

A NUMBERS GAME

In the wake of two failed special sessions, Texas Governor Rick Perry held a press conference this past week to declare that “The Legislature has not acted on education reforms, but I will.” In effect, Mr. Perry believes that school districts aren’t spending a large enough fraction of taxpayer dollars directly on classroom instruction, and therefore that, over time, this should account for not less than 65% of school district budgets. Who knew that executive fiat could so easily accomplish what our representatives have not? This, of course, begs the question of why the Governor ordered up not one, but two sessions in the first place. I guess we’ll have to wait for an answer to that one, but in the mean time let me offer some analysis of the mandate, some alternatives for how to view education spending, and what the impact of this edict might be.

First, it seems logical to PISD to remove capital outlays (buses, land, and buildings), debt service (long-term capital leases), and food service and transportation costs from the district’s general fund expenditures to more fairly compare basic operational expenses from one district to another. I agree.

Next, did you know that campus leadership (i.e. our principals and their assistants) is not currently classified as an instructional cost. Translation: the Texas Education Agency (TEA) does not at present consider the presence of these individuals in schools as a necessary component of educating our kids. Huh? PISD estimates that if these “function codes” were re-classified according to the above suggestions, PISD’s audited financial statements for the year ending on August 31st, 2004 would reflect instructional costs totaling 68.8% of the district’s overall budget (as opposed to the 55.6% derived from the current “principal-not-required” model).

Finally, consider this example of how the 65% rule might affect rural Texas school districts small in numbers of students but large in area should the code assignments not change. Given that a school bus costs \$75,000 these days, a district would need to find greater than \$200,000 to purchase that bus (so that its cost does not exceed 35% of the added budget burden)! This would amount to roughly an additional four percent on, say, a five million dollar budget. Surely this is not what the Governor envisions.

Why listen to Pearland ISD? Well, your school district just happens to be managing the financial aspects of building and opening an average of one new educational facility per year for several years running, and doing so on less than 60% of what the state of Texas allows as a debt-service tax allocation. Perhaps Mr. Perry could use PISD’s advice as well. In fact, he’ll get it. Our own Dr. Cain will serve on a select committee of district superintendents from across the state to advise TEA Commissioner Shirley Neely concerning implementing this new rule. The message she and others will carry to the Commissioner couldn’t be clearer—yes it takes teachers to educate our kids, but it also requires buses, food in our children’s stomachs, and campus administrators to make it all happen. Good luck, Bonny!

*Dr. Dave Watson
President, Board of Trustees
Pearland Independent School District*