



NEWS RELEASE

Texas AFT

A Union of Professionals
www.texasaft.org

3000 South IH-35, Suite 175 ♦ Austin, Texas 78704-6536
512-448-0130 ♦ 1-800-222-3827
www.texasft.org

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
December 9, 2010

CONTACT: Rob D'Amico
Cell: 512-627-1343

Comptroller's idea to gut class-size cap would be a giant leap BACKWARDS in efforts to improve achievement

A state official's recommendation to scrap class-size limits and instead use an "average" class-size rule "will gut the intent of the law and will be a giant leap backwards in efforts to raise achievement," said Linda Bridges, president of Texas AFT, which represents 65,000 public school employees statewide.

State Comptroller of Public Accounts Susan Combs issued a report—The Financial Allocation Study for Texas (FAST) —Wednesday to rate school districts on their financial "efficiency" and highlight recommendations for cost savings. A prominent recommendation in the report is "eliminating the 22-student limit for each K-4 classroom and instituting an average 22-student class size instead."

"The most disturbing part of her recommendation is her absurd claim that 'classes with up to 25 students could operate without any loss of instructional effectiveness,'" Bridges said. "The comptroller has managed to ignore the results of decades of scholarly research and what parents and teachers know intuitively—smaller classes are better for children, especially disadvantaged children, and especially in the early grades."

Bridges noted that classes in grades K-4 include many specialized classes with small numbers of students based on special needs (e.g., students with disabilities). Averaging these classes together with regular K-4 classes on a district-wide basis would make it simple to pack many more students into each regular classroom and still maintain the façade of a 22-student limit "on average."

"The comptroller's report makes extravagant claims for the potential cost savings—running into the hundreds of millions of dollars—supposedly to be reaped if this policy were enacted," Bridges said. "But it's apparent that the report fails to take into account a crucial fact: namely, the fact that school districts under existing law already can easily obtain from the Texas Education Agency a waiver of the class-size cap based on a claim of financial hardship. Waiver requests almost never are refused."

An appendix to the comptroller's report acknowledges that waivers are widespread. The appendix also gets to the real issue when it states: "Many school officials, however, find the waiver process difficult, as parents must be notified of the district's intention to increase class sizes, and in some cases a public hearing must be held."

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“Some school officials don’t want to have to notify parents and community and explain why they want a waiver from class-size limits; they want to be able to increase class sizes without this sort of accountability to the parents of the children affected,” Bridges said.

Bridges added that many administrators take the opposite view, embracing the state law on class-size limits (with the flexibility already provided by the waiver provision for undue hardship) as one of the most successful education reforms ever enacted in this state.

And despite the drumbeat for doing away with any meaningful class-size limit, the public sides with parents, teachers, and enlightened school administrators on this question. As an independent July 2010 Texas Poll commissioned by the Texas Association of School Boards found, Texans strongly support class-size limits. In fact, that poll found support is so strong that even in the midst of severe economic distress 71 percent of Texans actually favored paying higher taxes to lower class size.

Bridges said the comptroller’s report also tries to make the “efficiency” argument to resurrect other bad ideas that have been rejected in past legislative sessions, involving teacher evaluation, salaries, and contract rights. “Texans have spent 20-plus years working to enact measures to improve teaching quality and student achievement, and while the comptroller is certainly free to outline possible cost savings for these measures, the truth should be told about the cost to Texas schoolchildren of losing potentially thousands of teachers. Students need their teachers in the classroom, not on the unemployment line.”

Texas AFT represents more than 65,000 teachers, paraprofessionals, support personnel, and higher-education employees across the state. Texas AFT is affiliated with the 1.4-million-member American Federation of Teachers.

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