

Texas school districts struggle with fund cuts

Respondents increasing class sizes, scaling back remedial programs

By TERRENCE STUTZ – Dallas Morning News, Nov. 18, 2011

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AUSTIN — School districts across Texas are increasing class sizes, scrapping student field trips and scaling back remedial classes in response to massive funding cuts by the Legislature this year, according to a survey of more than 3,500 teachers, school employees and parents.

The Web survey by the Texas AFT also showed that 92 percent of the respondents reported the loss of jobs by teachers or other employees in their school districts in the wake of the unprecedented funding reductions.

While the survey was not scientific, it did get responses from 3,549 school employees and parents — with nearly 14 percent of the total coming from the Dallas school district. That was the largest bloc of respondents in the survey.

“The numbers reported for layoffs and larger classes confirm the direct impact on classroom instruction,” Texas AFT President Linda Bridges said in releasing the survey findings on Thursday.

The results and comments from teachers in the survey are “a clear signal that classroom conditions for many are at a breaking point that is imperiling children’s educational opportunities,” she said.

“Our teachers are doing their best to mitigate the damage of these cuts, but it’s disturbing to hear how much less time they have ... preparing for their classes, grading papers and trying to meet the expectations for achievement on the more rigorous STAAR exam this spring.”

For example, she noted, larger classes and the loss of teacher aides mean less time for teachers to spend with individual students who need more attention.

The teachers group conducted the survey to gauge the impact of the \$5.4 billion in cuts to public education approved by the Legislature earlier this year. Regular funding was reduced \$2 billion per year over the next two years, and another \$1.4 billion in state grants — including a merit pay program for teachers — also was cut.

Lawmakers enacted the reductions to help offset a \$23 billion revenue shortfall caused by the state’s sluggish economy and the failure of the state’s business tax to produce as much revenue as originally projected.

Size of reductions

School districts in North Texas and across the state saw reductions this year — averaging 3.3 percent — a figure that was held down because of federal stimulus money distributed to schools. Next year, the cuts will more than double for Dallas and other area districts, which face decreases of up to 8.6 percent.

“Gov. Rick Perry, Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst and other state leaders are spinning a tale of balancing the state budget while maintaining adequate funding for public education. The real truth about the severe harm of these cuts is portrayed in the survey results and the stories we have heard from teachers across the state,” Bridges said.

Dewhurst has continued to defend the budget passed by the Legislature and insists that the state put more money into education in the current biennium than in the previous two-year budget.

“Under the old law, we were expected to increase our funding for public education by \$8 billion,” Dewhurst said Thursday at an event sponsored by the Texas Tribune. “We increased our funding for public education by almost \$4 billion. Only in government if you expect an \$8 billion increase and get \$4 billion is that a cut.”

But educator groups and others have noted that the new state budget among other things did not even pay for student enrollment increases this year or next.

Regarding layoffs and elimination of jobs, 85 percent of those responding to the survey said teaching positions were cut in their districts this year, while 79 percent said teacher aide jobs were trimmed. The next-highest job categories cited by respondents were clerical workers (47 percent), custodians (45 percent) and special education teachers (44 percent).

“Advocates for special education will be disheartened to hear that 44 percent of respondents reported layoffs of special education teachers,” Bridges said, adding that has led to larger special education classes across the state.

Class sizes

On regular classes, nearly nine out of 10 respondents said there were increases in both elementary and secondary class sizes in their schools. Although there are no strict caps on class size in upper grades, there is a 22-pupil limit in kindergarten through fourth grade — a standard that school districts can get excused from this year if their funding has been cut.

In addition, one out of six respondents working in junior high or high schools reported class sizes of 35 or more students in core-subject-area classes.

The survey also asked about the impact of the funding reductions on programs and services offered in schools.

Nearly four out of five respondents said there were reductions in programs serving students, including more than half who cited the loss of tutorial classes for low achievers and elimination of some elective courses.

Teachers and other school employees also were asked to describe the climate for students, teachers and staff at their campuses — with four out of five saying conditions were “worse” or “much worse” than last year.

In addition, they cited several items or areas affected by the lower funding levels, including classroom materials and supplies, technology, paper and field trips.

Texas AFT and other educator groups have pointed to an increased number of teachers this year who are using personal funds to pay for classroom supplies.

“Supply budgets have been drastically cut,” wrote one teacher who responded to the survey. “This impacts the learning environment, because we lack basic supplies for students. Teachers have to utilize their own funds for supplies or do without.”

Another teacher — reflecting the lower morale in some schools — wrote, “This is the first year, out of 11, that I regret teaching. I dread coming to work.”