

MEMORANDUM

To: Senate Education Committee

Re: SB443 and SB3

From: Leland Williams, Superintendent, Dickinson ISD

Date: March 8, 2011

With the cuts to Texas public schools currently being proposed, there will be a major impact on the public school children of Texas. Please make education a priority, minimize the impact on education, and give school districts the flexibility to weather the cuts that will ultimately be approved. Visionary leadership at this time is critical to the economy of Texas--for the near term as well as the long term. Together we have made giant strides over the past few years, but continuing progress is in jeopardy if leadership does not rise to the occasion.

It is obvious that some restructuring of school finance will be needed. Whether those structural changes come primarily from state actions or local actions, there will, no doubt, be significant changes required at the local district level. Superintendents and Boards of Trustees need the tools to put those changes in place. Currently our hands are tied in several areas in which the Legislature could give us some relief. Please consider:

- With raising taxes off the table this session, use a portion of the state's Rainy Day Fund for public education. The cuts being considered would impact funding significantly. Without raising new taxes, the only way the Texas Legislature could reduce the proposed cuts for public education is to rely on funding from the state's Rainy Day Fund. The Rainy Day Fund belongs to the state and it exists for emergencies. Public schools are in a state of emergency. If this is not an example of a "rainy day", I don't know what is.
- Support legislation to replace the current 22:1 class size limit with a more flexible system. The present waiver system requires the district to do paperwork that would be unnecessary if more flexibility were allowed at the local level. Establishing a cap of 25 students in those classes

would allow district leaders to spread the burden more equitably while still ensuring a manageable class size limit in those early grades. Our district has had to use the waiver process on several occasions over the past few years, as we have been in a fast-growth mode. The maximum number of waivers we have requested in one school year was 40. During that year, our maximum class size was 25, and yet, student performance on the state assessments did not decline. We actually saw results that exceeded prior year performances. Good teaching will rise above arbitrary boxes.

- Please help districts avoid layoffs. Dickinson ISD is committed to avoiding teacher layoffs during the 2011-2012 school year, but auxiliary and administrative positions will, no doubt, be impacted. Administrative support of teachers' efforts will be negatively impacted. Campus climate and safety could become a concern as a result, as well as District efforts to address continuing revisions in curriculum and assessment. Care of grounds and facilities, although important will also be impacted. Failure to maintain existing facilities is simply "mortgaging the future". Although the District has some "one-year" relief available in our local fund balance, the commitment to avoid teacher layoffs will expire after the 2011-2012 school year, because we cannot indefinitely rely on fund balance to cover recurring costs. Although layoffs are not in our plans, we will definitely not be able to hire the 10 to 20 teachers we would normally employ to handle growing enrollments. Those teachers we do not employ will not be adding to the local economy. Current state law prohibits school districts from decreasing the salary of full-time teachers, nurses, counselors, librarians, and speech pathologists below the 2010-11 salary level. Repealing this provision would allow districts to lower salaries of existing employees, reducing personnel costs to minimize or avoid layoffs. Dickinson ISD has already committed to reducing administrative and auxiliary costs by \$500,000. Further reductions will impact our ability to perform at a high level. Our plans to restrict employment of new teaching staff to cover growth will impact class sizes, and reduce the impact on the local budget by approximately \$1,000,000. We have developed a contingency plan that would allow the District to reduce the salaries and stipends of employees by another \$1,000,000, if that option were available to us. As we have discussed this option with staff, they have expressed willingness to accept a reduction in their salaries in order to save jobs. Districts need the flexibility to take difficult, decisive action in these difficult financial circumstances. Educators understand the situation we are in and are

willing to do our part—but, we need a change in the statutes to accomplish this task.

- Support legislation to allow school districts to temporarily furlough employees. Allowing districts the ability to temporarily furlough employees would provide districts financial flexibility while keeping teachers employed--and without reducing the number of days students attend school. This could save as much as \$130,000 per furlough day in Dickinson ISD. Some of this is included in the total amount of salary reduction noted above.
- Support legislation to change the deadline of notification regarding renewal of term contracts. Current law requires districts to provide notice of intent to non-renew a teacher's expiring contract 45-days prior to the last day of instruction. In order to meet the 45-day notification deadline, districts must send these notices out in mid-April. The 45-day nonrenewal notice deadline should be changed for several reasons: It is bad for students, as it occurs while teachers are administering the state tests; it is bad for teachers, because student test scores are not available in time to inform the district's personnel decisions; and it makes efficient budgeting and planning impossible, because staffing plans must be developed before districts know how much state funding they will receive. School districts need a permanent change to the notice deadline, making it at the end of the instructional year rather than mid-April to give district leaders the flexibility in the future to budget efficiently and, more importantly, to make sure students aren't negatively impacted.
- Failing to invest in today's schoolchildren is dangerous and ultimately unfair. Texas children need and deserve a quality education. If funding is cut for our schools, our students and the state's economy will pay the price. If cuts must be made, allow local districts the flexibility to accomplish the task with the least destruction to the good work of school district staff, and without creating significant backlash from patrons.

I urge you to boldly support the children of Texas with your votes and influence.