



Texas Teacher

A Union of Professionals

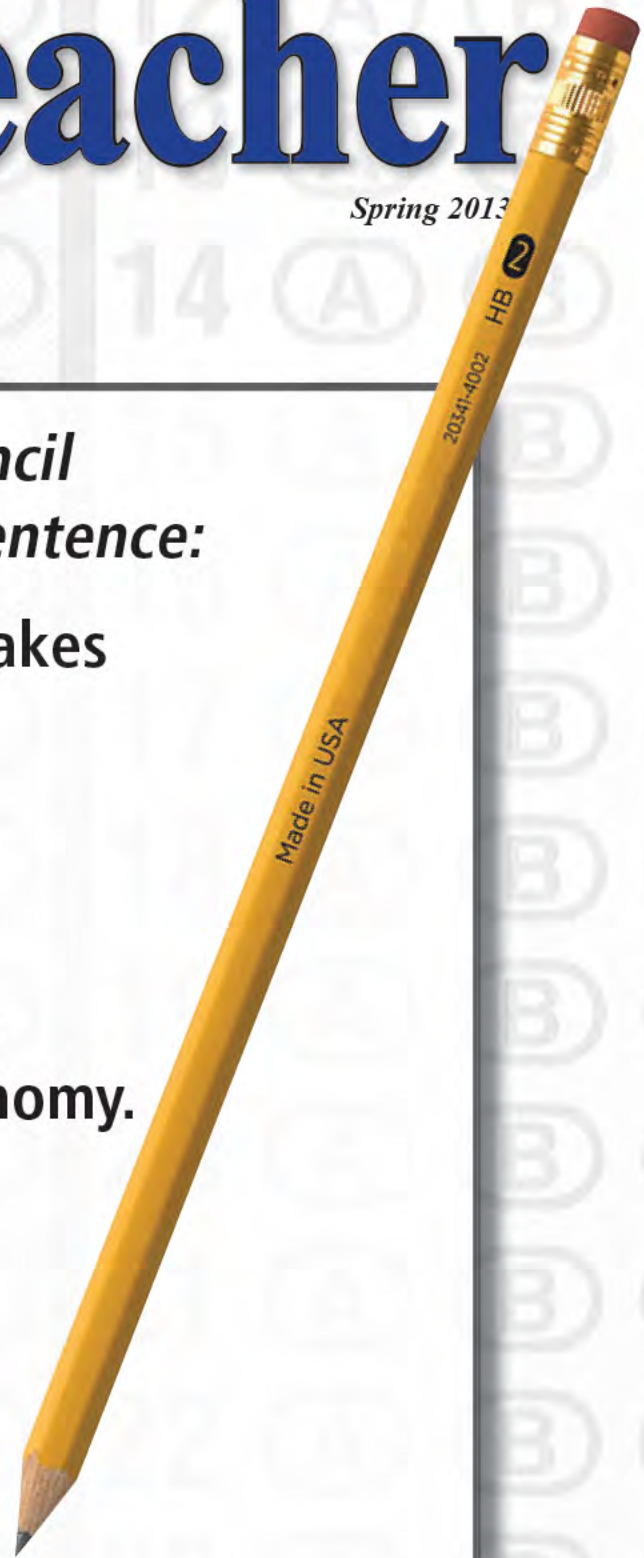
Spring 2013

***Please take out your No. 2 pencil
and complete the following sentence:***

**Our state's fixation on high-stakes
standardized testing ...**

- ☐ A Improves the quality of
public education.**
- ☐ B Prepares our students to
compete in a global economy.**
- ☐ C Improves the quality
of teaching.**
- ☐ D None of the above.**

***If you answered "D," go
to the head of the class!***



Attend the 2013 Convention and Professional Issues Day

Important information on attendance, rules and deadlines

Make plans now to attend the Texas AFT Convention Friday, June 21, through Sunday, June 23, 2013, at the Westin Houston Memorial City. The Texas AFT Convention is the primary policy-making body of the union.

The vitality of the union depends upon democratic participation in the convention by delegates from all local unions in good standing. As always, resolutions and constitutional amendments will be in the hands of the delegates, who will set the policies and elect the two Texas AFT officers. The three-day event will give members an opportunity to shape the direction Texas AFT will take over the next two years.

The convention will come to order at 2 p.m. on Friday, June 21, 2013. On Friday, convention committees will make recommendations on submitted resolutions. On Saturday, we will focus on professional issues with our keynote speaker Francine Lawrence, executive vice-president of the American Federation of Teachers. Convention attendees will then have a choice between three sets of professional issues workshops, plus our awards luncheon. Officer elections will take place Saturday evening.

On Saturday night, we will feature a private showing of "The Revisionaries," a must-see film about the reign of error at the State Board of Education, followed by a special presentation by SBOE watchdog Kathy Miller of the Texas Freedom Network. All Saturday events and workshops are open to non-delegate



members who register for the single day as well as to the credentialed convention delegates. Sunday will consist of action on proposed amendments, resolutions and other convention business. The convention will conclude by 3 p.m. Sunday, or when business is finished.

Representation

Please read the following information carefully. The constitutional provisions for Texas AFT Conventions have been adopted to assure Texas AFT members of representation in their governing body. Delegates must be nominated and elected according to the Texas AFT Constitution and the Landrum-Griffin Act. The credential process must be followed so convention officers can be sure that the will of the local membership prevails.

How to determine the number of delegates for each local union

The Texas AFT Constitution provides that a local shall be entitled to one delegate for 25 members or fewer and one more delegate for each additional 25 members (or fraction thereof). Only locals in good standing may send delegates (Texas AFT Constitution, Article VII, Section 6). For the 2013 convention, this means locals must be current on per-capita payments

through May 2013.

Resolutions, policies and positions

Resolutions, proposed policies and positions for the organization are submitted in the form of resolutions, which are due in the Texas AFT office no later than May 31, 2013, so that copies may be shared with delegates. They may be introduced by locals of Texas AFT, the Texas AFT Executive Council or the Texas AFT president. Resolutions submitted by local unions are to be approved by the executive board or membership of the local and signed by the president of the local. Each resolution needs to be submitted in typed form with a title. Submit to: Resolutions, Texas AFT, 3000 S. IH-35, Suite 175, Austin, Texas 78704.

Constitution and By-Laws amendments

Texas AFT locals may submit amendments to the Texas AFT Constitution and By-Laws to the Convention as provided in Article VIII of the Texas AFT Constitution. All proposed amendments should state the article and section to be amended and should include both the current wording and proposed change. The proposed change must be signed by the president of the local certifying that it has been

approved by the executive board or membership meeting of the local and transmitted to the secretary-treasurer of Texas AFT. The Executive Council of Texas AFT may also submit proposed changes to the Convention.

Deadline for amendments

Amendments must reach the Texas AFT state office by May 10, 2013. A two-thirds vote is necessary for the amendments to the Constitution to be adopted at the Convention. A majority vote is necessary for the By-Laws amendments to be adopted at the Convention.

Convention committees and delegate forms

Texas AFT will mail information to local unions regarding the new online delegate registration procedure and required credential lists from the locals. Elected delegates will indicate their choice of committee assignment at the time of registration. All credentials and forms are to be submitted to Texas AFT no later

than May 31, 2013.

Convention fees and registration

The cost for the convention (including the professional issues day) is \$65. An "early bird" registration fee of \$50 is available through May 31, 2013. Delegates must register through the local union. Individuals attending only the "We Are The Solution" professional issues day may get registration information from their local union, organizing committee or a staff representative. The fee for single day is the same: \$65, or \$50 if paid by May 31, 2013.

Hotel reservations

The room rate at the Houston Westin Memorial City is \$109 per night, single or double, plus hotel taxes (17 percent).

Delegates and attendees may register with the hotel online via a link provided on our convention page at docs.texasaft.org/convention, or they may call the hotel directly at 1-800-937-8461 and ask for the special Texas AFT convention rate.

Professional Issues Day Workshops and Panels

Below is a sampling of the workshops and panels offered on Professional Issues Day on June 22.

- * The Value of Investing for Texas School Employees
- * Preventing, Preparing for, and Responding to School Violence
- * PSRPs: Advocating for your Profession
- * The Unintended Consequences of Using Value-Added Measures to Evaluate Teachers and Students
- * Managing Anti-Social Behavior
- * Bullying in the Workplace
- * Helping Children Grieve
- * Reading Comprehension
- * Autism in the General Education Classroom
- * Using Social Media in the Classroom
- * Beyond Stress Management
- * Autism Awareness
- * Thinking Math
- * What's New? More Benefits for You!
- * Teacher Evaluation Panel Discussion
- * Teaching Economics in Elementary Classrooms
- * Developing Student Leaders through Differentiated Learning

**For more information, see:
docs.texasaft.org/convention**



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Texas Teacher

Texas Teacher is the award-winning publication of Texas AFT, an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO, and is printed quarterly.

To be added to our mailing list, contact Rob D'Amico at 800-222-3827 or editor@texasaft.org.



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Are schools getting safer? Surveys say...



Linda Bridges
Texas AFT President

Texas AFT has been compiling data on your views concerning school safety since 1993 with a series of periodic surveys. Much of the early data was used to push for

passage of the Safe Schools Act in 1995. The Safe Schools Act was codified in Chapter 37 of the Education Code and created teacher authority to remove disruptive students from the classroom. It also placed responsibility with the school principal to ensure proper support and placement of the disruptive students or those who have committed dangerous or illegal acts.

Our most recent survey conducted through January and February—with some 2,000 respondents—provides yet another indication of how well Texas is doing in providing safe schools for children.

First, let's look at correct implementation of the Safe Schools Act. In 2008, only about one-third of the respondents said that their district had tried to enforce the Safe Schools Act. In 2013, that figure remained the same.

Another key provision of the law is the creation at the campus level of a Placement Review Committee. This three-member committee is tasked with determining placement of the student when the teacher refuses the return of the student to his or her classroom. Two members of the committee are teachers chosen by the teachers at the campus, with the third designated by the principal. Survey results show that only 17.4 percent of the campuses are following the law

with regard to the Placement Review Committee.

Unfortunately, the answer “not sure” continues to be astoundingly high for whether the district is trying to enforce the Safe Schools Act (45 percent unsure), whether campuses are using Placement Review Committees as intended (48 percent unsure), and even whether the respondent's campus has a committee (54 percent unsure). Those results mirror previous survey data and clearly indicate that districts still are not doing enough to educate school employees about the

Texas AFT's surveys have always asked respondents for solutions. The top solution historically has been more uniform enforcement of the rules by administrators.

Safe Schools Act. Texas AFT has been instrumental in providing ongoing Safe Schools Act trainings across and distributing hundreds of thousands of brochures outlining the specifics of the law, but it's a daunting challenge trying to educate teachers in more than 1,000 school district statewide.

One group of employees not granted the power to remove disruptive students is school bus drivers. Survey participants were clear on their support for giving school-bus drivers more authority to

remove disruptive students from their buses in order to maintain safety and order (95.1 percent support). To address this need, state Representative Alma Allen (D-Houston) has filed HB 2367 and Senator Leticia Van de Putte (D-San Antonio) has filed SB 1541 granting more disciplinary authority for bus drivers.

When Texas AFT started documenting discipline conditions in our schools two decades ago, more than 80 percent of our survey respondents indicated that there were significant discipline problems in their schools. In 2002, this number had dropped to under 60 percent. Unfortunately, in 2013 this number has started a slight upward climb to 62.6 percent.

Survey results throughout the years also have indicated a serious problem with student profanity in the schools, with abusive language directed both at other students and staff. This trend continues to rise in 2013 to 91 percent. It was under 60 percent in 2002. Students assaulting other students (without a deadly weapon) took a dip in 2002 to around 41 percent. In 2013, this problem rose to 58.2 percent.

Texas AFT's surveys have always asked respondents for solutions. The top solution historically has been more uniform enforcement of the rules by administrators. This was a top issue with over 80 percent of the respondents in 1996; but in 2004, only around 51

Significant Problems with Student Misbehavior

PROBLEM	2008	2013
Failure to do homework	71.3%	74.9%
Abusive/profane language	60.9%	65.1%
Abusive/profane language directed at staff	20.5%	26.1%
Unexcused absences	52.1%	59%
Unexcused tardies	51%	54.9%
Vandalism of school property	41.3%	38.7%

percent of the respondents rated this as a top concern. In 2013, this issue took an upward turn with 74.6 percent of the survey participants indicating this was a top priority. (A vast majority of additional comments in the most recent survey also noted a severe problem with uniform enforcement.)

Our survey this year added a few new questions in response to the school shootings that have occurred across the country. Respondents indicated that teachers in the classroom should not be armed with guns (61.3 percent). Sixty-five percent of the respondents indicated that only law-enforcement and school-security officers should be responsible for any armed response to an attack like the one in Newtown, Connecticut.

Participants in the survey offered many comments on school discipline. Here are a few of the responses.

- *I think disruptive behavior, lack of student motivation, and poor student attendance should stop being blamed on teachers...assign it back to the responsible parties, which are students and parents.*
- *Each year we start out with mostly minor problems, and when administration does nothing (the students' own words), the behaviors get increasingly worse. Teachers have a very limited authority for discipline and the students are aware of it. The teachers with the best classroom management at our school are losing ground because there is no backup from administration. Despite consistency in the classroom, student offenses are escalating in occurrence and severity.*
- *Budget cuts have caused school districts to remove School Resource Officers. I think that is a tragedy! SROs are trained professionals and should be on each and every campus in the state.*

- *The solution to gun violence is not to turn schools into mini prisons with armed guards. The solution is to provide the support, solutions, and funds to address the social problems that teachers alone in their 45-minute classrooms cannot fix and yet are accountable to overcome for the purposes of state testing.*
- *The solution is the equitable allocation of state money so that all schools can benefit from safe schools equipped with the infrastructure, social support, and technology to keep up with the changing times.*
- *Cyber bullying is a tremendous issue. When done anonymously there are no repercussions.*
- *Most of the problems in my school are a direct result of doubling the student population in the last five years. The school is at 150 percent capacity with most class sizes having gone from 22-25 to 30-35.* 🇹🇽

San Antonio leader awarded AFT's highest honor for PSRPs

Rachel Martinez, a long-time champion of PSRPs and their efforts to gain rights and respect in the workplace, recently was awarded the Albert P. Shanker Pioneer Award.

The award was presented in March at the AFT PSRP Conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and is given to union members who have:

- Demonstrated leadership skills in the union, on the job and in the community;
- been a leader in the fight to win recognition for the important work PSRPs do in our nation's schools;
- overseen development and implementation of innovative programs to address PSRP issues and concerns;
- been active and a leader at all levels of the union; and
- through their work, made the union and our schools a better place for PSRPs and our students.

Martinez—executive vice president of the San Antonio Alliance of Teachers and Support Personnel—started her career as a

parent volunteer, and was hired in 1994 by San Antonio ISD as a community liaison after the district noted her skills in working with parents and school

employees. She quickly found a home as an active member of the local union and became part of its leadership team in 2003.

"We're fortunate to have a union leader who always is at the forefront in looking out for PSRPs," said Texas AFT President Linda Bridges. "A lot of the work Rachel has done has been emulated by our other local unions, so she's a role model, a mentor and last but not least, someone who is relentless in seeking solutions for the challenges PSRPs face in the workplace."

Martinez has successfully led school employees in efforts to gain respect and



Rachel Martinez

professional development opportunities, ensure overtime pay, stop privatization of core services, protect the health and safety of employees, and garner higher pay.

"AFT's Albert Shanker Pioneer is a force to be reckoned with," noted Tom Moran, director of AFT's PSRP division, who presented the award. "There is a quote in Spanish that I believe describes our pioneer's approach to solving problems that face her union and her members: 'A grandes males, grandes remedios,' or 'Big troubles call for big remedies.'"

Bridges added, "Congratulations to Rachel, and we're looking forward to even more advocacy on behalf of our PSRPs in the future." 🇹🇽

You can learn more about Rachel Martinez and her efforts in her column for the Texas AFT PSRP Report.

Current publication and archives are at www.texasaft.org (Click on "News > Publications & Reports").



May the CIRcle be unbroken



Louis Malfaro
Secretary-Treasurer

Comprehensive Immigration Reform (CIR) is long overdue for Texas and the nation

A lot of people think I'm Hispanic. It is true that I am a certified bilingual education teacher, that I speak Spanish, that I lived in Mexico, and that my forbears include Mediterranean and American-Indian people. But my birth certificate says I'm a White guy from

New Jersey. I grew up self-identifying as Italian American. Both sets of my dad's grandparents were born in Italy and immigrated to the United States. Mom's people were Irish, English, and American-Indian—a mix of many nations. When I was in school, if some kid wanted to trash-talk my ancestry, he'd call me a WOP. It was only as an adult that I learned the derivation of this pejorative: Without papers –WOP.

There are a lot of people who have come to the United States in the last 20 years without papers. They live in cities and towns all across Texas and the United States. They cook our food, build our houses, start small businesses, work in our fields, clean our buildings, and watch our kids. We are educating their children in our public schools with the hope and knowledge that these children will grow up and take their places among the bricklayers, small-business owners, manufacturers, chefs, engineers, medical technicians, attorneys, bus drivers and school

As educators, we don't just teach kids, we work with families and communities. Many of us have seen firsthand the difficulties and injustices faced by families who have had to live for years in fear and uncertainty on the margins of our society. The situation demands our attention and advocacy.

teachers our economy will need to ensure future prosperity. We also educate them in the hope and knowledge that they will become part of the citizenry of Texas and the nation—a citizenry that will build upon the foundation of American democracy we bequeath to them. This cycle of immigration and integration has been and continues to be one of the great engines of American prosperity; hardworking, ambitious, hungry (literally and figuratively) men and women (and their children) coming to America to make a new life for themselves.

Like most bilingual teachers, I taught immigrant children. I visited my students' homes, ate at their kitchen tables, and

helped get them to the clinic when they were sick, brought gifts at the holidays, and mourned with the family when the father of a student died in a construction site accident. As educators, we don't just teach kids, we work with families and communities. Many of us have seen firsthand the difficulties and injustices faced by families who have had to live for years in fear and uncertainty on the margins of our society. The situation demands our attention and advocacy.

The American Federation of Teachers and the AFL-CIO have taken a leadership role in promoting needed change to our nation's broken immigration system. For people who have lived peacefully as undocumented workers in our country, there must be a fair and expeditious process to gain legal permanent residency with an eventual opportunity to earn citizenship. For the children we teach in our schools who were brought to this country by their parents as minors, there must be a path to citizenship once they have completed their schooling.

Secure borders and a better system of ensuring that employers hire only workers who have legal permission to work in this country are needed as well. A system of immigration that allows families to reunite, identifies true workforce needs based on unbiased labor market analysis, and continues to welcome those who seek to escape repression in their home countries must be part of this Comprehensive Immigration Reform (CIR).

The re-election last November of President Barack Obama with the support of large majorities of Asian and Latino voters has created a political opening to address these long-needed changes. AFT and the AFL-CIO are working with elected officials of both political parties along with representatives from business and organizations that advocate for and empower the undocumented. Our goal is the creation of a modern immigration system that will meet not only our nation's workforce needs but also the civic needs of this democracy.

Among the things that make our nation unique is the plethora of immigrant histories that blend into the tapestry that defines us as a pluralistic democracy. My story is likely similar to many of your stories, and whether our ancestors started out in Africa, Europe, Asia, or Latin America or were here to begin with, we have coalesced as a people and have historically welcomed the stranger and made him our countryman. This is not a matter of charity; it is a matter of self-interest and of building upon what has been an historical strength of our nation.

May the circle of minting new Americans be unbroken, and may we as educators continue in our critically important role of teachers and leaders of families and communities in creating a more perfect union. 🇺🇸

Helping disadvantaged kids reach their college dreams

Nonprofit assists with enrollment, ‘college persistence’

By Rob Patterson

College Forward (www.collegeforward.org) is an innovative nonprofit that helps disadvantaged high school students get into four-year colleges and universities and then offers continued assistance to ensure that they graduate. Austin residents Lisa Fielder and Doreen Wise kicked off the idea in 2003 as a pilot program for two Hays Consolidated ISD schools. College Forward has since expanded to 12 Austin-area high schools as well as five Houston high schools.

The program begins in the junior year of high school with one-on-one guidance through the college application and financial aid process, as well as help studying for and passing the SAT and ACT tests. Once students enroll in higher education, the organization’s College Coaches and College Persistence Coaches—AmeriCorps members who have graduated from college—monitor the students and offer resources to help them graduate.

The nonprofit’s rate of success attests to its effectiveness. Some 85 percent of its students have graduated. Last year, 99 percent of College Forward students graduated high school and were accepted at 125 colleges and universities.

Texas Teacher asked Lisa Fielder, College Forward’s chief executive officer, to highlight the organization’s challenges and successes and outline how teachers and counselors could assist in supporting the program.

Texas Teacher: What in your background led you to start College Forward?

Fielder: Growing up (in Pecos, Texas), I had students in my class who—because they were ‘from across the tracks’ or spoke with an accent—received a different education and less support than I did for a variety of reasons. When, 25 years later, I realized this was still happening, I decided to find a way to give low-income students the same knowledge, socio-emotional preparation, and ongoing guidance that more privileged kids often get at their kitchen tables.

Texas Teacher: What are the biggest challenges for disadvantaged students in getting into college?

Fielder: Not just a lack of knowledge about all the steps that are required, but the courage to attempt them.

Texas Teacher: What are the key ways that College Forward helps a disadvantaged student become college-ready?

Fielder: About 12 years ago, a study showed that low-income students hear 20 million fewer words than high-income students do by the time they graduate from high school, just in the course



College Forward CEO Lisa Fielder (left) with College Forward’s first college graduate, Eiliana Martinez

of their daily lives. One of the words they haven’t heard much is “college” – they don’t get to listen to mom and dad reminisce about their college days, describe their experiences, or tell encouraging or cautionary tales.



We have two years to make up for that, to ensure that our students not only hear the word “college” 5,000 times, but that they also hear the stories, the tales of triumph and failure, that will set expectations and prime them for success when they get to campus. We also encourage families to be part of the process, and to give parents the information they need to support their students’ college aspirations and decisions.

Texas Teacher: What aspects of your program can teachers adopt to help their disadvantaged students become college ready?

Fielder: Believe in them. Show in every word, gesture, and glance that you believe they not only can be successful in college, but that they will be wildly successful in college and in life. Offer to help them through every step of the college admission process, one at a time, and cheer wildly as they complete every step.

Texas Teacher: How can schools in Austin and Houston become part of the program?

Fielder: As we have the resources to add high schools, we seek partners who enroll significant numbers of low-income students (33 percent to 89 percent economically disadvantaged) and whose policies support college success for all students. It also helps when schools can provide financial support, of course!

Texas Teacher: How can Texas educators help College Forward get started in their cities?

Fielder: In much the same way—by providing long-term financial support. If, say, schools in El Paso would like to bring College Forward there, they can help by getting us funding from their district or corporate sponsors or grants, to name a few sources. 🇹🇽

Texas AFT Lobby Day and Rally 2013



Some 3,000 Texas AFT members converged on the state Capitol on March 11 from all across Texas to lobby their legislators to restore school funding, reduce the state's over-reliance on high-stakes testing, oppose private-school vouchers, and bolster Teacher Retirement System pensions. AFT members from Brownsville to the Panhandle, from deep East Texas to far West Texas spent the better part of the day visiting their area lawmakers one by one to make the case for public education.

Speakers at a mid-day rally on the main steps of the Capitol put an exclamation point on key messages of the day. Sen. Wendy Davis (D-Fort Worth) lambasted the state comptroller for giving the 2011 legislature an official budget estimate that understated by \$8.8 billion the amount of money lawmakers would have to spend. That "colossally bad" budget forecast had a lot to do with the ensuing \$5.4 billion in education cuts, Davis said.



"Our Kids, Our Future" was the recurring theme sounded by Texas AFT President Linda Bridges, Secretary-Treasurer Louis Malfaro, and others who addressed the throng of Texas AFT members under a perfect blue sky in downtown Austin.





Testing changes are certain, but will they fix the key problem?

On March 27, the Texas House gave initial approval to HB 5, which reduces the number of end-of-course (EOC) exams in high school from 15 to 5. It also eliminates the 4x4 plan for graduation (four years required of English, math, science and social studies) in favor of a foundation program with one year less of science, or a distinguished program with options of more math and science. HB 5 also eliminated the required use of EOC scores for grade points average calculations. Similar bills were expected to be debated by the Texas Senate after *Texas Teacher* deadline. (You can see a full wrap-up of the changes from House and Senate bills at www.texasaftblog.com/hotline.)

While the debate raged over the graduation-path options, none of the 165 amendments presented to HB 5 succeeded in tackling the fundamental problem with the accountability system—that high-stakes testing ends up being misused to punish schools, inappropri-

ately evaluate and compensate teachers, and harm students with teaching to the test and excessive test preparation.

Nor did HB 5 address overtesting in grades 3-8. Rep. Jimmie Don Aycock (R-Killeen) told colleagues that he wanted to keep a tight rein on his bill and that any changes to testing for grades 3-8 or specific alignment of testing with accountability ratings would have to be dealt with in different legislation.

Momentum from a wave of high school parents dissatisfied with the number of EOCs and their use for GPAs clearly spurred a resounding victory for HB 5 on a vote of 147-2. Opportunities still exist in other bills for addressing both the misuse of test scores and the overtesting in lower grades. But it remains to be seen if those bills will be stifled by a legislative leadership content with throwing a bone to parents and educators hungry for more changes in the system.

Guest Column: Allowing teaching back in the classroom

By Dineen Majcher

President of Texans Advocating for Meaningful Student Assessment (TAMSA)

When outrage over the new STAAR tests started spreading among parents, part of the outrage was due to the clear impact that these tests would have on classroom instruction. As parents, we learn what goes on in our children's classrooms by listening to them tell us what happened that day, by sometimes following up with the teacher, by talking with other parents and reading school information. We stay informed because we realize how vital education is to our children's future and how a lifelong love of learning is gained at an early age. During the first few weeks of school every year, we ask our children at least two questions: do you like your teacher and are you making friends? We understand the importance of making connections in the classroom because these connections help keep our students engaged and wanting to be in school. As children interact in the classroom, they are making personal, conceptual, and experiential connections. However, when standardized tests like STAAR are valued above all else that

is done in the classroom and when they are used to close down schools, then the time for making connections is replaced by filling in circles on scantron sheets.

As many of us could see where the new STAAR tests would lead, we made our own connections in our communities and throughout Texas and formed TAMSA – Texans Advocating for Meaningful Student Assessment. We started with the notion that tests can be useful and meaningful; if developed properly, they can be one indicator of how our children are learning. Yet, it was easy to see even before the first administration of the STAAR tests in 2012 that the sheer number of tests and particularly the corresponding high stakes were creating a nightmare and strangling real learning. Over the last year, we have talked to hundreds of parents, teachers, and business people who all understand the need for a more balanced approach to testing. We are delighted to have been instrumental



Dineen Majcher

in providing input on several bills this session that would reform the STAAR testing structure. It is also heartening to hear testimony from so many students and parents. Yet time is running short to get bills through both the House and Senate.

From what we have learned over the last year, we believe that effective ways to combat the detrimental effect of the high-stakes and costly STAAR tests are:

- Limit the number of STAAR tests for high school to three: this will allow enriched teaching back in the classroom. Also, millions of dollars that are currently going to the testing company can be redirected to classroom instructions.
- The state needs to fund additional instructions when students fail the STAAR tests for these tests to be meaningful, we need to act on the data and support students who need additional help. It is a dereliction of state responsibility to require students to pass standardized tests for graduation and yet provide no support when students fail.

Others have argued that what is not tested will not be taught. As parents, we have more confidence in our teachers and schools than to listen to such vacuous

statements. It is a fundamental fallacy today that one must impose a standardized test to ensure material is taught. In fact the opposite is true—teachers, if given the time for creativity and enrichment, can provide much deeper and more meaningful lessons to children than simply focusing on rote memorization for standardized tests. Yet

we also are not blind to the need to change an accountability system that relies almost exclusively on students' performance on STAAR tests. We are working hard to ensure that these changes will be made this session. We appreciate that changing the structure of public education can be challenging, but we are heartened by all

the legislators, parents, businesses and of course educators who now see the urgent need to do so. We need to stay true to our commitment as well and keep our voices strong. Join us and help us ensure that connections rather than standardized tests are part of our children's classroom experience. ➡

A few observations after a decade of fighting overtesting

Parent (and union professional) highlights his children's experiences with testing

By Rob D'Amico
Texas Teacher Editor

Texas AFT has been working to add balance to the world of school accountability as long as I've been here as the director of communications. The milestone of a decade spent fighting the misuse of testing is now on the horizon for me, and I wish I could be more encouraged by some of the momentum we've seen for eliminating some of the overtesting—particularly at the secondary level, where it's a near certain that many of the end-of-course (EOC) exams will be eliminated, as well as the requirement to factor in EOC scores for grade-point averages.

Unfortunately, we're not seeing a lot of traction in changing the heart of the problem, which is the perverse use of test scores to punish schools and teachers instead of gauging which students need help and how we can support them. Even worse, it seems as though the younger kids aren't getting any relief from overtesting at all, since not much has been advancing in the Legislature—at least at the time I write this—to address the incredible amount of time districts spend on test prep and benchmark tests. And as a parent of a fifth-grade boy and a third-grade girl, I see first-hand the damage done by overtesting and the environment surrounding the overwhelming belief in the need to succeed on the STAAR test.

I recall my fervor for trying to help spur change in the system as my son entered third grade, the first year of state-mandated testing with TAKS. The realization that he suddenly would be immersed in the

world of standardized testing without any positive changes coming was painful. I took some solace in the fact that his Austin ISD elementary school's teachers and administrators had pledged not to teach to



A snapshot of just a few of the many campaigns Texas AFT has waged against the misuse of testing over the past decade.

the test and to minimize the pressure put on kids to score well on the TAKS. But as I stood in the hallway the first week of school listening to the clamor of the classroom at the start of the day, I came across something both shocking and disheartening. Hanging on the wall was a poster his class had made with each student's little mug shot and their personal notes on what they wanted to achieve for the year. I was astounded that about two-thirds of these little notes were along the lines of, "Do well on the TAKS test." I realize that third-grade kids aren't the most creative little beings when asked to imagine what school will do for them, yet this poster project was an opportunity to fuel that kind of creative thinking, and instead it merely ended up a two-dimensional, miniature pep rally for the TAKS test.

That year I politely declined requests to

have my son tutored by teachers concerned about his performance on the impending TAKS test, as well as invites to the Saturday morning "TAKS camps" in the spring. (He ended up doing fine on the test.)

My son attended a different Austin ISD elementary school for fourth grade, which is where I met Edy Chamness, whose son was in my son's class. I affectionately call Edy a "nut," since she can be rather obsessive—and loud—about her battles against standardized testing, but I share her views and wish I had more of her passion. Edy, a former teacher, started Texas Parents Opt Out of State Tests, an informal group focused around a Facebook page where parents discuss their dislike for what is happening in schools and dialogue about whether or not they can, or will have their kids opt out of the STAAR tests.

It was with Edy that I shared one little triumph, in a case that illustrates the misplaced priorities Austin ISD has developed around the STAAR. On an October Friday, we learned that our sons' class was scheduled to take benchmark tests for four days in a row, up to "four to five hours" a day starting on the following Monday. It was disgusting that any school would test fourth-grade kids for such an intense block of time, and my wife and I quickly agreed with Edy to opt out our kids and pull them from school for the four days. We informed the principal of our objections and plans, and although Edy volunteered to do an "outdoor classroom" at the school or use the school's library and unused science lab for instruction of any opt-out kids, the principal nixed the idea. On Tuesday

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morning the principal called me with a mea culpa and said she had met with her fourth-grade team of teachers, all of whom agreed the four-day block was a mistake. To her credit, she rescheduled the remaining benchmarks and broke them up into separate days over two weeks. Edy continued to opt out, while I let my son take the benchmarks, since I was trying to show him that testing was part of life, that you should only take action against it when its purpose was being abused (even though I privately felt that an opt out would be appropriate as a statement against the entire testing system).

When I inquired with the district's curriculum director about the four-day benchmark scheduling, I got a rather frank reply. Scheduling was campus based, she said, and many campuses were choosing to lump benchmarks together to "develop stamina for the new STAAR test in the spring." Ouch.

In a reply to one of Edy's ongoing missives against testing the district wrote, "AISD continues to...reduce the number of assessments.... For example, in 2010-2011, the large majority of the beginning-of-the-year and end-of-year benchmarks were eliminated." Indeed, our local union—Education Austin—formed an "overtesting committee" that worked jointly with the district for some two years, resulting in the elimination of many benchmarks, or so I thought. When February of that fourth-grade year arrived, I learned that my son's class would have four more benchmarks. I was perplexed, because written reports of the overtesting committee noted that beginning-of-the-year (BOY) and end-of-the-year (EOY) benchmarks for fourth-grade reading, math and science were eliminated, leaving just one middle-of-the-year (MOY) set of benchmarks. My son already took benchmarks in October, I thought, so how could they be having another round in February?

The AISD curriculum director set me straight. "We did get rid of the BOY benchmarks," she said. "But we added another MOY." Ouch again. The district bragged about getting rid of one set of

tests, only to rename them and add them back. Even worse was the explanation: "We reassessed our position on benchmarks and added the additional MOY because of our concern over the new STAAR test in the spring."

This year, Edy asked me to have my kids join hers to testify at a state Senate Education Committee hearing on testing and accountability. I jumped at the chance, especially when I found out a benchmark test was scheduled that day for our children. The kids wrote their own testimony, nailed their delivery of it perfectly, and got to punctuate their comments with, "If I were not here at the Capitol testifying today, I would be spending up to four hours taking a benchmark test." It was an all-smiles event, with senators praising our kids and posing for pictures with them. I tried to smile as

...many campuses were choosing to lump benchmarks together to "develop stamina for the new STAAR test in the spring."

well, but I realized—as I mentioned before—that little relief was likely in sight for them in the lower grades.

I also now realize that I may have damaged my children to some extent. Their knowledge of my endless battles at work, comments my wife and I make openly about testing, and even the experience at the Capitol have left them jaded about school. Each morning they exhibit a more-than-average glumness about going to school and often declare, "I hate school," while getting their backpacks ready. As my wife noted on many occasions, these kids just aren't mature enough to understand the nuances of appropriate use of testing, the sickening influence of testing corporations, and the agenda of privatization buried in much of the "reform" movement. So have I been selfish in including my kids in the battle, perhaps using them as the best weapon we have to fight this insanity? Or is it an important lesson they may understand better later in life?

The mischievous side of me would love for them to do the Bartleby Project, which

urges students to write, "I would prefer not to take your test," on the assessment and hand it in. It's a nod to *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, which ironically was required reading for most students when I was in school. But alas, that probably would prove to be too rebellious for their maturity level.

As for the future, my wife and I will be opting out both our kids from the STAAR next month. I'm sure the Mothers Against Drunk Testing—the moniker given the up-in-arms suburban moms who likely will succeed in getting changes to EOCs—will be celebrating their success come the end of the legislative session. But I remain pessimistic that we'll see the real change needed to spare our youngest kids and our teachers from the harmful impacts of our broken accountability system. To reach that level of change will require a greater groundswell of objections from parents of elementary-age kids. Parents—even if they are not willing to opt out, or don't believe in the purpose of it—should write a letter (and make a phone call) to their principal, superintendent and school board, letting them know of their objections. And by all means, parents should not put up with excessive test prep or benchmarking at the expense of their child's learning or emotional and physical well being.

I also would love for teachers to take a greater stand against testing, to the extent of the Garfield High School teachers in Seattle, who refused to administer their standardized test and provoked a wave of likely changes to their testing systems there—a wonderful example of the power of collective action (although they still face possible disciplinary action). However, I realize that many teachers won't risk losing their jobs, particularly if they don't see their district leadership advocating for change. I've never been a teacher, and it's hard to say what I would do in your situation. But I have been working for teachers all these years, and I believe in the power of our union to work toward positive change. With that in mind, I think I would at least explore the idea of collective action with my peers. And collective action, as the Mothers Against Drunk Testing can attest, gets respect and results. 🇹🇽

Snapshots from the Session



Budget bills advance

The Texas Senate on March 20 bowed to the wishes of top state leaders and voted to continue deep education cuts for another two years under SB 1, the Senate draft of the state's 2014-2015 budget, on a lopsided 29-to-2 vote.

A day after the Texas Senate voted to restore just 28 cents on the dollar of the funding cut from public schools last session, Texas House budget writers voted to add a billion dollars to the \$1.5 billion proposed by the Senate for fiscal years 2014-2015—in effect raising the portion of funding restored to 46 cents on the dollar—not enough, but at least a move in the right direction. Coming so closely on the heels of the Senate's disappointing action, this House committee decision shows clearly that there is still potential for progress on education funding in the 2013 session.

House Appropriations chair Jim Pitts (R-Waxahachie) confirmed that further potential by also announcing his intent to add another \$500 million for public education in a supplemental spending bill for the current fiscal year 2013. House consideration of the budget could come as soon as April 4.

Back on the Senate side, Sen. Wendy Davis—one of two “no” votes on SB 1—also has filed a proposed constitutional amendment to let Texas voters decide if they want to use \$4 billion in the Rainy Day Fund to put an end to the ongoing cuts in public education.

TRS contribution rate proposals, threat of changing eligibility age for full retirement benefits

The Senate budget bill includes a state contribution rate to the Teacher Retirement System pension fund at 6.4 percent for fiscal year 2014 (beginning this September) while boosting it to 6.7 percent for fiscal year 2015. House budget writers

voted for a 6.6-percent state contribution rate for both years of the coming biennium. The right move would be to approve the TRS budget

request for a two-step increase in the state contribution rate, to 6.9 percent in fiscal 2014 and to 7.4 percent in fiscal 2015. The TRS pension fund is in good shape, but raising the state contribution rate substantially is the key to making a long-overdue cost-of-living increase for retirees feasible sooner rather than later.

However, other changes in state laws on TRS pension contributions—and benefits—may be pursued instead. Sen. Robert Duncan (R-Lubbock), chair of the Senate State Affairs Committee with

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jurisdiction over TRS and a key player on the Finance Committee, hinted that more work needs to be done on TRS funding, which leaves open the door for changes like raising the eligibility age for full retirement benefits.

A February TRS staff presentation to system trustees reported that efforts to raise the eligibility age for full retirement benefits to 62 were “gaining traction” at the legislature. Attempts to impose higher contribution rates on active employees for both the TRS pension fund and the TRS-Care plan for retired school employees also cannot be ruled out. There has been talk as well of curtailing TRS-Care eligibility for retirees under 65, who are not yet eligible for Medicare.

Texas AFT has a better idea for lawmakers: Step up and meet the state's neglected obligations instead of trying to shift still more costs onto active and retired school employees. Stay tuned for ways you can take action on this issue.


Plenty of bad bills still moving

The list of bad bills attacking education quality standards and seeking privatization of public schools is still long. HB 300, a bill by Rep. Jason Isaac (R-Dripping Springs) is cloaked in the rhetoric of local control, family empowerment, and flexibility to innovate. But underneath the rhetoric is a top-down control mechanism authorizing a school board, by a bare majority vote, to exempt itself from state quality standards that protect children and to open the door to private takeover of schools.

The quality safeguards that would be nullified include class-size limits, teacher certification, fair standards for students facing discipline, teacher contracts and due process, teachers' freedom to join and pay dues to the professional organization of their choosing, and state protections for bilingual-education students. HB 300 also would allow “third-party school management organizations” to take over operation of neighborhood schools.

Still in committee at *Texas Teacher* deadline was SB 2, by Sen. Dan Patrick (R-Houston), which would expand the cap on charter schools. Patrick's bill has faced tough critiques from his peers in the Senate about charter proliferation without adequate assurance of improved charter quality, despite a long history in Texas of predominantly inferior charter performance. But Patrick is angling for unlimited expansion of some types of charters.

Also in the works are several private-school voucher bills, most couched in terms of “tax credit scholarships,” although House leadership has downplayed chances for passage in that chamber.

SB 115 by Sen. Tommy Williams (R-The Woodlands), a bill to make all Texas students with disabilities eligible for private-school vouchers, also drew strong opposition from a broad array of witnesses, including parents of disabled children and advocates for those with disabilities, in a Senate Education Committee hearing in early March. 

Locals and Members in Action

Professional development academy prepares members to train peers

Some 70 Houston-area Texas AFT members recently beefed up their skills on a variety of classroom instruction and management topics in February at a professional development academy sponsored by several local Texas AFT unions. The academy also included “train the trainer” programs to prepare teachers to present academic workshops to enhance teaching for their peers.

Topics included: “Using Social Media in the Classroom,” “Classroom Management,” “Understanding Student Behavior,” “Delivering Effective Professional Development to Adults,” “Understanding Student Bullying,” and “Managing Antisocial Behavior: The Acting Out Cycle.”

All participants will be coached and mentored to deliver interactive, research-based professional development for their locals unions. Many of the teachers and para-educators who attended will be presenting workshops for their colleagues at back-to-school events in their respective districts.

Locals that participated included: Houston Federation of Teachers, Brazosport Federation of Teachers, Alief AFTSE, Fort Bend Employee Federation and Spring Branch AFT.

Houston member wins aeronautics education award

Lanena Berry, a Johnston Middle School teacher and member of the Houston Federation of Teachers, recently was awarded the 2013 Educator Achievement Award by the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics.

Berry is co-director of Houston ISD’s Student Space Flight Experiments Program, which selects student



Lanena Berry



A photocard posted on Facebook celebrates the “Adelante: Conference for Bilingual and Dual Language Education,” sponsored by Education Austin, in collaboration with Austin ISD, on March 22 in Austin. Dr. Becky Palacios of Corpus Christi AFT presented AFT’s Colorín Colorado curriculum to several hundred teachers in attendance. You can learn more about Colorín Colorado at www.colorincolorado.org.

experiments for consideration to be performed by U.S. astronauts. The Institute awards teachers who have demonstrated exemplary efforts in “exciting K-12 students about math and science and preparing them to use and contribute to tomorrow’s technologies.”

An Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) teacher and soccer coach, Berry will receive a free trip to Washington, D.C., and will be honored at an Institute reception on May 8.

“When I go to Washington, I’m going to see what they have to offer to teachers and my students,” Berry told the *Houston Memorial Examiner*.

Round Rock member a finalist for excellence in education award

Penny Smeltzer, a statistics teacher at Westwood High School in Round Rock and a member of Education Round Rock, was named as a finalist for the H-E-B Excellence in Education Award.



Penny Smeltzer

Smeltzer was awarded \$1,000 for herself and \$1,000 for Westwood High School for being named a finalist and will compete in the Lifetime Achievement Award category, which honors teachers with more than 20 years of experience. Winners at the final May 3 award ceremony will receive \$25,000 in cash for themselves and a \$25,000 grant for their school. Smeltzer has been with Round Rock ISD since 1982.

Her recognitions include the 2011 O’Donnell AP Teacher of the Year, 2010 Intel Teacher of Merit, 2009 Texas Exes Outstanding Teacher, the 2008 Siemens Teacher Award, and 2007 Round Rock ISD Teacher of the Year. In 2006 she earned a trip to the Galapagos Islands to research interdisciplinary environmental studies as a Toyota International Teacher winner.



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(806) 359-4487

Austin Community College: ACC AFT
(512) 448-0130

Austin ISD: Education Austin
(512) 472-1124

Bastrop ISD: Bastrop AFT
(512) 448-0130

Brazosport ISD: Brazosport Federation of
Teachers (979) 265-9701

Calallen ISD: Corpus Christi AFT
(361) 855-0482

Channelview ISD: Northeast Houston AFT
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Corpus Christi ISD: Corpus Christi AFT
(361) 855-0482

Cy-Fair ISD: Cy-Fair AFT
(713) 466-1125

Dallas ISD: Alliance AFT
(214) 942-4663

Del Rio ISD: Del Rio AFT
(512) 448-0130

Edinburg ISD: Edinburg AFT
(956) 502-5340

El Paso ISD: El Paso Federation of Teachers
& Support Personnel (915) 562-3738

Flour Bluff ISD: Corpus Christi AFT
(361) 855-0482

Fort Bend ISD: Fort Bend
Employee Federation
(281) 240-1865

Galena Park ISD: Northeast Houston AFT
(713) 453-7500

Goose Creek ISD: Goose Creek
Education Federation (281) 427-2091

Gregory-Portland ISD: Corpus Christi AFT
(361) 855-0482

Houston ISD: Houston Federation
of Teachers (713) 623-8891

Houston ISD: Houston Educational
Support Personnel (713) 660-8435

Killeen ISD: Killeen Federation
of Teachers & Support Personnel
(254) 690-2538

La Joya ISD: La Joya AFT
(956) 682-1143

Lone Star College: AFT Lone Star
(281) 889-1009

McAllen ISD: McAllen AFT
(956) 682-1143

North Forest ISD: AFT North Forest
(713) 672-6788

North East ISD: Northeast AFT
(210) 227-8083

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(210) 733-9777

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(713) 453-7500

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