

**Testimony on Behalf of the Fast Growth School Coalition
Before the Senate Education Committee in Support of Senate Bill 300
February 24, 2009**

**Dr. Karen Rue
Superintendent, Northwest ISD
and
Chair, Fast Growth School Coalition**

Madam Chair and Members of the Committee:

My name is Karen Rue and I am the Superintendent of the Northwest Independent School District (NISD), which is located north of Fort Worth and West of the Dallas Metroplex. NISD enrolls more than 13,000 students and has doubled in size in just the last six years. Current projections suggest NISD could enroll as many as 20,000 students by 2012. I am appearing before you today in my capacity as the Superintendent of a fast-growing school district and as Chair of the Fast Growth School Coalition, an organization that represents the interest of the more than 100 rapidly-growing school districts that account for the vast majority of the enrollment growth in Texas public schools.

I am here today in support of Senate Bill 300 as filed by Senator Dan Patrick. There are modifications to several current state mandates included in the bill that we believe will benefit fast-growing school districts. The modification to the 22-to-1 class size ratio to permit a campus-wide average of 22 students in kindergarten and grades one through four could be helpful as a campus management tool in rapidly-growing school districts.

Currently districts have to apply to the Commissioner of Education for waivers to vary from the 22-to-1 class size ratio, based on whether the hardship is the result of facilities or teacher issues, or due to unanticipated student growth. This results in a substantial reporting requirement, as evidenced by the Texas Education Agency website *Waiver Online Report for 2008-09* containing 21 pages reflecting 850 records or entries. It would appear that SB 300 would have the effect of eliminating the need for a number of these waiver requests, to the extent that the increased flexibility permits variations based on campus averages.

My anticipation is that critics of this change will suggest that any variation in the 22-to-1 class size ratio will result in abandonment of smaller class sizes in the elementary grades. The expectations of our parents and our broader community will never allow us to vary substantially from the current standards for any extended period of time. As I view SB 300, it will permit growing school districts some flexibility in managing classroom assignments to deal with short-term growth, teacher and facilities issues without having to file waiver requests in most cases. There is nothing that suggests it is an abandonment of smaller elementary class sizes.

A second issue addressed in SB 300 that is of interest to fast-growing school districts is flexibility in the goal of reducing a school district's electrical consumption by five percent a year for six years. If a school district is adding what can be thousands of new students regularly and new campuses to accommodate them, accomplishing a 30 percent reduction in electric consumption over six years is not a realistic expectation. There is also a requirement to purchase more efficient electric light bulbs.

What is implicit in setting a goal for a 30 percent reduction in electric consumption over six years is the assumption that school districts are wasting a great amount of electricity in operating their facilities. The school districts of which I am aware operate very aggressive energy management programs to reduce their energy usage and costs, since this is one of the largest operating costs in a school district budget outside of personnel. These programs apply across-the-board to optimize the efficiencies of lighting, air conditioning and other uses of electricity, as well as general utility expenses.

The modifications to Chapter 39 to expand the potential for excellence exemptions to apply to recognized school districts (including changes to class-size limits that do not adversely affect academic achievement, subject to approval by the Commissioner) also make sense. As I understand it, there may not be recognized or exemplary ratings under the revisions that are being considered for the accountability system, so I am unclear as to how these provisions might interact if the changes to the rating system occur. But expanding the excellence exemptions to recognized districts make sense under the accountability system that operates today.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. If we can be of assistance to you in your deliberations on SB 300 or other legislation affecting fast-growing districts, please feel free to call upon me.