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El Paso state delegation urges EPISD trustees to delay school closure

Community must have opportunity to plan for major changes; rushed decision erodes trust

El Paso - Today, State Senator José Rodríguez and State Representatives Joe Pickett, Joe Moody, Mary González, César Blanco, and Lina Ortega sent a letter to the El Paso Independent School District (EPISD) Board of Trustees urging them to not make a hasty and irreversible decision to close schools without providing sufficient opportunity for the community to provide input and plan for major changes. **(Note: A copy of the letter is attached.)**

"Like many others in the community, we recently learned about the district's proposal to close Beall, Schuster, and Moye in the 2018-19 school year, as well as Hawkins, Rivera, Rusk, and Alta Vista in the 2019-20 school year. These are in addition to the closure of Bonham, Johnson and Roberts, which will be shuttered in the 2020-21 school year in an effort to make up a \$7 million deficit," the letter states.

"We have serious concerns that this announcement was made on June 11th, a mere 10 days before the June 21st deadline, when the board will announce a final decision."

While the trustees have scheduled two public meetings, on Monday (June 18) and Tuesday (June 19), a vote would come only two days later, on Thursday (June 21).

"We strongly urge the Board of Trustees to extend this timeline to give the community and stakeholders ample time to fully contemplate these proposals," the delegation members wrote.

The district has shared varying budget numbers, but the bottom line is that the disruption would be substantial and the savings minimal in the scope of the budget.

"These closures affect the lives of students, parents, teachers, and many others. At a minimum, proposals to close schools must include the process for student and teacher transfers, programmatic changes, transportation needs, and the future of the facilities themselves. This should be a thoughtful and reasoned process, not rushed through at the last minute. There are too many questions to be answered and issues to be vetted before the June 21st vote, especially since the anticipated closure savings of \$600,000 in the upcoming year would constitute less than one percent of the district's entire budget," the legislators wrote.

This rushed proposal, coming at the last stages of the budget process, erodes the trust that the district has worked to rebuild for the last several years.

"While the district made early significant strides, as evidenced by voters' approval of last year's bond, which we supported, it appears that the district has regressed. First, a district audit found evidence of bid tailoring, insider information, and vendor favoritism in relation to GAFCON and facilities construction oversight. Subsequently, politics began to infiltrate the actions of the board, as demonstrated by the public feud and actions of certain board members to prop up candidates rather than focus on the business at hand, such as budget management," they wrote. "This led to an audit of Trustee Byrd that has yet to be released or dismissed, despite that assurances that it would be expedited."

The letter concludes: *"In light of all this, it would be prudent to hold off on the proposed school closures. We believe if the board moves forward, you may lose whatever remains of the community's trust and confidence. We urge you to delay this decision until the next fiscal cycle, and to spend time working to fully regain our trust by vetting these proposals with students, parents, teachers, administrators, and other community stakeholders."*

A copy of the letter is attached.

José Rodríguez represents Texas Senate District 29, which includes the counties of El Paso, Hudspeth, Culberson, Jeff Davis, and Presidio. He represents both urban and rural constituencies, and more than 350 miles of the Texas-Mexico border. Senator Rodríguez currently serves as the Chairman of the Texas Senate Democratic Caucus, and is a member of the Senate Committees on Natural Resources and Economic Development; Transportation; Veteran Affairs and Border Security; and Agriculture, Water, and Rural Affairs (Vice Chair).