



ATPE

ASSOCIATION OF TEXAS PROFESSIONAL EDUCATORS

ATPE Input on SB 300 Regarding Eliminating Class-Size Limits

Testimony to the Senate Education
Committee, February 24, 2009

The Association of Texas Professional Educators (ATPE) offers this written testimony in opposition to Senate Bill 300 by Sen. Dan Patrick, which would eliminate the current limit of 22 students per class in elementary grades and replace the cap with a campus-wide average.

Texas public elementary schools have been subject to the 22:1 class size limit for the past 25 years. The Texas Education Code also includes provisions that allow the Commissioner of Education to grant waivers of the 22:1 class-size limit for school districts that are unable to comply with the law, as well as for schools that have been rated exemplary under the accountability system. **The simple and straightforward waiver process offer a safety net** for districts that cannot meet the 22:1 standard because of inadequate facilities, difficulty hiring teachers or unanticipated enrollment growth.

In his statement of intent for SB 300, Sen. Patrick offers no rationale for changing the current law from a 22:1 class-size limit to a campus-wide average. **There is no evidence presented in the author's statement to support a conclusion that the current waiver process is an inadequate solution for districts that are unable to comply with the 22:1 limit.** Instead, Sen. Patrick merely states that districts are being "forced to fulfill unnecessary mandates rather than focus on their basic mission, which is to educate students."

The current 22:1 class-size limit in Texas is not an "unnecessary mandate." On the contrary, it is an essential element of successful formulas for educating students. An overwhelming volume of research shows that restricted class sizes benefit all students regardless of race, location or socioeconomic background. At the same time, the research shows that smaller classes actually benefit minority and high-poverty students at a greater rate than other demographic groups and help to close the achievement gap. Research on class size has shown a particular benefit of smaller classes in elementary grades. In fact, some studies have shown that students who are taught in smaller classes in the early grades continue to reap the benefits of those smaller classes through improved performance in later grades. Students taught in smaller elementary school classes have been shown to be 37 percent less likely to drop out of high school than students who were taught in larger classes. More students taught in smaller classes complete high school on time and receive honors diplomas than do students taught in larger classes. Studies have shown that students taught in smaller classes are more likely to take ACT or SAT exams. In studies of a Wisconsin class-size initiative, students from smaller classes scored significantly higher on tests, and the achievement gap between African-American and white first-graders was eliminated. Class-size limits have been shown to improve teacher morale and parental support. Researchers have seen a positive correlation between smaller

class sizes and student performance on the NAEP exams. Finally, research points to a link between smaller class sizes and a decrease in disciplinary problems in the classroom.¹

In addition to the well-known national body of research that supports the policy of imposing class-size limits, there is more recent research specific to Texas that supports ATPE's position. ***Teacher Quality & School Improvement in Texas Secondary Schools*** was a study commissioned by ATPE in 2008 and conducted by Edward J. Fuller, Ph.D., and Bradley Carpenter of the University Council for Educational Administration, Department of Educational Administration at the University of Texas at Austin. The study identified high-performing and low-performing elementary, middle and high schools in Texas, and it featured both a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the characteristics of the teaching workforce at those schools and the strategies used by the high-performing schools to improve student achievement.

The authors of the study explained the methodology as follows: "The first part of this two-part study examined the distribution of teacher quality across selected middle and high schools in Texas... Although teacher quality is a major factor in increasing student achievement, specific school practices also heavily influence student outcomes. Thus, to supplement our study of teacher quality, we interviewed teachers and school leaders in 10 high-improvement high schools and in 10 high-improvement middle schools. We asked educators to identify the practices implemented in their schools that they believed impacted student achievement on the TAKS." Thus, those 20 high-improvement schools are referred to in the ATPE Teacher Quality study as "the Texas 20."

In their analysis of effective school improvement practices, the authors of our study first conducted a review of national literature on successful strategies employed in turnaround schools. Next, using those specific school improvement practices cited in the literature review, the authors analyzed the use of those practices by the Texas 20. As the authors of the study further explained: "This type of analysis provides the reader with an organized framework with which to compare the scholarly body of work surrounding turnaround schools with a unique and locally contextualized perspective of successful turnaround efforts in Texas public schools."

One of the major findings of the ATPE-commissioned study was that **"high-improvement middle and high schools employed many of the best practices found in the literature on 'turnaround' schools."** Through interviews with teachers and administrators, the authors of the

¹ Information summarized from studies including the following: O'Neil, Jan and Deborah Mercier, "Incredible Shrinking Class Size," *National Staff Development Council* Summer 2003: 18-22. D. McLaughlin and Gili Drori, *School-Level Correlates of Academic Achievement*, U.S. Dept. of Education, 2000. *Reducing Class Size*, U.S. Dept. of Education, November 1999. Slavin, R., *Class size and student achievement: Is smaller better?* Contemporary Education, Fall 1990: 62(1), 6-12. Finn, Jeremy et al. *How Small Classes Help Students Do Their Best*, U.S. Dept. of Education, 2000. Nye, Barbara et al. *The Lasting Benefits Study: A continuing analysis of the effect of small class size in kindergarten through third grade on student achievement test scores in subsequent grade levels*, Tennessee State University, Center of Excellence for Research in Basic Skills. Word, Elizabeth et al. *The State of Tennessee's Student/Teacher Achievement Ration (STAR) Project: Technical Report*, Tennessee Dept. of Education, 1990. Biddle and Berliner, *What research says about small classes and their effects*, WestEd, D.C. 2002.

study found that the Texas 20 schools were employing many of the same best practices identified in the literature.

One of the specific school improvement practices identified in the review of literature on turnaround schools was additional instructional time. **The literature repeatedly showed that turnaround schools “put forth a great amount of effort and resources toward providing students additional teach time, offering smaller class sizes and a more intense targeting of individual needs.”** Though additional instructional time is often included in broader strategies for academic intervention, the authors of our study noted that additional instructional time was mentioned in the literature on turnaround schools “with such great frequency that the research team decided this category merited stand-alone consideration.” Below are the results of the analysis of the use of additional instructional time, beginning with the literature review and followed by the information gleaned from interviews with educators at the Texas 20:

Literature

The following commonalities were found within the literature addressing the role of additional instructional time as an effective practice within turnaround schools: (1) schools found creative ways to offer additional teach time to students who struggled academically. The schools that experienced the greatest amount of success were able to expand academic opportunities by offering students additional time in academically oriented classes. This additional time was often provided through a wide variety of tutorial sessions and manipulation of the school schedule (Barth et al., 1999; Corallo & McDonald, 2002; Picucci et al., 2002).

The Texas 20

The following commonalities emerged from the interviews of the Texas 20: (1) schools hired additional personnel to create additional teach time for struggling students, and (2) schools utilized either pull-out strategies or tutorials to further target those students who were having difficulty mastering the subject material. Most schools interviewed found a way to maneuver fiscal resources so that they could afford extra personnel who were able to provide additional teach time for students struggling to master the curriculum. Whereas some schools hired “permanent substitutes,” other schools were able to hire additional full-time staff members through the creative expenditure of Title I monies.

ATPE’s Teacher Quality study highlights the importance of smaller class sizes as a tool for improving student achievement levels and reiterates the need for meaningful class-size limits in the Texas Education Code.

Perhaps equally compelling as the research on the significance of smaller class sizes as a school improvement tool are the testimonials of the classroom teachers themselves. In preparation for this hearing, ATPE sent an e-mail message to members Monday, February 23, 2009, soliciting

feedback on class-size limits. Within an eight-hour time frame, ATPE received hundreds of e-mails from educators supporting the maintenance of the current 22:1 class-size limit in elementary grades. Attached is a sampling of those messages from ATPE members compiled for the committee's review.

A campus-wide class-size average, as proposed in SB 300, would effectively eliminate the 22:1 class-size limit for most students. This is because campuses inevitably include some specialized classes, such as those for students with disabilities or students in gifted and talented programs, which are disproportionately smaller than the more traditional, mainstream classes that serve the vast majority of students. Consequently, in the quest to maintain a campus-wide average of 22 students per class, these small specialized settings would easily offset traditional classes with far greater than 22 students in each classroom.

Based on the overwhelming research that supports class-size limits as an effective strategy for improving student achievement and the compelling testimonials of Texas educators, **the 22:1 class-size limit in elementary grades should be maintained.** The Legislature should reject SB 300.

On behalf of our 112,000-plus members, ATPE urges you to vote NO on SB 300.