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TESTIMONY TO THE SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE REGARDING SB 982 & SB 2392

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Patty Quinzi, Texas AFT legislative counsel

On behalf of the more than 62,000 members of Texas AFT, I speak in support of all efforts to increase formula funding and equity for all public schools.

It is time to reinvest in Texas public education and Texas schoolchildren. This comprehensive school finance legislation presents an opportunity to restore some semblance of equity and adequacy to Texas school finance. Further, it is an appropriate vehicle to provide a much-needed state-funded pay raise for Texas public school teachers.

Since 2006, state funding for school districts has stagnated and funding inequities have been frozen in place. In many school districts, the budget squeeze already is translating into larger class sizes, salary freezes and reductions, layoffs of teachers and other key personnel, and cuts in vital educational programs such as pre-kindergarten. In addition, the recent study by the Legislative Budget Board confirms deterioration of equity.

Cutbacks in state commitments to public education since 2003 have shortchanged Texas students and educators in many ways. Some indicators of the resulting situation include:

- Average teacher pay in Texas ranks 48th in the nation compared to salaries for similar occupations in the state. In Texas that is 20 percent below pay for comparable jobs – those demanding similar levels of knowledge and skill.
- Since 2001, teacher pay has barely kept up with inflation, while retirement and health benefits have been cut.
- Some 50,000 classrooms are staffed by teachers who lack appropriate subject-matter certification for the assigned subject.
- Texas ranks 50th in the nation in percentage of adults over 25 with a high-school diploma.

We believe part of the increase in FSP funding – we suggest 50% – should be earmarked for an across-the-board increase in teacher pay, building up from a floor increase of at least \$1,000 a year. This would be at least a down payment on the overall increase needed to bring teacher pay in Texas to parity with pay in our state for comparable professions.

With available state funds plus federal economic-recovery aid, Texas AFT urges this Legislature to restore adequacy and equity in school finance and to increase teacher pay substantially.

(more)

FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT SCHOOL DISTRICT FUNDING CHALLENGES

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.

In December 2008 and January 2009, Texas AFT surveyed school districts that held tax-rate ratification elections in 2008 seeking approval of higher local property taxes to keep up with rising needs. Thirty-three percent of responding districts reported that they failed to win voter approval for a tax-rate increase.

Texas AFT asked these districts what strategies they would be forced to adopt as a result of the failure to pass a higher tax rate. Here's what we learned:

- Some 67 percent said they would freeze salaries, with the result that they will lose experienced teachers and likely will replace them with less experienced teachers.
- More than 50 percent said they would increase class sizes.
- Half said they would lay off teachers or reduce the number of teachers through attrition.
- More than 40 percent said they would lay off support staff, leaving teachers with increased administrative duties at the expense of instructional time.
- Two districts said they would be forced to consolidate schools.
- Two said they would have to reduce existing pre-kindergarten programs.
- One district said it would not be able to add two new schools to handle increased enrollment.

Some 80 percent of the districts that did manage to obtain voter approval of a higher local tax rate said the funding would not support new initiatives to improve student instruction but merely would cover the cost of basic services and repairs. One superintendent poignantly noted: "There is no enrichment possible through the tax increase – only survival."

Texas AFT also has been compiling published reports from all over the state concerning school districts' budget cutbacks. Cypress-Fairbanks, the third largest school district in Texas, with more than 100,000 students, is a prominent example. Facing a shortfall of \$27 million, Cy-Fair has eliminated 450 positions, will provide no raises this year despite substantial academic gains, and will add fewer new schools than needed to handle rapid enrollment growth.

Dallas ISD, the second largest district in Texas with more than 160,000 students, has faced even harsher budget cuts. The district's budget woes can be attributed partly to financial miscalculations, but it is important to note that the district incurred obligations in excess of available funds as it sought to provide additional teachers and other school personnel to help raise achievement of academically at-risk students, including those served under Title I and IDEA. For students and educators in Dallas ISD, the consequences of the current budget crisis have been harsh, with 375 teachers and more than 150 support employees laid off and with drastic program cuts taking effect as well.