



TEXAS STATE TEACHERS ASSOCIATION / NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION
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TEXAS STATE TEACHERS ASSOCIATION'S TESTIMONY SUPPORTING SB 982

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Over the past decade, Texas has dropped from 25th in the nation in per pupil expenditure for instruction to 45th. In Texas, 50,000 classrooms do not have appropriately certified teachers. And Texas today ranks 34th among the states in average teacher pay, \$6,129 below the national average.

The greatest need our Texas public schools, their students and their employees today face is the need for a school finance system that is sufficient and flexible to meet the growing, ever-changing needs of public education. The welcome infusion of federal stimulus dollars under President Obama's American Recovery and Reinvestment Act is only a short-term Band-Aid, not a long-term fix. Without a long-term fix, the state simply cannot retain and recruit the very best teachers in the nation to teach our students.

We need a new system of funding public schools that is sufficient to meet the needs of the 21st century and flexible enough to keep pace with the many changes our state is experiencing. Senate Bill 1, which the 79th Legislature passed in special session in 2006, was more about cutting property taxes and re-electing a governor than it was about meeting the long-term needs of Texas public schools and their students.

SB 1 freezes state funding at 2006 levels, with very few exceptions. As a result, 241 of the state's 1,031 school districts have sought voter approval for increased tax rates to pay for higher expenses for supplies and operations and to fund employee salary hikes. Taxpayers in 176 of those 241 districts approved higher tax rates for their schools, for a success rate of 73 percent since the passage of Senate Bill 1.

And securing voter approval of higher tax rates for schools is getting harder. In 2008, voters in barely 60 percent – only 70 of the 116 districts – holding tax rate elections approved the higher rates.

Many of the districts that have won voter approval of higher tax rates have maxed out at the state-imposed cap of \$1.17 per \$100 assessed valuation for maintenance and operations. They cannot later go back to voters for more money to fund ever-increasing operating expenses.

The districts seeking voter approval that have not won it are worse off, resulting in layoffs and cutbacks in programs. Many other districts across the state have temporarily staved off what are surely inevitable tax rate elections by draining reserve funds to risky low levels.

This convoluted, inadequate system is not an appropriate way to fund the most important responsibility the Texas Constitution assigns state government.

“Election rules are complex and vague, timelines are impossible, election dates (in some cases are up to five months after budgets are adopted) are cumbersome, the financial concepts involved are extremely difficult to communicate to the stakeholders, and with the current economy, this election is the most formidable administrative assignment I have witnessed,” Joe Smith, the founder and editor of TexasISD.com, wrote in January. As a retired superintendent, he knows a little about formidable administrative assignments.

Times may be tough in Texas. But an overwhelming majority of Texas voters knows just how important investing more resources in public education is to the future of the nation’s second-largest state. This is the primary finding of a statewide poll the Texas State Teachers Association commissioned earlier this year.

The Tarrance Group, a national Republican polling firm, and Harstad Strategic Research, a national Democratic polling firm, surveyed 815 Texas voters from across the state Jan. 26-29. Sixty-three percent of respondents say the state needs to increase funding for Texas public schools.

Texans from both major political parties and political independents all know that in today’s increasingly globalized economy, education is an essential investment that will not crash. Texas voters know that investing in our public schools and their students is the foundation for the Lone Star State’s economic future and the engine of its prosperity. This is true even in the current economic downturn.

Texas voters know that state government does not properly fund our public schools. Only 20 percent of respondents say the Legislature has sufficiently addressed the issue of public school funding. An overwhelming supermajority of 71 percent says the Legislature still has more work to do on school funding. This result comes almost three years after the Legislature “reformed” how Texas pays for its public schools. But lawmakers froze state funding at 2006 levels, with no allowance for rising costs or increasing salaries.

Texans also know just how important teachers are to the success of our public schools and their students. When asked what makes for a good public school, 61 percent of survey respondents identify teachers. And respondents believe teachers should be paid as the professionals they are. Sixty-six percent say teacher pay falls short of what it ought to be.

The Texas Legislature today has the opportunity to correct the shortcomings in how the state funds its most important constitutional responsibility. Texas needs a new system of school finance that is sufficient and flexible for the long term and that pays teachers as the professionals they are.