



Texas AFT

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Testimony of Eric Hartman  
on behalf of Texas AFT  
Before the Senate Committee on Education  
Regarding SB 1601  
April 7, 2009

Texas AFT is in strong sympathy with the intent of this bill to provide constructive options to school closure triggered by low accountability ratings—options that allow local communities rather than outside “alternative managers” to redesign local schools and get them back on track with what SB 1601 terms a “rigorous and relevant program.”

Current law prescribing sanctions for low accountability ratings is too rigid. The recent shutdown of Johnston High School in Austin illustrates much of what is wrong with current law. Although Johnston had been labeled “unacceptable” for five years, the school had been making significant progress, even as crudely measured by the state accountability system. Johnston’s Reading/English Language Arts scores showed that ninth-grade passing rates improved over the past five years, from 35 percent to 62 percent, 10th-graders from 28 percent to 64 percent, and 11th-graders from 34 percent to 73 percent. But the new state sanctions scheme passed in 2006 gave little or no weight to these improvements, automatically requiring that the school be shut down. Thanks to these arbitrary requirements, many of the very teachers responsible for Johnston’s significant gains in test performance in 2007-2008, and some of the students who would have benefited most from their continued help, have been dispersed in 2008-2009.

SB 1601 represents a welcome recognition of the irrationality this law has forced upon the commissioner of education. However, we are concerned that SB 1601 still accepts too much of current law as its framework. Thus, commissioner’s rules that set arbitrary percentages of teachers at a “repurposed” campus who must be reassigned would be elevated to statutory level, with too little room left for common-sense discretion. The bill also would leave intact the current law mandating reassignment of the campus principal, regardless of circumstances.

Frankly, we think the public and parents and teachers all are looking this session for a complete overhaul of punitive provisions of the current accountability system. That overhaul should shift the emphasis from sanctions to supportive interventions, should give parents and teachers a strong voice in the redesign of low-rated schools, and should guarantee schools the resources needed for a real opportunity to carry out the redesign program developed by the school community.