

Austin Independent School District

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Senate Bill 8

Relating to the flexibility of the board of trustees of a school district in the management and operation of public schools in the district.

June 2, 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, and I am testifying in favor of Senate Bill 8.

As you know, many school districts have been struggling to make ends meet with rising accountability standards, a growing population of at-risk students, increased operating costs and essentially flat revenues per student.

As a result, our school district, like many others, has been trying to find ways to reduce costs so that we can continue to meet the needs of our teachers and students in the classroom, even though about 87% of our budget is personnel costs. For the past two years, Austin ISD has made reductions at the central administration level, thereby avoiding cuts to the campuses. Specifically in FY2010 and FY2011, the District reduced spending by \$27.7 million and eliminated 135 central office positions from the budget. In addition, another 257 central office positions were eliminated through a Reduction in Force (RIF) in the budget for 2011-12.

This RIF was approved by the Board in late March 2011, much earlier than we would have preferred, but largely dictated by the need to give notifications to affected employees at least 45 days prior to the end of the contract year. Further, without any flexibility to reduce pay levels below the current year amounts to help address the funding shortfall, we were essentially limited to eliminating positions and terminating employees as a means to reduce costs.

Unfortunately, the cuts made to central administration, as well as additional decreases in non-payroll costs, were not nearly enough to address the funding

shortfalls. So as a result, our total RIF included eliminating 1,153 positions, of which 571 were teaching positions.

SB1, if adopted as currently structured, would result in a \$37 million state cut that is expected for FY 2012 and a \$58 million (or 8.5%) reduction in FY 2013. And if the intent remains to fully eliminate all Additional State Aid for Tax Reduction (ASATR) by 2018, then this means state cuts could get progressively worse for Austin ISD.

I can tell you from personal experience that laying off employees, especially teachers, is painful and gut-wrenching. It is not a choice we wanted to make. However, without any flexibility or options other than lay-offs, it was the only choice we had. We know that teachers are the backbone of any school district. Their jobs are more difficult now than probably any time in recent memory. It is a noble goal to want to pay teachers more money; they certainly deserve that.

Yet in the current fiscal landscape, my district will undoubtedly find ourselves in this position again next year as we face increased state funding cuts. So we support SB 8 as districts like ours would prefer is to at least have the option of paying teachers a little less so that more of them can remain in the classroom, which allows for smaller class sizes and/or more offerings to our students. Such an option would allow us to work together with our employee associations so we can determine the best possible approaches to meet the state funding cuts.

Removing the salary floor in Education Code 21.402(d) would provide school districts the flexibility to manage staffing in the manner that best supports our educational mission. This change would provide the opportunity to better mitigate the negative impact of budget cuts on students.

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 resources toward improving our outcomes for all our students.