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TESTIMONY TO THE SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE
REGARDING SB 443

By

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March 8, 2011

The teachers and other school employees of Texas AFT are deeply concerned that appeals for so-called “mandate relief,” driven by a desire to shrink the state budget, will lead to a retreat from important state commitments to uphold the quality of public education. The proposed changes that SB 443 makes to current law would dismantle quality reforms that helped Texas make substantial educational progress in the past two decades. The damage to students and schools would be substantial and long-lasting if the legislature goes down this road.

Class Size

The most troubling change in SB 443 is the elimination of the state law setting class-size limits of 22 to 1 in each classroom in grades K-4. This quality and efficiency measure is one of the best things the Texas legislature has ever done for Texas schoolchildren. Decades of scholarly research have confirmed what teachers and parents know from experience—smaller classes are better for children, especially for disadvantaged children, and especially in the early grades. As a study conducted by the Bush School at Texas A&M said in 2006, “small class size and low student-teacher ratios are associated with positive outcomes” due “to the increased amount of time these characteristics allow a teacher to spend with individual children. Increased individual interaction time allows the teacher to have more knowledge about the learning abilities of each child.”

We ask you to recognize what the research shows: Class-size limits are a crucial contributor to teacher effectiveness and student achievement. A 2003 report of the Institute of Education Sciences at the U.S. Department of Education found that class-size reduction is one of the evidence-based reforms that have been proven to increase student achievement via rigorous, randomized controlled trials. The Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association has created an online compilation of much of the extensive supporting research that bolsters this conclusion (www.tepsa.org). For example, analysis of the key STAR experiment in Tennessee found that students who had the benefit of smaller classes in early elementary grades did better in school and had a higher likelihood of attending college. Studies by Alan Krueger of Princeton University among others have shown that even within the control group of STAR students who were in larger classes, the smaller the class, the better the results. Just last month, the Utah State Office of Education found a direct correlation between class sizes and the ability to meet Federal testing goals. Elementary schools that met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) had class sizes of 21 students compared with an average of 24 students per class in schools that did not meet AYP. That study and others showing the benefits of smaller classes are cited in articles appended to this testimony.

The public certainly recognizes the value of smaller class size. The independent Texas Poll commissioned by the Texas Association of School Boards in July of last year found that Texans strongly support class-size limits. In fact, the poll found this sentiment is so strong that in spite of economic distress 71 percent actually supported paying higher taxes to lower class size. A more recent poll conducted for major Texas newspapers also found strong support (more than 60 percent) for the 22-to-1 class-size limit in grades K-4.

It's true that the state comptroller has come out with a report making extravagant claims of savings to be reaped from eliminating the 22-student limit for each K-4 classroom and turning it into a 22-student average instead. But the claim she attributes to unnamed administrators that classes with up to 25 students could operate without any loss of instructional effectiveness is simply not evidence-based. Former Lt. Gov. Bill Ratliff has put it well: "rather than raising the number, the State of Texas should do all in its fiscal power to set its sights on lowering this number. In our current fiscal situation, this is not a realistic goal for today. But we should at least fight to maintain the current limit."

For districts faced with undue hardship from compliance with the class-size limit for each K-4 classroom, the legislature already has provided for waivers, and this option has been used extensively over the years without difficulty. However, the waiver process preserves a crucial safeguard: **parents have to be notified of the district's intention to increase class sizes.** This requirement keeps school administrators accountable to parents and community, and many administrators will tell you that they have no problem with asking for and obtaining a waiver under this provision. If districts want an explicit acknowledgment that reduced state aid can be the basis for a hardship waiver, the commissioner can provide that acknowledgment through administrative guidance under current law.

Texas AFT has conducted a survey of superintendents regarding the potential impact of state-imposed budget cuts, and it is striking how many of the 188 respondents thus far have singled out the adverse impact of larger classes as one of the most damaging effects. Texas AFT joins with administrators, parents, and the public at large in defense of class-size limits. We urge you to do all in your power to maintain the current law on class size in grades K-4—one of the most effective education reforms ever enacted in this state.

Limited English Proficiency Summer Program

Section 4 of the bill would eliminate a longstanding and very successful program that serves the fastest growing student population in Texas. The summer program serves students who are of limited English proficiency who will be eligible for admission to kindergarten or the first grade at the beginning of the next school year. This program was specifically designed to meet the needs of ELL students, and it is especially important considering recent TEA data that show the number of students receiving bilingual or English-as-a-second-language instructional services increased by 58.2 percent over the past 10 years. Within the bilingual and ESL programs, as well as within the LEP population, 87.3 percent of students were categorized as economically disadvantaged. Now, more than ever, this summer program is essential to ensuring LEP students' success.

Exemptions for Recognized and Exemplary Campuses

According to TEA data, 5,797 campuses last year were rated “recognized” or “exemplary” out of a total of 8,435 campuses state-wide. By making "recognized" campuses exempt from certain quality standards, this bill would more than double the number of campuses exempted. This means that 2/3 of campuses in Texas under this bill would be exempted from class-size requirements and from other basic quality standards such as the Education Code chapter on parental rights and responsibilities.



class size matters

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Is there a threshold effect in reducing class size?

There is a common misconception that a threshold must be reached in reducing class size -- that is, a class has to be decreased below a certain number of students to have a positive effect on student achievement.

This argument is often used in order to discourage class size reform efforts, since shrinking classes below a particular figure is seen as impractical and too expensive to contemplate. Yet the research shows that there is no magic number that needs to be reached before a smaller class will result in more learning.

Economist Alan Krueger of Princeton analyzed the Tennessee STAR data and found that even within the larger classes of 22-25, students did better the smaller their class size -- that is in classes of 22 or more. According to Krueger, Charles Achilles, and other class size researchers, the relationship between lower class size and higher student achievement is linear, with no evidence of a threshold.¹

Three large scale studies have shown that the smaller the class, the better the results, as measured by student performance on NAEP exams, again with no evidence of a threshold. According to these studies, there is no particular level a class size must be lowered to in order to raise achievement.²

Other analyses have found that class size benefits are linear, and that each additional student added to a class results in a decrease in the class average for students in all academic scores. In the SAGE studies in Wisconsin, the test score decline in all academic areas was found for each student added to a classroom above 15 in the early grades; in OECD analyses in Europe, a decline in scores in reading, math and science was found for high school classes for each student added above 25.³

¹ Alan B. Krueger, "Experimental Estimates of Education Production Functions," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Volume 114, Issue 2, May 1999. This paper is available at <http://www.irs.princeton.edu/pubs/pdfs/379.pdf>, see esp. pgs. 30-31.

² Donald McLaughlin and Gili Drori, *School-Level Correlates of Academic Achievement: Student Assessment Scores in SASS Public Schools*, U.S. Department of Education, 2000; <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2000/2000303.pdf>. David Grissmer, et.al., *Improving Student Achievement: What State NAEP Test Scores Tell Us*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2000, www.rand.org/publications/MR/MR924/ See also Harold Wenglinsky, *When Money Matters*, Educational Testing Service, April 1997; <http://www.ets.org/research/pic/wmm.pdf>

³ Molnar, A., Smith, P., Zahorik, J., Halbach, A., Ehrle, K., & Hoffman, L. M. (2001). *2000-2001 evaluation results of the Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE) program*. Milwaukee, WI: Center for Education Research, Analysis and Innovation, University of Wisconsin. pp. 141 - 142. See also OECD (2001). *Knowledge and skills for life. First results from PISA 2000*. Paris, pp. 202 - 205. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study (2000) of reading, mathematical and scientific literacy of 15 year olds in 32 countries found that as the student-teaching ratio rises above 25, there is a continuous decline in school performance in all three areas of reading, math and science. The PISA study predicted that a student score which is ten points higher in one school than another is associated with an average of 3.3 fewer students per teacher.

Class size impacts test scores

Published: 2/10 7:02 pm

Updated: 2/10 10:31 pm

SALT LAKE CITY (ABC 4 News) - Budget short falls, and increased classes impact how well students learn reading and math. The Utah State Office of Education found a direct correlation between class sizes and the ability to meet Federal testing goals.

Sharon Barlow is a teacher in the Granite School District. The average district elementary class size is about 27. When Barlow began her teaching career decades ago she had 22 students in her 3rd grade class. Now she has 28. She says the extra students make a big difference. "When you have fewer students you have more time to spend with individual problems and challenges."

She says these days there are more challenges to address. Barlow says she has seen an upswing in children with learning disabilities, and language barriers. While the need has grown, she says help has decreased. Classroom aids and librarians have been lost to budget cuts. "I have never felt in the past two years,

when I leave this school, that I have done my best for every child. That's how it is." Barlow says with tears in her eyes.

Judy Park, state associate superintendant says no matter how talented the teacher, they cannot compensate for the larger class sizes. Adequate Yearly Progress testing shows the difference one on one time can make. "You can't say that schools failed AYP because they had larger class sizes but obviously there is a strong correlation there that the schools that passed had lower class sizes than those that failed."

Elementary schools that met the AYP, No Child Left Behind goals, had class sizes of 21.2 students compared with an average of 24.2 students in schools that did not. Park says high class size is not a problem with an easy or inexpensive solution. "It's very expensive to reduce it, and if you are only reducing it by a small amount it may not have any effects that you desire, but if you don't start somewhere then you are never going to get there." She says states where class sizes are low are those that made it priority years ago. "States that attended to class sizes early on and provided funding, and didn't allow class to size to ever get over certain levels, they have been able to maintain that. It's like anything. When you allow things to get too large, and all of the sudden you are trying to reduce it, it's very, very expensive."

Sharon Barlow says it's time for Utah to re-evaluate its priorities. "If our families are our most precious asset, their education should be the most important thing to you. Either come clean and say our kids are really secondary, money is more important, or if the kids are important make sure they have what they need. They need individual attention from a teacher, a qualified teacher, and a teacher who has the resources needed to teach.

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