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**Testimony to the Senate Education Committee Regarding Charge #2,
Middle School Dropout Prevention**

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On behalf of our 64,000 members, I want to thank the committee for specifically examining the importance of middle school grades in connection with dropout prevention. It is imperative that the state examine the link between middle school performance and future career or college success. At a time when the enrollment of economically disadvantaged students is increasing at twice the rate of total public school enrollment, it is vital that the state concentrate efforts on the early signs indicating students are at risk of dropping out.

These early interventions must include measures to address factors that are beyond the control of teachers and schools yet have a direct effect on student outcomes. Important factors such as health care, social services, and parental involvement are too often absent from school life, although they are critical to student success. These supports become even more crucial at a time when a struggling economy puts even greater pressures on families.

Community Schools

In its report on “Best Practices in Dropout Prevention,” the Texas Education Agency cites school-community collaboration as one of the most effective dropout prevention strategies. AFT has long supported transforming some of the schools serving our neediest students into community schools that bring together, under one roof, the services and activities that our children and their families need. A number of proven programs demonstrate how the availability of family social services fosters high student achievement.

The Children's Aid Society (CAS) launched its first community school in 1992 in partnership with the New York City Public Schools to meet the pressing needs of children and families. Today CAS operates 14 campuses and more than 45 locations, serving more than 150,000 students. Three major components characterize the CAS community schools' philosophy: (a) comprehensiveness in its full-service design; (b) coherence in its planning and integration of services to promote a common vision and shared responsibility; and (c) commitment of CAS and partner schools to work together on behalf of students and families. A recent longitudinal study across six middle schools from 2004-2007 showed that participants achieved significant gains in math and reading when compared to a control group.

Communities in Schools (CIS) is another proven program, familiar in Texas, that provides community resources and the link between educators and the community to help young people learn, stay in school, and prepare for life. CIS creates comprehensive, locally controlled support systems around schools. CIS and the local school system identify the most crucial needs of students and families, then locate and coordinate community resources, volunteers

and agencies to work with the public schools, both during the day and after school. CIS reports that this makes the work of educators much more effective. A CIS national evaluation of matched comparison schools and CIS schools (602 schools in each group) shows positive results for graduation and dropout and math and reading outcomes. This quasi-experimental design showed a 3.6 percent improvement in dropouts and a 4.8 percent improvement in the number of students graduating. In schools adhering most closely to the model of a community school, the number of elementary (4th grade) and middle school students (8th grade) proficient in reading and math increased as well. Elementary students increased proficiency in math by 2.0 percent and in reading by 5.3 percent. Middle school students increased proficiency in math by 4.9 percent and in reading by 6.0 percent.

Brown University's Annenberg Institute for School Reform also spent six years evaluating seven community organizing campaigns for school reform around the nation, including Austin's Alliance Schools. This effort led by Austin Interfaith, in which our Education Austin affiliate is an active participant, engages parents, teachers, and administrators in schools serving high-poverty communities through collaborative efforts to improve student learning. The Alliance Schools campaign has brought new resources to historically underserved schools, fostered greater trust and collaboration among parents, teachers, and administrators--and it has raised student performance on standardized tests.

The Community Learning Centers (CLCs) in Cincinnati offer another example of a successful community-school partnership. The goal of CLCs is to re-engage the broader community with the school to support student and family success. By providing a variety of academic and family support services and enrichment programs for children and families, CLCs allow teachers and principals to focus their attention on academics – improving student performance and graduation rates. The centers assemble and coordinate a variety of nonprofit and business partners to offer a variety of programs before and after school, during the evenings, and on weekends and throughout the year. As a result, CLCs often become the neighborhood's center of activity.

Class-size limits

Compelling evidence demonstrates that reducing class size has a positive effect on student achievement overall and has an especially significant impact on the education of disadvantaged students. More teacher-student interaction allows teachers to recognize the needs of individual students and customize instruction and assignments. Teachers know the students better and can recognize problems and special needs early. Students are more likely to be on task and less likely to talk amongst themselves. They create fewer discipline problems and engage in more pro-social behavior, allowing teachers to devote more time to instruction and less to controlling the class. For these reasons, the state should consider extending class-size limits through ninth grade as a strategy to reduce dropout rates. This would help teacher develop relationships with students during times when students are undergoing difficult transitions.

In North Carolina, the state's largest school district, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, has reduced class size by varying amounts, depending on how many low-income students are in each school. In the district's high-poverty schools, this has led to a class size of 16 compared to 19-23 elsewhere. Since the program began, the achievement gap between racial and ethnic groups has narrowed, and

test scores of black students have risen by 18 percent. The district recently scored the highest of any urban school district tested in its NAEP assessments.

Since 2001, North Carolina has reduced class size in each of its lowest-performing schools to 15 for grades K-3, 17 in grades 4-8, and 20 in grades 9-12. This was done to improve student achievement in these schools, but also as a result of a statewide survey of teachers and administrators that asked what would be the most effective incentive for teachers to work in low-performing schools. The number one response was to lower class size, with 83.7 percent of teachers and 83.1 percent of administrators replying that it would be an effective incentive, exceeding any other proposal, including providing a signing bonus.

Not only do class-size limits benefit students' performance, but also they serve as a retention strategy for keeping experienced teachers in the classroom.

Early Warning Data Systems

The use of an early warning data system in middle school allows teachers, counselors, and others to identify students in need and gives them more time to intervene. Research from Johns Hopkins University shows that many students at risk of dropping out can be identified as early as sixth grade by monitoring poor attendance patterns, and behavior and course failure in English or math. Research from the National Research Council, the Urban Institute, and the National Council of La Raza also shows that many students at risk of dropping out have low English language proficiency, high mobility rates, homelessness, and periods of interrupted formal schooling.

In its recent report on "Achieving Graduation for All," the National Governors Association recommended the use of data systems to identify individual students who are likely to drop out. Such a system could support local and state efforts to provide students with effective interventions and supports. In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, for example, about 40 percent of eventual dropouts showed early warning signs in the sixth grade, and 80 percent of eventual dropouts were identified by the end of ninth grade.

Louisiana developed a state early warning data system that flags students as at risk of dropping. The system considers factors such as whether a student is absent 10 percent of days enrolled, has a discipline count of 7 percent of days or more, has a current grade point average of 1.00 or less, has had a decline in grade point average of at least 0.50, or is over the normal age for a particular grade.

Developing an early warning data system at the state level offers several advantages. It would minimize duplication of efforts. It would help ensure that greater numbers of students benefit from such systems. It would also inform resource allocation decisions by providing the state with better data to analyze which districts and schools are the most effective. Several states, including Colorado, are currently developing early warning data systems.

The state should not only have the ability to identify which students are at risk, but it must also ensure that schools have the capacity to target effective assistance to students.

Graduation Coaches

Although the Texas Education Code requires that elementary, middle, and junior high school counselors inform students about the importance of higher education and financial aid availability, there are no state laws that require counselor to student ratios to ensure that counselors have the time and capacity to serve the students most in need. As a first step, the state should consider implementing mandatory ratios for those districts with excessive numbers of middle school students at risk of dropping out.

In addition, the state should consider investing in training and employing middle school “graduation coaches.” The term “graduation coach” applies to an individual whose only responsibility is to identify students at risk of dropping out and steering them toward graduation. In 2006, Georgia enacted legislation providing funding for a graduation coach in each of the state’s high schools. The state pays \$40,000 per year for each graduation coach. In 2007, the state expanded the program to middle-school grades. These coaches can provide personalized learning plans to provide students with an accurate assessment of the courses, knowledge, and supports they need to reach their career goals. Graduation coaches also help connect students to mentoring, tutoring, and life skills programming as well as credit recovery efforts and attendance interventions. In addition, private-sector leaders can volunteer as community coaches to provide graduation coaches with a conduit to the business community.

In the two years since Georgia launched this initiative, the state’s graduation rate has improved by nearly five percentage points, surpassing 75 percent for the first time. Alabama, Oklahoma, and Massachusetts are also developing legislation to support graduation coaches.

Effective teaching

Dr. Ed Fuller’s research here in Texas has demonstrated that teacher quality continues to be inequitably distributed across schools, with high-poverty, high-minority, and low-performing schools having much lower teacher quality on average than low-poverty, low-minority, and high-performing schools. The students who struggle the most are often taught by inexperienced teachers or by teachers who are assigned to teach courses for which they are not certified.

The state must invest in significant salary stipends to encourage the most experienced teachers to teach in schools with high populations of students at risk of dropping out. In addition, the state should provide schools with the resources to give school personnel the time they need to work together to develop and implement individualized programs to help at-risk students succeed.