

Austin Independent School District

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Testimony before the Senate Committee on Education February 1, 2011

Good morning, Madam Chair and members of the Committee. I am Mark Williams, President of the Board of Trustees of the Austin Independent School District.

I appreciate the opportunity to provide the Committee with my perspective on a few possible changes in state laws or requirements that could provide school districts like Austin with additional flexibility to save significant resources as well as better utilize the monies we do have at a time when school districts and the state face an unprecedented budget crisis.

There are four key areas that I will be speaking about today, including

1. Allowing districts to implement furloughs and employee pay reductions for contract employees.
2. Permitting increased class sizes in grades K-4.
3. Have the local Boards of Trustees be the final decision maker in the Reduction in Force (RIF) appeals process.
4. Remove requirements on certain spending areas such as compensatory education, career and technical, gifted and talented and the high school allotment.

Furloughs and Employee Pay

Over 88 percent of Austin ISD's budget is devoted to personnel. Due to the size of the projected decreases in state funding for the next biennium, there just isn't any way we can avoid budget reductions that won't result in the loss of some employees providing direct instructional services to students. However, we would be able to preserve some positions, and therefore more services, if districts had the flexibility to pay employees less. That flexibility could be accomplished in at least two ways. One, adjust the state's provisions for contract employees to allow for an across-the-board (or more strategic) reduction in salaries. And two,

allow districts to implement employee furloughs on as needed basis. Austin ISD would save about \$2.1 million each furlough day for all employees.

Class Size

Another area of potential cost savings to school districts is to increase the current statutory class size requirement of 22:1 in grades K-4. To enable school districts to find the meaningful savings necessary to try and close the budget shortfalls, this increase would need to be a level of at least 24:1. Allowing districts the flexibility to determine class sizes—which could vary according to the needs of students—would allow districts to be strategic with staffing decisions, without the current burden of applying for waivers (which are currently limited to one class per grade level per school). Changing individual class size requirements from 22 to 24 in Austin ISD would save the district about \$10 million.

Reduction in Force

As districts have to make the necessary personnel changes to actualize cost reductions, including increased class sizes and fewer offerings at all grade levels, it is anticipated that some Reductions in Force (RIF) will be required. This RIF is expected to affect contract employees who are both at the end of their contract term (non-renewal) as well as those during the middle of an existing contract (termination). Current law allows appeals for the non-renewal of an employee contract to be heard by the local board of trustees. However, appeals for employee contract termination are presently heard by an independent hearing examiner, appointed by the Commissioner of Education, at the cost of thousands of dollars, per employee, to the district. A more cost effective approach would be to have the Board of Trustees in the local district be the final arbitrator for both contract terminations and non-renewals.

Flexibility in Spending

Specific spending requirements exist in a variety of different areas throughout state law. For example, spending requirements exist in the areas of compensatory education, career and technical education, gifted and talented service, and the high school allotment. Each of these areas of spending are worthwhile and valuable for students, but removing the spending requirements in these areas at this time would allow districts to maximize the effectiveness of available dollars.

You have an incredibly difficult and important responsibility in navigating the challenges of the being fiscally responsible in these tough economic times and still ensuring sufficient public education resources to achieve the goals we all have of graduating our young people ready for college, career and life. Thank you for your consideration and thoughtful approach to helping districts find additional flexibility in the state's requirements to enable us to target increasingly limited dollars toward improving our outcomes for all our students.

I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.