

## **Script for Press Conference on HB 2:**

**Dawson:** Thank you for being here today.

My name is Dawson Orr. I am the superintendent of schools in Wichita Falls ISD and I am here speaking on behalf of the Coalition to Invest in Texas Schools. Here with me are the members of the education community, representing the 4.2 million school children of Texas, standing together to urge the Legislature to INVEST IN TEXAS SCHOOLS. Never have we been so united.

HB 2 fails the school children of Texas.

This bill fails students, teachers, parents and our communities because it does not provide a long-term solution to the funding crisis facing Texas public schools.

In addition, this bill fails because it does not restore the program cuts from last session and institutes a host of new requirements without providing adequate dollars.

HB 2 also restricts districts ability to raise additional revenue.

Today is March 1. One third of the legislative session is behind us. The start of the 2005-06 school year is a mere six months away. We trust that the start of the new school year will also be a new beginning in our public schools.

The Legislature has a Constitutional obligation to provide a free and appropriate education for all Texas children. But for too long, they have shirked their responsibility. With the Governor making public school finance a legislative emergency, we were given hope that this would change.

We are disappointed that House Bill 2, does not adequately address our concerns or the needs of our children.

A year ago the Coalition to Invest in Texas Schools laid out a list of core principles for evaluating new school finance legislation. Those same principles are vital today: Any new system must

- Be adequate to fund the diverse needs of districts throughout our big state,
- Provide at least 90% equity and a clear roadmap to bring 98 percent of Texas school children into an equalized system over time,
- Provide new capacity to allow the system to grow as we meet the challenges of tomorrow,
- Respect local control, and
- Provide for adequate classroom facilities for our school children.

HB 2 does not sufficiently meet these principles.

Texas is the second fastest growing state in the country, with a rapidly changing student population, and the legislature has an obligation to ensure that school funding grows to meet the ever-increasing needs that will accompany the influx of 85,000 new students every year.

To speak to this further is Rick Woolfolk, a member of the board of trustees of the Denton Independent School District and the Texas Association of School Boards.

**Rick Woolfolk:** Thank you, Dawson.

It has been said that HB 2 provides \$3 billion new state dollars for public education, but let's look at the facts.

HB 2 does not provide \$3 billion new funding for public schools as at least \$600 million is currently being sent to school districts to pay health insurance supplements. That \$600 million is about half of the funding for health insurance that was cut by the Legislature

in 2003. The state has also failed to purchase \$400 million for textbooks, which directly impacts students because they are forced to use textbooks that are over ten years old.

The new state funding in the bill barely covers inflation and does nothing to fix the lack of meaningful discretion in setting local tax rates held to be unconstitutional by the courts. The problem with our current school finance system is lack of capacity. HB 2 does not address the ability of local school districts to pay for the escalating costs of existing programs.

A group of legislators has taken a different look at the \$3 billion of new money for the biennium and noted that it is not enough to make up for the cuts and additional costs (like a new school payroll tax) that were implemented in 2003.

While significant new funds are not in HB 2, significant property tax relief is provided. HB 2 proposes \$5.5 billion per year in property tax relief. It has been announced that the tax bill, another bill, HB 3, will finance ONLY the property tax relief.

Does HB 2 provide additional and NEW revenue? HB 2 actually repeals the \$1000 health insurance provision for school employees and replaces it with a one time \$1000 salary increase for all schoolteachers, nurses, counselors, and librarians. Let us remind you that the \$1000 health insurance provision was actually cut to \$500 last session. Unlike current law, providing for state funding for the health insurance supplement, this provision has no ongoing source of state funding to pay for and ensure the continuation of this important benefit. This change could also leave those employees that aren't classified as teachers, nurses, counselors, or librarians who currently receive the pass through provision with a \$500 pay cut.

Now you will hear from a member of the Texas PTA, Rick Mendiondo from Austin.

**Rick Mendiondo:** Hello. I am speaking you today as a member of Texas PTA, but most importantly, as a parent of XX children in our public schools.

As a parent, and as a taxpayer, I am concerned by the many things HB 2 proposes to do in the name of “reform.” Who better to help a school district make decisions than the parents and citizens in that community?

HB 2 ignores this fact by placing more burdensome and unnecessary state requirements on our school districts and takes away the ability of communities to influence local decisions. HB 2 chooses your school calendar, ignoring that every community has different needs. HB 2 mandates your school board elections, politicizing one of the few elections that today is not decided on a partisan ballot.

HB 2 compromises the equity of the finance system by permitting selected districts to raise and spend far more than the typical or average district. As a parent, I think that my children deserve the same education as the kids in the neighboring town, or in the district on the opposite side of the state. Geography shouldn't determine the value of your education.

Further, HB 2 does not adequately fund facilities for public schools. This is wrong, and ignores a vital need for our school districts. In some districts, kids attend school in 50-80 year old facilities. In other districts, the student population is growing by thousands every year. Districts need access to funding for updating and repairing the old facilities and for building new ones. Thank you, and now Dawson Orr will wrap-up our comments.

**Dawson:** Let me finish by repeating that we are all standing here today because we are urging the Legislature to INVEST IN TEXAS SCHOOLS. The Legislature should concentrate on the adoption of an adequate, fair, and constitutional funding system. If the Legislature is willing to identify \$11 billion in new state revenue to lower property taxes, surely more than \$1.5 billion could be dedicated to public education. Make no mistake - we support property tax relief. But just as important is educational development and excellence and we believe there is a more appropriate balance that is realistic, attainable, and is the RIGHT thing to do. As an education community, we know that the Legislature must do better, and can do better. Our children deserve it.

As the people gathered here representing Texas parents, teachers, school board members, and administrators, we know that we can do better. While it is the Legislature's obligation to fund our public schools, it is our responsibility, with our parents, to ensure that our kids have an excellent education. HB 2 does not support this duty, and in fact jeopardizes the interests of our children in the name of tax relief.

Does the Committee Substitute to House Bill 2 meet the Legislature's Constitutional obligation? Our answer is an unequivocal NO. House Bill 2 FAILS to adequately and equitably fund our public schools.

Therefore we STRONGLY OPPOSE HB 2.

Thank you, and we'd be happy to answer any questions.