



Texas AFT

A Union of Professionals

www.texasaft.org

3000 S. IH-35
Suite 175
Austin, TX 78704

(512) 448-0130
(800) 222-3827
f: (512)448-0678

TEXAS AFT TESTIMONY TO THE SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE
REGARDING SB 300

February 24, 2009

Patty Quinzi, Texas AFT Legislative Counsel

Texas AFT is strongly opposed to SB 300 because it would weaken one of the most important foundations of a quality education—class-size limits.

Reducing class size is one of the best research-validated reforms that can significantly improve academic achievement. Providing individualized instruction in smaller class settings has been proven to narrow achievement gaps between white and minority students as well as between affluent and impoverished students. Texas has been nationally acknowledged as a leader for mandating a 22:1 student-teacher ratio in kindergarten-4th grade. Reducing these important standards to a district-level average will provide a clear message that Texas chooses to address budget constraints by lowering vital education standards.

Class size is properly recognized as a crucial issue under current law. Even under the excellence exemptions in Education Code Section 39.112, there is a requirement that the exempted campus or district submit to the commissioner a written plan showing steps that will be taken to ensure that the exemption from class-size limits will not be harmful to the academic achievement of the students affected.

Districts currently can obtain a temporary waiver of class-size limits, but to continue a waiver for more than two semesters they must notify the public to ensure that the community is aware of both the waiver request and the actions the district is taking to reduce the need for continued class-size waivers. State law also requires the district to notify parents about the specific classes that will be affected and to cite the number of students affected in particular classrooms. SB 300 would eliminate this process for public notice and justification of departures from class-size limits.

Parents want to know about class sizes because when class sizes are smaller there is increased teacher knowledge of student needs and more individualized attention for each student. That's why parents of all types of students—gifted, average, and struggling—are worried their child will get lost or ignored in large classrooms stuffed with as many desks as can physically fit in a room. By getting rid of the need for class-size waivers, SB 300 would cut parents and the community out of the process of identifying and addressing the constraints that lead districts to seek those waivers.

If SB 300 were to become law, districts with an already "academically unacceptable" accountability rating could increase class sizes at will, making matters even worse for their students. This bill also would cloud the accountability picture. Comparing one cohort of

students to another without considering vast and unidentified variations in class sizes will provide an inaccurate picture of how well an individual student or class of students is performing.

At several of the Texas High School Completion and Success Initiative Council meetings, council members heard from invited experts in the innovative fields of Early College High Schools and other High School Redesign Projects. An overarching theme among them all was the importance of building relationships between students and teachers. The council heard that at-risk students are particularly responsive to smaller class sizes and relationship-building. The current class-size limits in kindergarten through fourth grade make it easy to understand why elementary teachers have good student-teacher relationships. The small ratio helps elementary teachers get to know their students and their students' parents. One of the guiding principles of the council's strategic plan states that "dropping out of school is a process that can be predicted for most individual students as early as 4th/6th" grade. Without class-size limits for every classroom in grades K-4, educators will have less opportunity to identify and address individual students' needs at the earliest possible level, before more costly remediation is needed in later grades.

This committee should reject any statutory changes that encourage less individual attention to the needs of our students. If anything, the legislature should consider extending class-size limits to pre-kindergarten classes and to higher grade levels.

Excellence Exemptions

Expanding the current excellence exemptions in the Education Code also would diminish educational quality for schools that are on the verge of becoming "exemplary." Reducing standards for a "recognized" district will remove the quality standards that helped the district reach that point in the first place. In addition, the removal of these safeguards will have significant adverse impacts on the working environment for teachers who have helped their schools achieve excellent results.

The dilution of proven state standards that improve education quality is not the way to address district budget constraints. The real solution is to fund public schools to the full extent necessary to fulfill state standards.