it harder to raise necessary funds locally. With the economic downturn now striking home in Texas, we see a trend toward ever deeper budget, program, and personnel cuts at the local level—at the very time that higher state expectations of student achievement are taking effect.

The consequences are illustrated by the stratagems districts have been forced to adopt when their tax-rate approval elections fail. Last year, Texas AFT conducted a survey of each of the 116 school districts that held a tax-rate increase election in 2008. Among the districts that failed to achieve a higher tax rate, the resulting budget cuts have meant reduced pre-kindergarten programs, increased class sizes and campus overcrowding, hiring freezes, salary freezes, and layoffs of highly qualified teachers. Important school reforms that have significantly improved Texas schools are being stripped away just so that local districts can “get by.”

Alarmingly, the districts that did achieve a tax rate increase had to use the additional funds not to improve student instruction and programs, but for basic services and repairs. Many stated the new funds would be used for facilities repairs and to “fix buildings that are crumbling around us.” Others stated the new funds would be used to maintain current programs and to pay for increased fuel and utility costs. Unfortunately, many of these districts have already reached maximum taxing capacity and have no alternatives left. Compounding the situation, a recent study by the Legislative Budget Board confirms deterioration of equity.

As this committee examines cost drivers, we urge the committee to be mindful of the key school reforms that the legislature has implemented in the past. These must not be surrendered to false economies in the name of achieving “efficiency” at a time when the state seeks to educate ever-increasing numbers of high-need students to a standard of “career readiness” and already faces high dropout rates. Altering a vital reform such as class-size limits would undercut the progress the state has already made toward reaching the goal of career readiness for all students. Small classes create classroom conditions that afford students the opportunities to actively participate,

learn, and achieve socially and academically. It also allows teachers to teach in safe classrooms where our students can learn. The state cannot expect to achieve “career readiness” for all students if districts are expected to do it “on the cheap.”

In the upcoming 2011 session, the goal should indeed be to ease the financial squeeze on school districts—not by undercutting valuable reforms but by properly funding our schools. That means not only covering the cost of enrollment growth and inflation but making significant improvements in funding to help students meet rising state and federal expectations and standards of achievement. School districts also should have additional capacity to make local budget decisions to improve programs that address the needs of the local community.

Texas AFT looks forward to working with this committee and the Select Committee on Public School Finance Weights, Allotments & Adjustments to make significant improvements in the school finance system in Texas.