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SHORTCHANGED

Promises ... and now penalties

TEA plan to cut Katrina aid is unfair, inequitable to Texas schools

By KEVIN H. HOFFMAN and SARAH WINKLER

Gulf Coast-area districts hoped that the federal Hurricane Recovery Act would provide long-awaited and much needed aid for schools that enrolled thousands of homeless Katrina students. We became alarmed when we learned that the original per-student allocation of \$6,000 specified in this legislation had plummeted to approximately \$4,000 per student.

Our concern intensified when the Texas Education Agency announced its plan to withhold millions of dollars of federal impact aid from schools.

In a recent letter, TEA outlined its intent to reimburse the state's Foundation School Program by retaining some of these federal funds to offset state aid given to districts through the normal funding system.

TEA's decision means that many districts will receive less than \$2,000 per student in impact aid. This is very alarming since every congressional and senatorial office we contacted said that the federal intent was for the state education agencies to provide supplemental aid directly to school districts serving hurricane survivors, not to supplant state funding.

Current federal impact aid flows through to school districts dollar for dollar and is not used to offset state expenditures. There is no reason to treat this funding differently.

The federal legislation explicitly allows TEA to retain 1 percent for administrative purposes. It is unfair and inequitable to the public, to school districts and, more importantly, to students, for TEA to propose retaining a much larger percentage of these funds when the appropriation is already insufficient to cover our expenditures or the costs borne by local taxpayers.

Some of these students came to our districts with social and academic needs that have resulted in numerous associated costs. Many are behind academically, and a large number of area school districts are struggling with secondary student discipline issues. We have not only had to add instructional intervention teams, but also additional social counselors and security. We have also incurred significant costs due to the mobility of these students, as some have enrolled for as little as three days before moving on to other districts.

TEA's plan also creates serious equity issues.

Property-poor districts receive more state aid per student since their taxpayers are unable to raise adequate funding because of lower property wealth. Under the current TEA plan, districts receiving more state aid will be penalized and receive less impact aid than other more wealthy districts. This amounts to reverse equity.

In fact, the only true winners under TEA's plan will be private schools, which receive no state aid, and thus qualify for the entire federal allotment. All districts must provide similar services and programs to serve Katrina students and should be reimbursed for those costs on an equal basis.

TEA's letter states that it has consulted with the U.S. Department of Education about the plan and that the Hurricane Relief Act allows the agency to reimburse the Foundation School Program by retaining funds in proportion to the extent that state monies were committed to educate evacuated students. After reading this legislation and consulting with area superintendents, legislators, attorneys and school finance experts, we do not see any justification for allowing TEA to withhold these funds. If TEA is allowed to implement this plan, school districts and many needy students will be financially penalized.

Texas public school districts are doing our very best to provide the services and programs our students need to succeed. We have opened our doors when our neighbors needed our help. Last October, many federal and state officials promised Harris County superintendents and school board members that our area districts would be supported as we welcomed thousands of homeless children. If current TEA plans for distributing these funds continue, this promise is meaningless.

Hoffman is a trustee with the Houston Independent School District. Winkler is president of the Alief ISD Board of Trustees. Other local school officials who endorsed this article are: Rick Ogden, president of the Aldine ISD Board of Trustees; Lida Woodul, president of Cypress-Fairbanks ISD Board of Trustees; Dr. Bonnie Longnion, vice president of Humble ISD board; Diana Davila, president of the HISD board; and Greg Meyers, a trustee with HISD.

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