

Austin Independent School District

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Testimony to the Texas Senate Committee on Education On Senate Bill 21, by Senator Judith Zaffirini

Relating to an enhanced quality full-day prekindergarten program provided by public school districts in conjunction with community providers.

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Good morning Madam Chair, members of the Committee, and Senator Zaffirini. I am Pat Forgione, Superintendent of the Austin Independent School District. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on Senate Bill 21 today.

Austin ISD currently serves over 4,600 students in a full-day, six-hour pre-K program with transportation provided by the district. English language learners represent two-thirds of our pre-K membership. Eligible students attend prekindergarten classes in 66 of our 78 elementary schools. In addition, the district has opened the Lucy Read Prekindergarten Demonstration School. Thus, we have a school-based delivery for our pre-K services that allows our parents to work while their children are well served in a full day pre-K program.

Thirty percent of Austin ISD's pre-K program funding comes from the State Prekindergarten Expansion Grant, which was recently renamed the Early Start Grant. Our funding from that Grant amounts to almost \$4.5 million dollars annually, with AISD matching this investment by greater than 2 to 1. Loss of the funding, which is quite possible under the new rules for the Early Start Grant, recently adopted by the Commissioner, would probably mean we would have to cut back on this essential program. That consequence would have a dramatic impact on student achievement throughout our system.

We have developed a standards-based pre-K program with a rigorous curriculum to build language development in these early years. Countless studies show that building this language foundation is crucial to later academic success, especially for urban school children who come to school without strong family support and readiness preparation.

As a result of the increased rigor offered through a full-day program, we have evidence of dramatic academic improvement:

- 76 percent of the pre-K students made gains on the *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test* (PPVT) and 78 percent of English Language Learners made gains on the *Test de Vocabulario en Imagenes Peabody* (TVIP).
- The average growth in receptive vocabulary on this assessment was 15 months for English-language students and 14 months for Spanish ELL students—more than two times the expected growth for 4-year-olds in a seven-month early childhood intervention program.
- Additionally, we have examined the long-term effects of our program. Sixty-three percent of the 2003-2004 pre-K cohort were enrolled in AISD in 2008 and took the grade 3 TAKS tests. These students who attended the AISD pre-K program were more likely to pass the reading and math Grade 3 TAKS assessments.

Austin ISD is an urban district serving students with great needs; in fact, our student population reflects more need now than it did in 1999, when the expansion grant was first put into law. In the past 10 years, AISD's population of English Language Learners has grown by 140 percent. Our student poverty rate has increased by 20 percent (from 50 percent to 60 percent of our 83,000 students). AISD has over 50,000 children from homes at or below the poverty level.

Full-day pre-K represents the values of the Austin community and district—to offer the very best opportunities for learning to all students and especially to our taxpayers and our working families who welcome and highly support the AISD model of full-day prekindergarten. We sincerely appreciate the opportunities the State Prekindergarten Expansion Grant has helped us provide to students in the past, and hope that those opportunities can continue and improve. We ask you to take a close look at the success Austin has had with our students as you consider Senate Bill 21.

Thank you for your belief in the public school children of Texas.