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Texas AFT Testimony to the Senate Education Committee Regarding Extended Learning Time and After-school Programs

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We thank the committee and Senator West for holding a hearing that specifically examines the impact on school success of extended learning time and after-school programs. This hearing is particularly timely in light of the fact that economically disadvantaged students, who are likely to receive the greatest benefit from these programs, are the fastest-growing segment of the student population in Texas.

The Texas Education Agency recently reported that as overall student enrollment rapidly increased over the past decade (adding nearly 900,000 students), economically disadvantaged students accounted for nearly all--some 97 percent--of that increase.

Many educationally disadvantaged students enter school behind their peers, and the traditional school day does not ensure enough time and attention for these students to catch up. Yet just as these high-need children are becoming the supermajority in our schools, deep spending cuts enacted last year mean that they have fewer teachers and educational aides to help them, full-day pre-kindergarten classes are no longer provided by state grants for thousands of these children, and many of the reading specialists and academic coaches relied on to provide extra services for them are no longer present in our schools. All of these adverse changes translate into less of the individualized instructional time--less of the extra professional attention--that disadvantaged students particularly need.

So perhaps the most important thing the legislature could do to increase learning time for high-need students would be to restore the funding for vital staff and programs that was cut last session and begin to add new funding to address future needs.

Extended Learning Time

Extensive research shows that extended learning time has a positive effect on student achievement. Research also finds that districts with the shortest school days and years are more likely to serve students in poverty. Some schools are showing that adding time to the school calendar can help turn around low-performing schools. Findings suggest that these programs may be especially helpful for low-income, low-performing minority

students. Extended learning time may be even more crucial now, in order to counteract the way standardized testing and test preparation continue to encroach on classroom time. AFT is part of The Time to Succeed Coalition, which is a broad and diverse nationwide coalition working to ensure that all children in high-poverty communities have more and better learning time in school to prepare them for success. Expanding learning time means more academic instruction and personalized support. It also means the chance to broaden students' exposure to core subjects such as social studies, history, languages, science, and technology, as well as arts, music, drama, community service, and athletics.

AFT also supports extended learning time by investing in new approaches for students and teachers. Through the AFT Innovation Fund, we are rethinking the use of time in schools. We believe this is essential if students are to receive a well-rounded education and the enrichment opportunities to develop their talents. At the same time, it's just as important to redesign school time for teachers so they can collaborate and solve problems as professionals, as they do in most high-performing nations. AFT has found that a combination of extended learning time coupled with community partnerships and services increases parental involvement and produces the most significant effect on student achievement.

The Innovation Fund has made two grants related to extended learning time this year. AFT is partnering with the Providence Teachers Union in Rhode Island and the Meriden Federation of Teachers in Connecticut.

Providence Teachers Union

United Providence! (UP!) is a unique organization created by the union and school district that is serving as a lead partner overseeing turnaround efforts in three Providence schools. Expanding learning time is one key facet of this work. Through this grant, UP! will work closely with national organizations and the faculties of the schools to design innovative schedules that extend learning time for students and provide ample time for teachers to work together.

UP! Intends to do the following:

- Conduct "time audits" in the schools to understand the use of time and re-imagine it.
- Create innovative schedules that allow for expanded learning time for students and collaboration time for teachers.
- Demonstrate that respectful labor-management partnerships are an effective way to address the challenges of low-performing schools.

Meriden Federation of Teachers

The AFT and the Meriden, Connecticut, school district are collaborating to extend learning time at Casimir Pulaski Elementary School by offering before-school academic and health programs. In addition, they will form a labor-management planning team and work to create a flexible schedule that will allow a cost-effective way to extend learning time for students—and for teachers—at additional district schools in subsequent years.

This program is intended to do the following:

- Create a public school model for extending learning time using staggered schedules.
- Show the benefits of expanded learning time for both students and teachers.
- Work with community partners and parents to build support and involvement in the model.

There are also several effective state-funded programs to increase learning time. In Massachusetts, schools that benefit from the Massachusetts Expanded Learning Time Initiative are posting higher gains in test scores than the rest of the state. In 2009, the percentage of students in schools with expanded schedules who achieved proficiency on the state test increased from 2008 in both math and English language arts at double the rate of student increase in proficiency across the state over that one-year period.

Community Schools

AFT has also been a strong supporter of community schools. Community schools initiate a partnership with at least one community organization to assist in the delivery of services and enrichment. Examples of partner organizations are community-based organizations, universities, nonprofits, teacher unions, private businesses, faith-based groups, recreation clubs, and cultural institutions. Support or “wraparound” services cater to students, families, and community members, providing health, mental, and dental care. One essential element is programming focused on adult learning such as English as a Second Language, high school diploma equivalency programs (General Educational Development, or G.E.D., programs), English literacy classes, and job training.

Community schools are achieving promising outcomes. An evaluation of three leading community-schools efforts—Communities in Schools, the Chicago Community School Initiative, and the Children’s Aid Society in New York City—shows impressive gains in student achievement. Evaluations of community schools from around the country reveal academic gains, improved attendance, fewer dropouts, decreases in behavior and discipline problems, increased parental engagement, and greater community access to services.

In addition, teachers in community schools say they have more time to work with students in class as well as more time to prepare for class, as a result of not having to take time during class to deal with students' nonacademic issues.

Class-Size Reduction

In addition to extended learning time and after-school programs, teachers know that another proven intervention to improve student achievement enabling them to spend more time with each student is the reduction of class size. In a recent survey, funded by the Gates Foundation, 90 percent of teachers nationally say that having fewer students in their class would have a "very strong" (62 percent) or "strong" impact (28 percent) on student achievement. However, Texas is moving in the opposite direction. Since the state cut \$5.4 billion from education during the last legislative session, class-size waivers have more than tripled, and more than 8,000 classrooms now exceed the class-size cap. Reducing class size to allow more time for individualized attention for each student, especially the economically disadvantaged student, is in our view a crucial element that must be part of an effective agenda of education reform.