



MIKE FALICK

MEMBER AND LEGISLATIVE LIAISON

SPRING BRANCH INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Public Testimony Concerning Proposed New 19 TAC Chapter 102, Educational Programs, Subchapter AA, Commissioners Rules Concerning Early Childhood Education Programs, §102.1002, Prekindergarten Early Start Grant Program November 13, 2008

Commissioner Scott,

Thank you for allowing me to testify today in connection with the Proposed New 19 TAC Chapter 102, and §102.1002 – the Prekindergarten Early Start Grant Program.

My name is Mike Falick. I am currently serving in my fifth year as a trustee on the Spring Branch ISD Board of Trustees. I am here today in that capacity and as the Board's Legislative Liaison.

FUNDING

I know you are familiar with Spring Branch ISD and our outstanding Prekindergarten program, but some brief background will provide context for my comments.

Spring Branch is often perceived as a "rich" district. However, our current demographics belie that myth. Fifty-seven percent (57%) of our students are defined as "at risk." Nearly one third of our students come to us with limited English proficiency. Our District has extreme poverty, and while we are a Robin Hood district, we are also broadly representative demographically, both economically and racially, of the population of the State of Texas.

And that is why our District made a commitment to Prekindergarten over twenty years ago. That commitment was further strengthened in 2000 when the District spent approximately \$20 million to build four fully dedicated Pre-K centers.



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Our program currently serves 2,017 students. Of those, 1,712 (85%) are eligible students under the current funding system. Each Pre-K classroom has a maximum of 22 students and is served by a certified teacher and an assistant.

As a result of our strong, long-term commitment to Pre-K, our students who attend the program show marked improvement over those students who do not. Our longitudinal data shows improvements in both academic and social skills, and these students, many of whom come from challenging environments, are successful specifically because of the skills they obtain from our program.

Our program is funded through the following funding streams:

- \$5,011,770.00 WADA Funding
- \$3,275,261.11 Pre-K Expansion Grant
- \$1,770,532.67 General Fund
- \$1,238,440.86 Tuition

We have received the Pre-K Expansion Grant for the past several years, and as you can see, it forms an integral and essential component of our current funding. And like most school districts, under the hold harmless, Spring Branch has no way to replace this funding. Loss of the thirty percent (30%) of the funding that comes from the Grant would be devastating to our program and the students we serve.

Indeed, on October 20, our Board reviewed the impact that the loss of the Grant funding would have and the programmatic changes that would be necessary. In short, each of the proposed changes would negatively impact our students. These changes include the likely reduction of the program from full day to half day, elimination of assistants, elimination of teachers, and closing Pre-K center(s).

Under the Rules as proposed, Spring Branch does not fall within any of the three tiers for eligibility for the Grant. While arguably, Spring Branch should be a Tier 2 District, Tier 2 requires that the district “demonstrated improved student performance results for the last three consecutive years on the Grade 3 assessment instruments.” In 2006, 93% of Spring Branch’s English speaking students passed the third grade reading TAKS test. In 2007, “only” 92% of these students passed. A strict reading of the



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proposed Rules would eliminate Spring Branch from eligibility, even though these students are performing at the exemplary level.

In addition, if Spring Branch is a Tier 2 District, the proposed Rules appear likely to result in a significant decrease in the funding available to Spring Branch. We urge you to reclassify the funding tiers to maintain funding for programs that have demonstrated continued commitment and success.

Finally, under the proposed Rules, a Tier 2 District that does not receive Grant funding for three years, it can then become eligible to reapply for funding as a Tier 1 applicant if its third grade TAKS scores are "substantially below the state average." A school district that has demonstrated success should not have to fail its students for 3 years in order to "fail its way" back into the Grant. By maintaining existing grant funding for successful programs, the funding system will ensure continued student success.

Spring Branch urges you to modify the proposed Rules to continue funding for highly successful, robust programs such as ours. The 2,000+ students in our program will suffer educationally and developmentally in the absence of our Pre-K program. A school district that has exhibited a strong, long-term commitment to enhancing the education of our most at-risk students should not be penalized in favor of unproven, untested programs.

CURRICULUM

In addition to the funding issues, Spring Branch is concerned about the mandated changes contained in the proposed rules that would meaningfully and negatively impact our program. More specifically, there are several sections of the proposed rules we would like to see deleted or modified.

First, the new Rules (§102.1002(h)(2)) require that "each grantee must provide a prekindergarten program . . . that is aligned with the Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines." These Guidelines, which the Texas Education Agency's website say are "voluntary," are not as well developed and robust as the curriculum being used in Spring Branch today. The rules should be modified to comply with the fact that the Guidelines are intended to be voluntary.



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Second, the new Rules (§102.1002(h)(3)) mandates school readiness integration partnerships. While partnerships with outside providers are an admirable goal, they should not be mandated. This section should be modified to leave the decision to partner with an outside provider within the local control of the school district and its community school board, and administrators.

Finally, the new Rules (§102.1002(h)(4)) require each grantee to develop a "sustainability plan" that "must include . . . participation in the school readiness certification system." Participation in the school readiness certification system is voluntary under the law and should remain so under the new Rules. Texas Education Code §29.161(a) ("The [school readiness certification] system shall be made available on a *voluntary basis* to program providers seeking to obtain certification as evidence of the quality of the program provided.)(emphasis added).

Thank you for your attention and for providing the opportunity to discuss these concerns with you today.