

Summary

Performance Review of the Texarkana Independent School District

The goal of the Comptroller's *Texas School Performance Review* is to promote better public education through improved school district management, based on the belief that it's essential that as many scarce education dollars as possible be concentrated in the classroom, not on administration and red tape.

The Texarkana Independent School District (TISD) was studied in detail over a five-month period from September 1996 to January 1997, and is the 23rd public school district the Comptroller's team has reviewed. The authority to conduct these reviews was given to the Comptroller by the Texas Legislature in June 1990.

The Comptroller's review of TISD was requested by State Representative Barry Telford and supported by Superintendent Gary Collins and other community leaders, and school district officials. The Comptroller, in turn, contracted with Empirical Management Services, a management consulting firm, to assist in the review.

We believe TISD could achieve a minimum of \$4.2 million in cost savings during the next five years (1997-98 through 2001-02).

These recommendations include reinvestment opportunities of \$1.2 million over the same period. Savings during the current school year will total nearly \$871,000, if these recommendations are adopted.

These savings are conservative and should be considered the minimum that Texarkana taxpayers can expect if all our recommendations are implemented.

It's important to note that some of the 110 detailed proposals in this report may not result in immediate or direct cost savings. However, these proposals should be viewed as no less significant; they, too, represent major changes in the management and operations of the district, and will ultimately help make its operations more efficient and effective.

In the course of our work, we identified a number of exemplary programs in TISD. This report highlights some of those practices, and we encourage

other school districts across the state to take a look at them to see if they may be adapted to meet their needs.

TISD faces challenges in administrative operations, strategic planning, facilities use, asset management, and other important areas. The recommendations contained in this report will lead to significant taxpayer savings and improved student services in the coming years.

Many district officials and community leaders are committed to positive change. We hope that this report will serve as a blueprint for a new era of hope, opportunity and educational excellence in the Texarkana Independent School District.

Key Recommendations

District Organization and Management

An atmosphere of distrust and even divisiveness pervades among TISD board members, the superintendent and administration. Board members, teachers, administrators, and members of the community complained that it is difficult to get accurate and timely information from the board.

The simmering distrust detracts from the district's primary mission: to educate students. TSPR recommends that the board retain a facilitator to organize a team-building and sensitivity-training workshop to bring together board members, the superintendent, and central administration. The same event, as part of an annual retreat, could lead to development of a genuine strategic plan to guide the district toward a more stable future.

The board and administration must strengthen their credibility with the public by providing clear and complete information on board actions. TSPR also recommends the superintendent hold public forums with teachers, administrators, and parents every two months to improve overall communication. The review team found that questions persist over the district's \$1.5 million shortfall, funds that had to be sacrificed in 1995-96 at a cost in salary increments to teachers. In general, the public expects more accountability.

Educational Service Delivery

On average, TISD teacher salaries are lower than teacher pay in peer districts or statewide, due in part to the reduction in local supplements during the financial crisis. Because TISD is not competitive with peer districts, TISD's ability to attract and retain teachers could seriously affect

the quality of instruction in the future. TSPR recommends reinstating teacher supplements to 1994-95 levels.

To address wide variances in student-teacher ratios among different schools, the district should develop a staffing allocation model to bring the ratios more in line with state and peer district averages. By eliminating vacant positions, the district could save the money needed to restore teacher pay increments during 1997-98.

The inequitable distribution of resources in TISD is not limited to the teaching staff. An allocation system to balance state and federal aid for students with special needs also should be devised.

Community Involvement

The district public information officer must address low public trust in the district, initially by focusing more on community relations. TSPR recommends a three-step community outreach plan including district initiatives, campus outreach activities, and ethnic minority outreach efforts. TISD also should establish a business-backed "Adopt-A-School" program. And board meetings should be broadcast on a local radio station.

Personnel Management

TISD's Personnel Director is unable to devote sufficient time to tracking district personnel needs, including development of salary schedules and benefit comparisons with other districts. The review team recommends creating a Personnel Department, which would centralize employee records, ensure regular teacher and administrator appraisals, create a comprehensive employee manual, monitor staff turnover, establish employee grievance procedures, and coordinate re-activation of the Minority Recruitment Committee. Administrator salaries also merit more routine attention, including comparisons to peer district and state averages.

Asset and Risk Management

To address employee doubts about the district's self-funded health insurance plan, the district should form a health plan committee to routinely evaluate and report on aspects of the plan. The committee should be involved with all bid and vendor selection decisions. Annually, the district should survey employees on the health plan and the health plan's cost, and features should be compared to plans offered both by neighboring districts and major area businesses.

Financial Management

District staff did not track, recognize, or clearly report TISD's declining fund balance or its over-estimation of anticipated revenue, all flaws that magnified the difficulty of a \$1.5 million funding shortfall in 1995-96. The review team recommends that the superintendent regularly report on the district's financial condition, and be held accountable for the district's finances in an annual performance appraisal.

Management Information Systems

TISD comes very close to meeting the state's goals of providing one computer for every four students but has not fully funded its admirable five-year technology plan. TSPR recommends the district proceed with plans to upgrade systems and establish a foundation to finance these upgrades. However, their technology plan should be systematically updated, and the district's private foundation should draw on considerable community assistance. In addition, other technology funding sources should be developed.

Purchasing and Warehouse Services

Concerns emerged about TISD purchasing equipment and supplies from companies owned by spouses of employees or employing spouses as managers. No bidding improprieties were observed, but the district needs an effective system to monitor competitive sealed bids and eliminate any appearance of improprieties. On another front, thousands of dollars worth of textbooks have been needlessly lost or damaged. TSPR recommends a formal policy and procedures to handle the textbook inventory.

Facilities Use and Management

Maintenance operations can be streamlined by eliminating several positions. Public comments suggested a need for renewed district facility planning by recreating a Campus Facilities Committee to review facility needs and set priorities. TSPR also recommends updating the district's five-year facilities management plan and creating school space guidelines to aid facility planning.

Transportation

The Bowie County Transportation Cooperative reports to its own management board, but TSPR believes it would be informative if it would also give an annual presentation to district boards. TISD should consider entering into a joint purchasing agreement with Bowie County and neighboring governments for fuel and vehicle parts.

Food Service

Student participation in breakfast and lunch programs has lagged behind peer districts for three years. TSPR recommends TISD develop a strategy to increase meal participation by 20 percent, possibly by using models developed by other Texas school districts. Student meal prices have increased twice in three years, and exceed prices charged by peer districts; the department should find a way to keep student meal prices from further increasing.

Safety and Security

TISD does not have a long-term strategy for handling safety and security issues--even as discipline problems are on the rise. TSPR recommends developing a long-term plan that includes strategies for alternative education programs, community-based programs, and law enforcement.

Summary of Potential Savings and Costs in TISD

Many recommendations would result in savings and revenue increases that TISD could use to more effectively meet student needs. The savings opportunities identified in this report are conservative and should be considered minimums. Investment requirements usually create an opportunity for future efficiency or savings to the district, enhancing productivity and effectiveness.

As shown below, full implementation of the recommendations in this report could produce gross savings of almost \$1.6 million in the next two years. TISD could achieve total net savings of more than \$2.8 million by 2001-2002 if all recommendations are implemented.

Summary of Total Savings/Costs for 1998-2002

Year Savings Begin	Costs	Savings	Total
1997-98	(\$231,408)	\$870,679	\$639,271
1998-99	(\$231,408)	\$736,503	\$505,095
1999-00	(\$231,408)	\$864,103	\$632,695
2000-01	(\$231,408)	\$864,103	\$632,695
2001-02	(\$231,408)	\$864,103	\$632,695
One Time (Costs)/Savings	(\$295,200)	\$79,594	\$2,826,645
TOTALS	(\$1,157,040)	\$4,199,491	\$3,042,451

Best Practices

- Through Tigervision, possibly the only high school broadcast course in the nation with regular broadcasts on several local television stations, the district has established a special training ground for video journalists. The program raises as much as \$14,000 a year to pay for additional equipment.
- TISD's Science Department successfully sought an outside grant to integrate DNA technology into high school biology courses. Texas High School was the only high school in the nation to present a major integrated multimedia program at an international science and technology conference.
- TISD has improved classroom instruction and improved student scores on the state-mandated Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) using the district's Checkpoint Assessment, a system created in 1993-94 that tracks student performance throughout the year against TAAS objectives. Ideally, teachers can adjust their instruction to target areas of greatest academic need.
- Tigers Inc., a Junior Achievement company owned and operated by severely disabled students, gives students an innovative way to achieve life skills and make a profit. Students who run the company learn about banking, the business world, and general day-to-day decision-making.
- The district's public information officer employs "campus communicators" to efficiently collect information about events at individual schools and to alert the district to newsworthy developments. The practice is endorsed by the Texas School Public Relations Association.
- TISD has highly experienced teachers with an average of 13.3 years of teaching experience, compared to the state average of 11.7 years.
- TISD's automated purchasing and requisitioning system enables schools and departments to enter requisitions electronically, greatly reducing paperwork.
- TISD participates in the highly efficient Bowie County Transportation Cooperative, which provides regular education transportation services to school districts in Bowie County. The cost per mile for transportation services is far below state averages due to many innovative strategies that hold the line on costs while providing quality services to the county's districts.
- By employing appropriately certified coaches and other staff as school bus drivers for extracurricular trips, the district has saved thousands of dollars otherwise spent paying overtime to bus drivers.

- Bowie County and the district purchase and refurbish used buses at a cost of \$4,000 to \$8,000 per bus--a more effective approach to purchasing new buses that normally cost \$40,000 each.
 - TISD's Food Service program maintains cooperative agreements to serve students in nearby Redwater and Red Lick ISDs, leading to increasing profits for TISD and reduced administrative burdens for the served districts.
 - Since creation of a TISD police department in 1992-93, students, teachers and administrators strongly agree that school buildings are safe. In an inventive move, the district police chief has students convicted of Class C misdemeanors perform community service at the high school.
-

If you have questions or comments on the review of Texarkana ISD, or if you would like to order a printed copy of the full report, call 1-800-531-5441 ext 3-4900 toll-free, send e-mail to tspr@cpa.state.tx.us, or write:

Texas School Performance Review
P.O. Box 13528
Austin, Texas 78711

There is a \$10 charge for a printed copy of the full report.