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Talmadge Heflin: A plan to restore fiscal faith in DISD

Last month, the Dallas Independent School District announced an \$84 million budget shortfall that plunged the nation's 12th-largest district into financial chaos.

Scrambling to close the gap, district officials have proposed a series of budget reforms, including \$38 million in proposed budget cuts and the elimination of 1,250 staff and teacher positions. But those measures would only narrow the district's deficit to \$15 million.

Superintendent Michael Hinojosa's explanation? The district's budget woes result from "inadequate budgeting" and "the cost of additional staff." Yet, as many Dallas residents are already aware, the district has a poor track record of fiscal responsibility.

Wasteful spending and misappropriated funds have come to characterize a system plagued by "problems related to district credit card use, allowances, overtime expenditures and cozy relationships between vendors and district workers," according to *The Dallas Morning News*. And even when the district hasn't been caught in unethical activities, there are plenty of examples of school officials exercising poor financial judgment.

Take, for example, the \$1.36 billion bond package approved in 2002. At the time, it was easily one of the largest in the nation and should have been sufficient to fund the district's

needs well into the next decade—particularly since DISD's enrollment has steadily declined from 162,989 in 2002 to 156,677 this year.

Rather than setting aside the vast majority of those funds to renovate existing structures, the district instead opted to spend lavishly on extravagant new projects. Consider the two costliest projects of the 2002 bond election: Emmett J. Conrad High School and the Jesse Owens Memorial Complex.

Conrad High cost nearly \$50 million to build. At a colossal 325,000 square feet, the massive new complex is home to 670 students who enjoy almost 500 square feet each. Even more impressive is the interior of the schoolhouse. Featuring a state-of-the-art computer room for graphic design, a media center, a technology room and an on-site steakhouse restaurant, the school boasts some of the best technology and amenities that taxpayer money can buy.

Slightly less exorbitant is the \$38.4 million Jesse Owens Memorial Complex. Designed to accommodate 12,000 spectators, this huge arena was built to showcase middle and high school athletic events.

So how do we fix these problems and restore public confidence?

First, taxpayers should demand that accurate financial data for every school district in Texas be posted online—whether by the district's

own initiative or by state legislation. Financial audits, check registers, winning and losing contract bids, and other financial information need to be publicly available in an obvious, user-friendly format. Additional sets of expert eyes could have flagged Dallas' financial problems earlier and possibly mitigated some of the painful midyear cuts.

In late 2007, DISD had its check register online, but users had to navigate through nine layers of the district's Web site to get there, and the information was difficult to evaluate.

Second, taxpayers should demand that school board members take an active role in management decisions. Too often, a school board is nothing more than a rubber stamp, another layer of bureaucracy that does little to ensure prudent behavior.

A board's failure to become actively engaged in the district's priorities and goals only invites the kind of financial blunders now plaguing DISD. As taxpayers, it is our responsibility to demand better results for our education dollars.

Talmadge Heflin is director of the Center for Fiscal Policy at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a non-profit, free-market research institute based in Austin. He is a former president of the Alief ISD school board and former chairman of the Texas House Appropriations Committee. His e-mail is theflin@texaspolicy.com.