

For Immediate Release
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Statement on Teacher's Health Insurance

"I am extremely pleased by today's approval of Senator Bivins' teachers health insurance plan. While this legislation does not go as far as we would certainly like, it is a solid first step toward providing health insurance to our hard-working teachers.

"Improving teachers health benefits is one of the Senate's top priorities. Texas faces a severe teacher shortage in our schools, and a combination of low pay and benefits are considered the key causes. Last session, we worked hard to provide a \$3,000 pay raise for Texas teachers. Unfortunately, rising health insurance costs in many districts ate away much of that increase. We did not work so hard just make teacher hand over their well-earned raise to HMOs. That is why this legislation is so important.

"Senator Bivins has worked very closely with the Senate Finance Committee, the Senate Education Committee and other colleagues to come up with the funding for this program in a very reasoned and responsible way. It provides about \$1.1 billion over the biennium to finance health benefits to Texas teachers. A key to this proposal is that it will also ensure TRS Care remains solvent for the next decade, raises the guaranteed yield to maintain equity in our school financing system and raises equalized wealth level to provide some assistance some assistance to wealthier districts.

"The Senate proposal adds new equity money and distributes it to school districts and directs them to use a portion of the new funds for teachers health insurance. That builds on our experience from last session, when we used part of the new equity money for the teacher's pay raise.

"At a time when we have more priorities than dollars to pay for them, this plan represents a tremendous step forward for Texas teachers. I congratulate Senator Bivins for his work on this plan. He handled an extremely difficult endeavor in a slowing economy and came up with a strong, fiscally-responsible proposal."