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Neighborhoods, Schools, and Budgets

AISD's looming financial crisis is a statewide story

BY RICHARD WHITTAKER. FRI., FEB. 11, 2011

Once upon a time there were three documents. There was the Austin Independent School District's Facility Master Plan, being developed by a district task force. There was the AISD budget, which pays for the district's schools. And there was the state budget, which helps pay for all the school districts around the state.

Then the state budget collapsed into a \$27 billion hole – and AISD started bracing to absorb its share of the abyss. And the task force turned from envisioning a bright future for all kids to finding the least painful cuts.

What that means for Deirdre Doughty is that Pease Elementary, the school to which she chose to send two of her kids and plans to send a third, may close.

When Doughty was looking for somewhere to send her children, Pease seemed ideal. She wanted an ethnically diverse school – half the kids came from Hispanic families, and the rest split almost equally between white and African-American households. While the historic campus is only six blocks west of the Capitol, it's also socially diverse, with 26% of students classified as economically disadvantaged. The school had also achieved a rare double honor: an "exemplary" rating from the Texas Education Agency, combined with a five-star rating from the comptroller's Financial Allocation Study for Texas. "We had the highest level of academic success for the lowest level of spending," said Doughty.

So, like the other Pease parents, she's trying to work out why the axe is hanging over her kids' heads. They're not alone. In early January, the AISD Facility Master Plan Task Force named another eight schools as candidates for closure. In February, it added four more. Among that list, there's one big difference about Pease: It's the only all-transfer school in the district. When so much of the argument against closure has centered around maintaining neighborhood schools, that might seem like a strike against Pease. But for Doughty, that's one of the school's core strengths. "Every parent has chosen to have their child at that school," she said. "If it closes, then we will be scattered to the winds, and we won't have this community anymore."

Base Closures

That community has rallied together – first at the campus level, and now as part of the districtwide Coalition To Save Austin Urban Schools – ever since closure was first suggested. "In the first day or two," said Doughty, "we were very focused on Pease." When the task force held two nights of large-scale public consultation meetings in



AISD forum at Burger Center, Jan. 13
PHOTO BY JOHN ANDERSON

Neighborhoods, Schools, and Budgets

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BY RICHARD WHITTAKER

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early January, it became clear to Pease parents that there was broadly shared pain. Rather than pleading their own school's case before the school board and pitting one school against another, they came away convinced that one unified chorus was better than separate voices. Doughty added, "Apparently, the people at the other schools were feeling the same way, because it happened almost overnight."

Yet even with that broad unity, the process has been frustrating. Parents have combed the task force findings to see how the group came up with its numbers. They have reached out to the board, to the administration, and to the task force, but the limited formal time for citizen communication means the clock runs out quickly. Meanwhile, rumors and conspiracy theories have spread like wildfire. Doughty said: "A lot of us feel like we've taken on a second job in trying to mobilize our opposition. We've been working around the clock, having meetings, coming up with press releases. So it's been very disruptive already, and very upsetting."

She and other members of the community heard last year that the task force was looking at smaller schools in connection with the efficiency part of its study. When they met with task force co-chair Richard Frazier in November, Doughty said: "He told us at the time, 'Don't worry; we're not here to close your school.' ... So we were reassured." When the district informed her and all the other parents of the closure option just before the new term started, that felt like a betrayal.

With many stories like that in circulation, Frazier knows he's seen as the hatchet man. Nine months of low-key meetings and number-crunching has become a furious debate, verging on a public trial of the task force. After a particularly grueling presentation to the Austin Neighborhoods Council on Jan. 31, he said, "In Texas, we know a lot about football, we know a lot about barbecue, and everyone's a school expert."

When the 72-member task force began its work last April, it had a clearly defined core task: Create a 10-year Facility Master Plan for the district. Frazier said: "Our job was to sit down and find ways to save dollars, so the limited amount of resources that we get can be used more efficiently. That's it." When word spread of how bad the state budget was likely to be, the operation suffered mission creep, turning from a visionary body into what some members have dubbed the "base closure commission." Frazier said: "We were asked to look for remedies by the staff members to see if we could make headway in there. And when you try to get involved in that, knowing that there's a dire circumstance coming up, it kind of changes the focus."



Deirdre Doughty at Pease Elementary
PHOTO BY JOHN ANDERSON

With the luxury of hindsight, Frazier admits that concentrating on school closures and presenting them as though they were a done deal was "a mistake on our part." Yet while closures are only an option, they also represent only a fraction of the problem. In population terms, Austin is like a balloon that's simultaneously inflating and deflating. While the task force's calculations show an excess of classrooms in the urban core, they also show shortages in other areas. The district has bond money available for two elementaries. If the task force numbers are correct, Frazier said, "We would have to put both of them in North-Central [Austin], and we'd still need another in the Southeast before a few years."

While the task force then scrambled to get away from listing schools and back to its original mission statement, Superintendent Meria Carstarphen gave the members a new, specific instruction: Identify \$3.5 million in facilities-related savings that she can implement now. "I don't know that we can get there," Frazier said. "I don't know that we can't, but weighing it now I'd say it was going to be difficult." The problem is not just money: It's what the district has to do with that money. The elephant in the room, Frazier said, is "the seemingly complete disjunct between the Legislature's demands and the reality in the classroom."

The Texas Way

It's a simple equation: From funding to testing to staffing levels to the punitive school accountability system, Texas lawmakers are deeply involved in telling school districts how to operate. Yet those same lawmakers propose to carve between \$10 billion and \$13 billion out of essential school funding for the next two years. The \$3.5 million charge is a small fraction of the total \$113 million shortfall AISD is facing this coming school year. In response, every possible fundraising idea has been proposed – from private donors for new projects to charitable dollars to preserve historic campuses like Pease. The task force is even rehashing old decisions: In 2008, the Citizens' Bond Advisory Committee warned that building the long-awaited districtwide performing arts center on a campus would be a bad idea, making it seem like the property of one school. Now the task force – just to save on land costs – is considering that option again.

While the task force fine-tunes its plan for a Feb. 14 preliminary presentation to trustees, the district has already defaulted to the Texas way of dealing with cash problems: Fire people. On Jan. 24, the board of trustees approved new "staffing formulas," and its new numbers delete 22 high school librarian positions. When he's not a public face of the task force, Frazier is an instructional coach at Anderson High. They just hired a librarian – "a dear friend of mine and the best librarian in the district," he said. "She just got told that she probably won't have a job next year. So that affects me personally. If you're closing a school and it affects you personally, that's when it becomes real."

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That reality is hitting everyone. Compared to Pease or Zilker or Sanchez or any of the other schools discussed for closure, O. Henry Middle School seems in the clear. It even looks like an idealized model for what the district could look like in a year. A 29-year veteran of middle school education, Principal Peter Price has already implemented some of the cost-saving changes approved by the trustees. The best news for him is that, unlike so many schools in the urban core, his campus is not on the proposed closure list.

The bad news is that everything else is on the table.

As a principal, by default he's become a budget expert. "You get pretty used to making do with what you can with not a lot of money," he said. "It's just the case with public schools." For most of his decade as a principal, his budget stayed pretty much the same. Over the last couple of years, he's felt the side-effects of cuts at AISD's central office (like fewer curriculum staff), but the blow to his campus was a glancing one. "This year's a different story," he said. In January, he got the first draft of his staffing numbers: His optimistic prediction was for three teacher positions gone, but the district warned him it could be as many as eight. He said: "Typically, we lose five to 10 teachers and staff out of 100 every summer due to attrition. So actual bodies leaving O. Henry? I think we're going to be fine. What we may have to do is increase class size."

Tough Choices

Four years ago, when Price shifted from having teachers hold classes from five periods out of seven to six out of eight, it was for academic reasons. His students were falling behind in math and science, so he started double-blocking periods so they could have more time in the lab. He even added an extra period to maintain a diversity of electives.

This time, it's just money driving his decisions, and the electives will suffer. O. Henry is one of the few AISD campuses that teaches kids to speak Japanese. With only 15 students in the class, Price will probably no longer be able to offer one of the world's foremost languages. It's brutal math: A shrinking budget, combined with district demands for fewer teachers educating more kids, makes specialty courses untenable. Price explained, "With a 28-to-1 ratio, 15 means someone else is taking up the slack with a 32, 33 class." That's not the worst problem he can face: While American schools traditionally value small classes, he points to countries like South Korea, where secondary-school class sizes regularly run much larger without damaging performance. "The key factor is the quality of the teacher," he said.

However, when Price gets his final staffing numbers, he'll be caught in horse trading, balancing the value of each teaching position against the needs of the school. He already did that when he swapped a teaching job to hire a full-time technology specialist, in order to maintain his 400 classroom computers. Another choice meant exchanging the funding for half a teaching position to pay for a specialist coordinator for the 100 kids with some form of disability on his campus. He's already using parent volunteers to answer phones, freeing up an administrator position. Come fall, Price will have fewer paid adults at his campus, and nonteaching staff will go first. After that, it will be about tenure and experience. Price said, "The 'last one hired, first one fired' philosophy is really painful if you have some outstanding first-year teachers – and we do."



Students rally to save schools.
PHOTO BY JOHN ANDERSON

A lot of the debate about the threatened schools has been about whether or not the task force included in-district transfer students in its calculations. Yet it's not switching from one AISD school to another that worries Price; it's children who will be transferring to private or charter schools, or even neighboring districts. His campus is literally within walking distance of Eanes ISD, and while Carstarphen has asked the task force to consider program changes to keep kids in AISD, he fears the flow outward will only worsen: "Historically, [parents] have chosen us because they want a more diverse learning experience, and we've been able to do that." Yet he is already hearing from private school principals that their applications are up, and, he said, "I'm wondering whether if it's coincidental or if it's a causal relationship."

Hideous Challenge

The good news in all of this is that AISD is not alone in this budget debacle. That's also the bad news. As the former president of teachers union Education Austin, Louis Malfaro sat through two decades of local budget-building. Now, as secretary-treasurer of the Texas AFT, he's been visiting other districts to see what they're experiencing. "Hideous is the word for it," he said.

Malfaro pointed to a perfect storm of bad decisions by lawmakers: the underperforming business margins franchise tax; the 2007 cut in school property taxes that the franchise tax was supposed to cover but never did; their steadfast refusal to tap the \$9 billion Rainy Day Fund. Malfaro said: "Maybe the appropriations writers did us a favor. They said: 'OK, you want to see a budget with no new revenue and no Rainy Day? Well, here it is!'" He argued that slash-and-burn politicians are out of touch; recent polling by the union shows that 70% of respondents wanted no cuts to education whatsoever. Rather than the election drumbeat of "no new taxes," he said, "What [legislators] are going to find out is that people are saying: 'Help create an environment where jobs can flourish."

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Don't hurt me or my family or my neighbors."

The scale of the threat to education and the economic viability of the state became clear on Jan. 31, when the Texas Association of School Administrators gathered at the Austin Convention Center for its midwinter conference. On the tradeshow floor, dozens of national and statewide vendors offered everything from virtual whiteboards to new basketball courts, while architects compared notes and swapped business cards with catering supply firms. With district budgets collapsing, there's a real question of how many contracts will be signed, and how many of those firms will have to cut back or lay off staff. Yet for the superintendents and administrators in attendance, a few more years with crumbling facilities are the least of their worries. TASA President John Fuller said, "This is the biggest challenge superintendents have ever faced, at least in my lifetime as an educator."

Like Malfaro, Fuller traced the problem back to the Legislature and its refusal to either raise revenue or tap the Rainy Day Fund. The other part of the problem is "target revenue" – the system whereby the state guarantees to make up district income if their local property tax revenue falls below pre-agreed levels. In his opening speech to the Senate, Finance Committee Chair Steve Ogden, R-Bryan, described the system as a \$5 billion drag on state revenue. For the districts, that's math from through the looking glass. Target revenue doesn't boost their income; it locks them in at their 2006 budget levels. The only new cash last legislative session came from the federal stimulus bill – most of which was used to replace rather than supplement state spending – and a one-time \$120 per student increase that went to cover a state-mandated teacher pay raise. As the draft budget stands, Fuller said: "It's probably the worst-case scenario. But I don't know what the best case is."

These are not just abstractions for Fuller. As superintendent for the 12,000 students of Wylie ISD (near Plano), he's facing the same budget crash as his members. His current predictions are for a \$10 million and \$13 million cut. He explained, "Every million is 20 teachers, or it's 15 assistant principals, or 11 principals." Until the budget is finalized, he said, "I really can't make statements to my teachers, to my staff. What I have to tell them is what it's going to cost us in terms of lost personnel." Like AISD administrators, he's waiting to see if the Lege will give school districts new contract authority. At the moment, he can cut the salaries of every employee but his teachers. If the laws change, he plans to ask his board for a 3% across-the-board pay cut. Similarly, AISD's board is waiting to see whether lawmakers will approve unpaid furloughs. "Teachers don't want to hear this," Fuller said, "but they also don't want to hear that we may lay off 100 teachers."

Fuller's predecessor in the TASA hot seat was Northside ISD Superintendent John Folks. Just to keep pace with inflation and the growing student population in his San Antonio district, he needs an extra \$15 million next year. Instead, he's drafted scenarios that predict increasingly catastrophic cuts. He's already cut \$44 million out of his draft budget. If what's proposed in House Bill 1 passes as is, he would lose \$97 million a year and would probably have to lay off 2,000 of his 7,500 teachers. "I do not know how Northside can operate when you take almost \$200 million out of an operating budget of \$600 million," he said. He was blunter than Fuller about the culpability of lawmakers. "It is totally irresponsible to ask these school districts to make these cuts when the legislators themselves have created the problem, and to date they have taken no action to fix it. For me, this is what you call an emergency."

Starving? Eat Less.

While he called Wylie "the richest of the poorest districts," Fuller readily conceded that there are superintendents facing far tougher times. It isn't hard to find them. Outside of Tuesday afternoon's TASA general session, three rural superintendents had just left a study group, where district heads consoled one another and brainstormed on savings. Sharon Ross, superintendent of Jefferson ISD in Marion County, has been holding budget workshops with her staff and board, and, like AISD's administration, she's hoping to lose personnel and positions primarily through attrition rather than a direct reduction in force. That's a process she called "acts of kindness." It's the same story in Clarksville ISD, about 20 miles south of the Oklahoma border, where Superintendent Pam Bryant has already absorbed 21 positions. She's looking for more savings, but, she said, "It's hard to be proactive when you have no idea what's going to happen."

The tale is reiterated north of Houston, for the 1,600 kids of Coldspring-Oakhurst Consolidated ISD. If lawmakers think there's fat to trim from her budget, Superintendent LaTonya Goffney doesn't know where. Her board already cut music and art, her four campuses have nursing assistants instead of registered nurses, and there's only one certified librarian for the entire district. "It's like putting an anorexic on a diet," she said. "I don't have a problem with making a decision that's in the best interest of kids, but when you just start cutting and it's not in their best interests, I have a problem with it."

The biggest worry for all three rural superintendents is the potential loss of prekindergarten provision. The research is clear: Take away full-day early childhood facilities, and education suffers. Cut it even to half-day, and many families will just not enroll because they cannot leave work to pick their kids up at noon. Goffney only recently introduced all-day pre-K; now, after convincing families of the program's value, she may have to cancel it. She said, "We're just hoping that the worst-case scenario is the worst case and not the reality that we're going to be living in for the next two years."

That means that all of Texas is filled with parents like Deirdre Doughty at Pease, all just waiting to see if their schools are open in the fall and what kind of education they can provide. Doughty said: "I was at the [AISD] board meeting the other day, and I find it very ironic that they were making the report for the previous academic year."

AISD had made gains across the board in terms of [Texas Education Agency] ratings, in terms of graduation rates. Our district is thriving, and to have this happen is very disheartening."

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