

## STATE AND LOCAL FUNDING OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS IN TEXAS

### Litigation Relating to the Texas Public School Finance System

On April 9, 2001, four property wealthy districts filed suit in the 250th District Court of Travis County, Texas (the "District Court") against the Texas Education Agency, the Texas State Board of Education, the Texas Commissioner of Education (the "Commissioner") and the Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts in a case styled *West Orange-Cove Consolidated Independent School District, et al. v. Neeley, et al.* The plaintiffs alleged that the \$1.50 maximum maintenance and operations ("M&O") tax rate had become in effect a state property tax, in violation of Article VIII, Section 1-e of the Texas Constitution, because it precluded them and other school districts from having meaningful discretion to tax at a lower rate. Forty school districts intervened alleging that the Texas public school finance system (the "Finance System") was inefficient, inadequate, and unsuitable, in violation of Article VII, Section 1 of the Texas Constitution, because the State of Texas (the "State") did not provide adequate funding. As described below, this case has twice reached the Texas Supreme Court (the "Supreme Court"), which rendered decisions in the case on May 29, 2003 ("West Orange-Cove I") and November 22, 2005 ("West Orange-Cove II"). After the remand by the Supreme Court back to the District Court in West Orange-Cove I, 285 other school districts were added as plaintiffs or intervenors. The plaintiffs joined the intervenors in their Article VII, Section 1 claims that the Finance System was inadequate and unsuitable, but not in their claims that the Finance System was inefficient.

On November 30, 2004, the final judgment of the District Court was released in connection with its reconsideration of the issues remanded to it by the Supreme Court in West Orange-Cove I. In that case, the District Court rendered judgment for the plaintiffs on all of their claims and for the intervenors on all but one of their claims, finding that (1) the Finance System was unconstitutional in that the Finance System violated Article VIII, Section 1-e of the Texas Constitution because the statutory limit of \$1.50 per \$100.00 of taxable assessed valuation on property taxes levied by school districts for maintenance and operation purposes had become both a floor and a ceiling, denying school districts meaningful discretion in setting their tax rates; (2) the constitutional mandate of adequacy set forth in Article VII, Section 1, of the Texas Constitution exceeded the maximum amount of funding available under the funding formulas administered by the State; and (3) the Finance System was financially inefficient, inadequate, and unsuitable in that it failed to provide sufficient access to revenue to provide for a general diffusion of knowledge as required by Article VII, Section 1, of the Texas Constitution.

The intervening school district groups contended that funding for school operations and facilities was inefficient in violation of Article VII, Section 1 of the Texas Constitution, because children in property-poor districts did not have substantially equal access to education revenue. All of the plaintiff and intervenor school districts asserted that the Finance System could not achieve "[a] general diffusion of knowledge" as required by Article VII, Section 1 of the Texas Constitution, because the Finance System was underfunded. The State, represented by the Texas Attorney

General, made a number of arguments opposing the positions of the school districts, as well as asserting that school districts did not have standing to challenge the State in these matters.

In *West Orange-Cove II*, the Supreme Court's holding was twofold: (1) that the local M&O tax had become a state property tax in violation of Article VIII, Section 1-e of the Texas Constitution and (2) the deficiencies in the Finance System did not amount to a violation of Article VII, Section 1 of the Texas Constitution. In reaching its first holding, the Supreme Court relied on evidence presented in the District Court to conclude that school districts did not have meaningful discretion in levying the M&O tax. In reaching its second holding, the Supreme Court, using a test of arbitrariness determined that: the public education system was "adequate," since it is capable of accomplishing a general diffusion of knowledge; the Finance System was not "inefficient," because school districts have substantially equal access to similar revenues per pupil at similar levels of tax effort, and efficiency does not preclude supplementation of revenues with local funds by school districts; and the Finance System does not violate the constitutional requirement of "suitability," since the Finance System was suitable for adequately and efficiently providing a public education.

In reversing the District Court's holding that the Finance System was unconstitutional under Article VII, Section 1 of the Texas Constitution, the Supreme Court stated:

Although the districts have offered evidence of deficiencies in the public school finance system, we conclude that those deficiencies do not amount to a violation of Article VII, Section 1. We remain convinced, however, as we were sixteen years ago, that defects in the structure of the public school finance system expose the system to constitutional challenge. Pouring more money into the system may forestall those challenges, but only for a time. They will repeat until the system is overhauled.

In response to the intervenor districts' contention that the Finance System was constitutionally inefficient, the *West Orange-Cove II* decision states that the Texas Constitution does not prevent the Finance System from being structured in a manner that results in gaps between the amount of funding per student that is available to the richest districts as compared to the poorest district, but reiterated its statements in *Edgewood Independent School District v. Meno*, 917 S.W.2d 717 (Tex. 1995) ("*Edgewood IV*") that such funding variances may not be unreasonable. The Supreme Court further stated that "[t]he standards of Article VII, Section 1 - adequacy, efficiency, and suitability - do not dictate a particular structure that a system of free public schools must have." The Supreme Court also noted that "[e]fficiency requires only substantially equal access to revenue for facilities necessary for an adequate system," and the Supreme Court agreed with arguments put forth by the State that the plaintiffs had failed to present sufficient evidence to prove that there was an inability to provide for a "general diffusion of knowledge" without additional facilities.

## **Funding Changes in Response to West Orange-Cove II**

In response to the decision in West Orange-Cove II, the Texas Legislature (the "Legislature") enacted House Bill 1 ("HB 1"), which made substantive changes in the way the Finance System is funded, as well as other legislation which, among other things, established a special fund in the State treasury to be used to collect new tax revenues that are dedicated under certain conditions for appropriation by the Legislature to reduce M&O tax rates, broadened the State business franchise tax, modified the procedures for assessing the State motor vehicle sales and use tax and increased the State tax on tobacco products (HB 1 and other described legislation are collectively referred to herein as the "Reform Legislation"). The Reform Legislation generally became effective at the beginning of the 2006–07 fiscal year of each district.

## **Possible Effects of Litigation and Changes in Law on School District Bonds**

The Reform Legislation and the changes made by the State Legislature to the Reform Legislation since its enactment did not alter the provisions of Chapter 45, Texas Education Code, that authorize districts to secure their bonds by pledging the receipts of an unlimited ad valorem debt service tax as security for payment of such bonds.

In the future, the Legislature could enact additional changes to the Finance System which could benefit or be a detriment to a school district depending upon a variety of factors, including the financial strategies that the district has implemented in light of past State funding systems. Among other possibilities, a district's boundaries could be redrawn, taxing powers restricted, State funding reallocated, or local ad valorem taxes replaced with State funding subject to biennial appropriation. In Edgewood IV, the Supreme Court stated that any future determination of unconstitutionality "would not, however, affect the district's authority to levy the taxes necessary to retire previously issued bonds, but would instead require the Legislature to cure the system's unconstitutionality in a way that is consistent with the Contract Clauses of the U.S. and Texas Constitutions" (collectively, the "Contract Clauses"). Consistent with the Contract Clauses, in the exercise of its police powers, the State may make such modifications in the terms and conditions of contractual covenants related to the payment of school district bonds as are reasonable and necessary for the attainment of important public purposes.

Although, as a matter of law, school district bonds, upon issuance and delivery, are entitled to the protections afforded previously existing contractual obligations under the Contract Clauses, school districts can make no representations or predictions concerning the effect of future legislation or litigation, or how such legislation or future court orders may affect their financial condition, revenues or operations. See "CURRENT PUBLIC SCHOOL FINANCE SYSTEM."

## **CURRENT PUBLIC SCHOOL FINANCE SYSTEM**

### **Overview**

The following description of the Finance System is a summary of the Reform Legislation and the changes made by the State Legislature to the Reform Legislation since its enactment, including modifications made during the regular through third called sessions of the 79th Texas Legislature (collectively, the "2006 Legislative Session"), the regular session of the 81st Texas Legislature (the "2009 Legislative Session") and the regular and first called sessions of the 82nd Texas Legislature (collectively, the "2011 Legislative Session"). For a more complete description of school finance and fiscal management in the State, reference is made to Vernon's Texas Codes Annotated, Education Code, Chapters 41 through 46, as amended.

Funding for school districts in the State is provided primarily from State and local sources. State funding for all school districts is provided through a set of funding formulas comprising the "Foundation School Program," as well as two facilities financing programs. Generally, the Finance System is designed to promote wealth equalization among school districts by balancing State and local sources of funds available to school districts. In particular, because districts with relatively high levels of property wealth per student can raise more local funding, such districts receive less State aid, and in some cases, are required to disburse local funds to equalize their overall funding relative to other school districts. Conversely, because districts with relatively low levels of property wealth per student have limited access to local funding, the Finance System is designed to provide more State funding to such districts. Thus, as a school district's property wealth per student increases, State funding to the school district is reduced. As a school district's property wealth per student declines, the Finance System is designed to increase its State funding. A similar equalization system exists for facilities funding wherein districts with the same tax rate for debt service raise the same amount of combined State and local funding. Facilities funding for debt incurred in prior years is expected to continue in future years; however, State funding for new school facilities was not appropriated by the 82nd Texas Legislature for the 2012–13 fiscal biennium.

Local funding is derived from collections of ad valorem taxes levied on property located within each district's boundaries. School districts are authorized to levy two types of property taxes: a limited maintenance and operations ("M&O") tax to pay current expenses and an unlimited interest and sinking fund ("I&S") tax to pay debt service on bonds. Under current law, M&O tax rates are subject to a statutory maximum rate of \$1.17 per \$100 of taxable value for most school districts. Current law also requires school districts to demonstrate their ability to pay debt service on outstanding indebtedness through the levy of an ad valorem tax at a rate of not to exceed \$0.50 per \$100 of taxable property at the time bonds are issued. Once bonds are issued, however, districts may levy a tax to pay debt service on such bonds unlimited as to rate or amount (see "TAX RATE LIMITATIONS" herein). As noted above, because property values vary widely among school districts, the amount of local funding generated by the same tax rate is also subject to wide variation among school districts.

The Reform Legislation, which generally became effective at the beginning of the 2006–07 fiscal year of each school district in the State, made substantive changes to the Finance System, which are summarized below. While each school district's funding entitlement was calculated based on the same formulas that were used prior to the 2006–07 fiscal year, the Reform Legislation

effected changes to the manner in which school districts are funded that were intended to reduce local M&O tax rates by one-third over two years through the introduction of the "State Compression Percentage," with M&O tax levies declining by approximately 11% in fiscal year 2006–07 and approximately another 22% in fiscal year 2007–08. (Prior to the Reform Legislation, the maximum M&O tax rate for most school districts was \$1.50 per \$100 of taxable assessed valuation.) Subject to local referenda, a district may increase its local M&O tax levy up to \$0.17 above the district's compressed tax rate. Based on the current State Compression Percentage, the maximum M&O tax rate is \$1.17 per \$100 of taxable value for most school districts (see "TAX RATE LIMITATIONS" herein).

### **Local Funding for School Districts**

The primary source of local funding for school districts is collections from ad valorem taxes levied against the taxable property located in each school district. As noted above, prior to the Reform Legislation, the maximum M&O tax rate for most school districts was generally limited to \$1.50 per \$100 of taxable value, and the majority of school districts were levying an M&O tax rate of \$1.50 per \$100 of taxable value at the time the Reform Legislation was enacted. The Reform Legislation required each school district to "compress" its tax rate by an amount equal to the "State Compression Percentage." For fiscal years 2007–08 through 2012–13, the State Compression Percentage has been set at 66.67%, effectively setting the maximum compressed M&O tax rate for most school districts at \$1.00 per \$100 of taxable value. The State Compression Percentage is set by legislative appropriation for each State fiscal biennium or, in the absence of legislative appropriation, by the Commissioner. School districts are permitted, however, to generate additional local funds by raising their M&O tax rate by \$0.04 above the compressed tax rate without voter approval (for most districts, up to \$1.04 per \$100 of taxable value). In addition, if the voters approve the tax rate increase, districts may, in general, increase their M&O tax rate by an additional two or more cents and receive State equalization funds for such taxing effort up to a maximum M&O tax rate of \$1.17 per \$100 of taxable value. Elections held in certain school districts under older laws, however, may subject M&O tax rates in such districts to other limitations (See "TAX RATE LIMITATIONS" herein).

### **State Funding for School Districts**

State funding for school districts is provided through the Foundation School Program, which provides each school district with a minimum level of funding (a "Basic Allotment") for each student in average daily attendance ("ADA"). The Basic Allotment is calculated for each school district using various weights and adjustments. This basic level of funding is referred to as "Tier One" of the Foundation School Program. The basic level of funding is then "enriched" with additional funds known as "Tier Two" of the Foundation School Program. Tier Two provides a guaranteed level of funding for each cent of local tax effort that exceeds the compressed tax rate (for most districts, M&O tax rates above \$1.00 per \$100 of taxable value). The Finance System also provides an Existing Debt Allotment ("EDA") to subsidize debt service on eligible outstanding school district bonds and an Instructional Facilities Allotment ("IFA") to subsidize debt service on newly issued bonds. IFA primarily addresses the debt service needs of property-

poor school districts. A New Instructional Facilities Allotment ("NIFA") also is available to help pay operational expenses associated with the opening of a new instructional facility. Future-year IFA and NIFA awards, however, were not funded by the Legislature for the 2012–13 fiscal biennium, although funding awards for IFA made in prior years will continue to be funded (but not the second year for NIFA for the 2012–13 fiscal biennium for districts that first became eligible for NIFA in the 2010–11 fiscal year).

Tier One and Tier Two allotments represent the State's share of the cost of M&O expenses of school districts, with local M&O taxes representing the district's local share. EDA and IFA allotments supplement a school district's local I&S taxes levied for debt service on eligible bonds issued to construct, acquire and improve facilities. Tier One and Tier Two allotments and existing EDA and IFA allotments are generally required to be funded each year by the Legislature. Since future-year IFA awards were not funded by the Legislature for the 2012–13 fiscal biennium, and debt service assistance on school district bonds that are not yet eligible for EDA is not available, debt service on new bonds issued by districts to construct, acquire and improve facilities must be funded solely from local I&S taxes. State funding allotments may be adjusted in certain circumstances to account for shortages in State appropriations or to allocate available funds in accordance with wealth equalization goals.

Tier One allotments are intended to provide all districts a basic level of education necessary to meet applicable legal standards. Tier Two allotments are intended to guarantee each school district that is not subject to the wealth transfer provisions described below an opportunity to supplement that basic program at a level of its own choice; however, Tier Two allotments may not be used for the payment of debt service or capital outlay.

The cost of the basic program is based on an allotment per student known as the "Basic Allotment". The Basic Allotment is adjusted for all districts by a cost adjustment factor intended to address competitive labor markets for teachers known as the "cost of education index." In addition, district-size adjustments are made for small- and mid-size districts. The cost of education index and district-size adjustments applied to the Basic Allotment, create what is referred to as the "Adjusted Allotment". The Adjusted Allotment is used to compute a "regular program allotment," as well as various other allotments associated with educating students with other specified educational needs. For fiscal year 2007–08, the Basic Allotment was \$3,135, and for fiscal year 2008–09, the Basic Allotment was increased to \$3,218. For a discussion of the Basic Allotment in fiscal years 2009–10 and beyond, see "2009 Legislation" below.

Tier Two currently provides two levels of enrichment with different guaranteed yields depending on the district's local tax effort. For the 2012–13 State fiscal biennium, the first six cents of tax effort that exceeds the compressed tax rate (for most districts, M&O tax rates ranging from \$1.01 to \$1.06 per \$100 of taxable value) will, for most districts, generate a guaranteed yield of \$59.97 per cent per weighted student in average daily attendance ("WADA"). The second level of Tier Two is generated by tax effort that exceeds the compressed tax rate plus six cents (for most districts eligible for this level of funding, M&O tax rates ranging from \$1.07 to \$1.17 per \$100 of taxable value) and has a guaranteed yield per cent per WADA of \$31.95. Property-wealthy

school districts are subject to recapture at the equivalent wealth per student of \$319,500 (see "Wealth Transfer Provisions" below). For school districts that adopted an M&O tax rate of \$1.17 per \$100 in taxable value for the 2010–11 fiscal year, the \$31.95 guaranteed yield is increased to \$33.95, but only for the 2011–12 fiscal year.

The IFA guarantees each awarded school district a specified amount per student (the "IFA Guaranteed Yield") in State and local funds for each cent of tax effort to pay the principal of and interest on eligible bonds issued to construct, acquire, renovate or improve instructional facilities. The guaranteed yield per cent of local tax effort per student in ADA has been \$35 since this program first began. To receive an IFA award, a school district must apply to the Commissioner in accordance with rules adopted by the Commissioner before issuing the bonds to be paid with IFA state assistance. The total amount of debt service assistance over a biennium for which a district may be awarded is limited to the lesser of (1) the actual debt service payments made by the district in the biennium in which the bonds are issued; or (2) the greater of (a) \$100,000 or (b) \$250 multiplied by the number of students in ADA. The IFA is also available for lease-purchase agreements and refunding bonds meeting certain prescribed conditions. Once a district receives an IFA award for bonds, it is entitled to continue receiving State assistance for such bonds without reapplying to the Commissioner. The guaranteed level of State and local funds per student per cent of local tax effort applicable to the bonds may not be reduced below the level provided for the year in which the bonds were issued. For the 2012–13 State biennium, however, no funds are appropriated for new IFA awards, although all current obligations are funded through the biennium.

State financial assistance is provided for certain existing eligible debt issued by school districts (referred to herein as EDA). The EDA guaranteed yield (the "EDA Yield") is the same as the IFA Guaranteed Yield (\$35 per cent of local tax effort per student in ADA), subject to adjustment as described below. For bonds that became eligible for EDA funding after August 31, 2001, and prior to August 31, 2005, EDA assistance was less than \$35 in revenue per student for each cent of debt service tax, as a result of certain administrative delegations granted to the Commissioner under State law. Effective September 1, 2003, the portion of the local debt service rate that has qualified for EDA assistance is limited to the first 29 cents of debt service tax or a greater amount for any year provided by appropriation by the Legislature. In general, a district's bonds are eligible for EDA assistance if (i) the district made payments on the bonds during the final fiscal year of the preceding State fiscal biennium or (ii) the district levied taxes to pay the principal of and interest on the bonds for that fiscal year. Each biennium, access to EDA funding is determined by the debt service taxes collected in the final year of the preceding biennium. A district may not receive EDA funding for the principal and interest on a series of otherwise eligible bonds for which the district receives IFA funding.

Prior to the 2012–13 biennium, a district could also qualify for a NIFA allotment, which provided assistance to districts for operational expenses associated with opening new instructional facilities. As previously mentioned, this program was not funded for the 2012–13 State fiscal biennium.

## **2006 Legislation**

Since the enactment of the Reform Legislation in 2006, most school districts in the State have operated with a "target" funding level per student ("Target Revenue") that is based upon the "hold harmless" principles embodied in the Reform Legislation. This system of Target Revenue was superimposed on the Foundation School Program and made existing funding formulas substantially less important for most school districts. As noted above, the Reform Legislation was intended to lower M&O tax rates in order to give school districts "meaningful discretion" in setting their M&O tax rates, while holding school districts harmless by providing them with the same level of overall funding they received prior to the enactment of the Reform Legislation. Under the Target Revenue system, each school district is generally entitled to receive the same amount of revenue per student as it did in either the 2005–2006 or 2006–07 fiscal year (under existing laws prior to the enactment of the Reform Legislation), as long as the district adopted an M&O tax rate that was at least equal to its compressed rate. The reduction in local M&O taxes resulting from the mandatory compression of M&O tax rates under the Reform Legislation, by itself, would have significantly reduced the amount of local revenue available to fund the Finance System. To make up for this shortfall, the Reform Legislation authorized Additional State Aid for Tax Reduction ("ASATR") for each school district in an amount equal to the difference between the amount that each district would receive under the Foundation School Program and the amount of each district's Target Revenue funding level.

## **2009 Legislation**

During the 2009 Legislative Session, legislation was enacted that increased the Basic Allotment for the 2009–10 fiscal year from \$3,218 to \$4,765. In addition, each district's Target Revenue was increased by \$120 per WADA. Target Revenue amounts were also adjusted to provide for mandatory employee pay raises and to account for changes in transportation and NIFA costs since the original Target Revenues were set. Overall, the Legislature allocated approximately \$1.9 billion in new State aid for school districts.

## **2011 Legislation**

During the 2011 Legislative Session, the Legislature enacted a budget that cut \$4 billion from the Foundation School Program for the 2012–13 State fiscal biennium, as compared to the funding level school districts were entitled to under the current formulas, including Target Revenue, and also cut approximately \$1.3 billion in various grants (i.e., pre-kindergarten grant program, student success initiative, etc.) that were previously available. Such cuts were made in light of a projected State deficit of up to \$27 billion for the 2012–13 State fiscal biennium. In order to reduce formula funding, a Regular Program Adjustment Factor ("RPAF") was applied to the formula that determines a district's regular program allotment. RPAF is multiplied by a school district's count of students in ADA (not counting the time a student spends in special education and career & technology education) and its Adjusted Allotment, which is the \$4,765 Basic Allotment adjusted for the cost of education index and the small- and mid-sized district adjustments. The RPAF is set at 0.9239 for the 2011–12 fiscal year and 0.98 for the 2012–13

fiscal year. In order to balance these reductions across the two years for formula funded districts, such districts have the option to request that an RPAF value of 0.95195 be applied for both the 2011–12 and 2012–13 fiscal years. In order to be granted the request by the Commissioner, the district must demonstrate that using the 0.9239 RPAF will cause the district a financial hardship in 2011–12. By applying the RPAF only to the Adjusted Allotment, other Tier One allotments, such as special education, career and technology, gifted and talented, bilingual and compensatory education, were not affected. The State Board of Education however, was directed to decrease funding for these programs in proportion to the reductions to the Basic Allotment. The Legislature also established an RPAF value of 0.98 for the 2013–15 State fiscal biennium, subject to increases by subsequent legislative appropriation not to exceed an RPAF value of 1.0. The RPAF factor and its related provisions are scheduled to expire on September 1, 2015.

The RPAF is the primary mechanism for formula reductions in the 2011–12 fiscal year. In the 2012–13 fiscal year, the RPAF of 0.98 is combined with a percentage reduction in each school district's Target Revenue per WADA to 92.35% of its formula amount. For the 2013–14 and subsequent fiscal years, the percentage reduction will be set by legislative appropriation. With regard to this adjustment, the ASATR relief that funds the Target Revenue system is phased out between the 2013–14 and 2017–18 fiscal years.

### **Wealth Transfer Provisions**

Some districts have sufficient property wealth per student in WADA ("wealth per student") to generate their statutory level of funding through collections of local property taxes alone. Districts whose wealth per student generates local property tax collections in excess of their statutory level of funding are referred to as "Chapter 41" districts because they are subject to the wealth equalization provisions contained in Chapter 41 of the Texas Education Code. Chapter 41 districts may receive State funds for certain competitive grants and a few programs that remain outside the Foundation School Program, as well as receiving ASATR until their overall funding meets or exceeds their Target Revenue level of funding. Otherwise, Chapter 41 districts are not eligible to receive State funding. Furthermore, Chapter 41 districts must exercise certain options in order to reduce their wealth level to equalized wealth levels of funding, as determined by formulas set forth in the Reform Legislation. For most Chapter 41 districts, this equalization process entails paying the portion of the district's local taxes collected in excess of the equalized wealth levels of funding to the State (for redistribution to other school districts) or directly to other school districts with a wealth per student that does not generate local funds sufficient to meet the statutory level of funding; a process known as "recapture".

The equalized wealth levels that subject Chapter 41 districts to wealth equalization measures for fiscal year 2011–12 are set at (i) \$476,500 per student in WADA with respect to that portion of a district's M&O tax effort that does not exceed its compressed tax rate (for most districts, the first \$1.00 per \$100 of taxable value) and (ii) \$319,500 per WADA with respect to that portion of a district's M&O tax effort that is beyond its compressed rate plus \$.06 (for most districts, M&O taxes levied above \$1.06 per \$100 in taxable value). M&O taxes levied above \$1.00 but below \$1.07 per \$100 of taxable value are not subject to the wealth equalization provisions of Chapter

41. Chapter 41 districts with a wealth per student above the lower equalized wealth level but below the higher equalized wealth level must equalize their wealth only with respect to the portion of their M&O tax rate, if any, in excess of \$1.06 per \$100 of taxable value. Chapter 41 districts may be entitled to receive ASATR from the State in excess of their recapture liability, and such districts may use their ASATR funds to offset their recapture liability.

Under Chapter 41, a district has five options to reduce its wealth per student so that it does not exceed the equalized wealth levels: (1) a district may consolidate by agreement with one or more districts to form a consolidated district; all property and debt of the consolidating districts vest in the consolidated district; (2) a district may detach property from its territory for annexation by a property-poor district; (3) a district may purchase attendance credits from the State; (4) a district may contract to educate nonresident students from a property-poor district by sending money directly to one or more property-poor districts; or (5) a district may consolidate by agreement with one or more districts to form a consolidated taxing district solely to levy and distribute either M&O taxes or both M&O taxes and I&S taxes. A Chapter 41 district may also exercise any combination of these remedies. Options (3), (4) and (5) require prior approval by the transferring district's voters; however, Chapter 41 districts may apply ASATR funds to offset recapture and to achieve the statutory wealth equalization requirements, as described above, without approval from voters.

A district may not adopt a tax rate until its effective wealth per student is at or below the equalized wealth level. If a district fails to exercise a permitted option, the Commissioner must reduce the district's property wealth per student to the equalized wealth level by detaching certain types of property from the district and annexing the property to a property-poor district or, if necessary, consolidate the district with a property-poor district. Provisions governing detachment and annexation of taxable property by the Commissioner do not provide for assumption of any of the transferring district's existing debt. The Commissioner has not been required to detach property in the absence of a district failing to select another wealth-equalization option.

### **Public Hearing and Rollback Tax Rate**

In setting its annual tax rate, the governing body of a school district generally cannot adopt a tax rate exceeding the district's "rollback tax rate" without approval by a majority of the voters voting at an election approving the higher rate. The tax rate consists of two components: (1) a rate for funding of maintenance and operation expenditures and (2) a rate for debt service. The rollback tax rate for a school district is the lesser of (A) the sum of (1) the product of the district's "State Compression Percentage" for that year multiplied by \$1.50, (2) the rate of \$0.04, (3) any rate increase above the rollback tax rate in prior years that were approved by voters, and (4) the district's current debt rate, or (B) the sum of (1) the district's effective maintenance and operations tax rate, (2) the product of the district's State Compression Percentage for that year multiplied by \$0.06; and (3) the district's current debt rate (see "CURRENT PUBLIC SCHOOL FINANCE SYSTEM - Local Funding for School Districts" for a description of the "State

Compression Percentage"). If for the preceding tax year a district adopted an M&O tax rate that was less than its effective M&O tax rate for that preceding tax year, the district's rollback tax for the current year is calculated as if the district had adopted an M&O tax rate for the preceding tax year equal to its effective M&O tax rate for that preceding tax year.

The "effective maintenance and operations tax rate" for a school district is the tax rate that, applied to the current tax values, would provide local maintenance and operating funds, when added to State funds to be distributed to the district pursuant to Chapter 42 of the Texas Education Code for the school year beginning in the current tax year, in the same amount as would have been available to the district in the preceding year if the funding elements of wealth equalization and State funding for the current year had been in effect for the preceding year.

Section 26.05 of the Property Tax Code provides that the governing body of a taxing unit is required to adopt the annual tax rate for the unit before the later of September 30 or the 60th day after the date the certified appraisal roll is received by the taxing unit, and a failure to adopt a tax rate by such required date will result in the tax rate for the taxing unit for the tax year to be the lower of the effective tax rate calculated for that tax year or the tax rate adopted by the taxing unit for the preceding tax year. Before adopting its annual tax rate, a public meeting must be held for the purpose of adopting a budget for the succeeding year. A notice of public meeting to discuss budget and proposed tax rate must be published in the time, format and manner prescribed in Section 44.004 of the Texas Education Code. Section 44.004(e) of the Texas Education Code provides that a person who owns taxable property in a school district is entitled to an injunction restraining the collection of taxes by the district if the district has not complied with such notice requirements or the language and format requirements of such notice as set forth in Section 44.004(b), (c) and (d) and if such failure to comply was not in good faith. Section 44.004(e) further provides the action to enjoin the collection of taxes must be filed before the date the district delivers substantially all of its tax bills. A district may adopt its budget after adopting a tax rate for the tax year in which the fiscal year covered by the budget begins if the district elects to adopt its tax rate before receiving the certified appraisal roll. A district that adopts a tax rate before adopting its budget must hold a public hearing on the proposed tax rate followed by another public hearing on the proposed budget rather than holding a single hearing on the two items.

## **TAX RATE LIMITATIONS**

### ***Districts with M&O Tax voted under Article 2784e-1 (assumes voted \$1.50 maximum rate)***

A school district is authorized to levy maintenance and operation ("M&O") taxes subject to approval of a proposition submitted to district voters. The maximum M&O tax rate that may be levied by a district pursuant to Article 2784e-1, Texas Revised Civil Statutes Annotated, as amended ("Article 2784e-1") cannot exceed the voted maximum rate or the maximum rate described in the next succeeding paragraph.

Article 2784e-1 limits a district's annual M&O tax rate based upon a comparison between the district's outstanding bonded indebtedness and the district's taxable assessed value per \$100 of assessed valuation. Article 2784e-1 provides for a reduction of \$0.10 for each one percent (1%) or major fraction thereof increase in bonded indebtedness beyond seven percent (7%) of assessed valuation of property in the district. This limitation is capped when the district's bonded indebtedness is ten percent (10%) (or greater) of the district's assessed valuation which would result in an annual M&O tax rate not to exceed \$1.20. Lastly, the Texas Attorney General in reviewing a district's transcript of proceedings will allow a district to reduce the amount of its outstanding bonded indebtedness by the amount of funds (on a percentage basis) that the district receives in State assistance for the repayment of this bonded indebtedness (For example, if a district anticipates that it will pay 75% of its bonded indebtedness from State assistance, for the purposes of Article 2784e-1, the Texas Attorney General will assume that only 25% of the district's bonded indebtedness is outstanding and payable from local ad valorem taxes).

The maximum tax rate per \$100 of assessed valuation that may be adopted by a district may not exceed the lesser of (A) \$1.50, or such lower rate as described in the preceding paragraph, and (B) the sum of (1) the rate of \$0.17, and (2) the product of the "State Compression Percentage" multiplied by \$1.50. The State Compression Percentage has been set, and will remain, at 66.67% for fiscal years 2007–08 through 2012–13. The State Compression Percentage is set by legislative appropriation for each State fiscal biennium or, in the absence of legislative appropriation, by the Commissioner. For a more detailed description of the State Compression Percentage, see "CURRENT PUBLIC SCHOOL FINANCE SYSTEM - Local Funding for School Districts". Furthermore, a school district cannot annually increase its tax rate in excess of the district's "rollback tax rate" without submitting such tax rate to a referendum election and a majority of the voters voting at such election approving the adopted rate

***Districts with M&O Tax voted under Education Code Ch. 20/45.003(d) (assumes voted \$1.50 maximum rate)***

A school district is authorized to levy M&O taxes subject to approval of a proposition submitted to district voters under Section 45.003(d) of the Texas Education Code, as amended. The maximum M&O tax rate that may be levied by a district cannot exceed the voted maximum rate or the maximum rate described in the next succeeding paragraph

The maximum tax rate per \$100 of assessed valuation that may be adopted by a district may not exceed the lesser of (A) \$1.50 and (B) the sum of (1) the rate of \$0.17, and (2) the product of the "State Compression Percentage" multiplied by \$1.50. The State Compression Percentage has been set, and will remain, at 66.67% for fiscal years 2007–08 through 2012–13. The State Compression Percentage is set by legislative appropriation for each State fiscal biennium or, in the absence of legislative appropriation, by the Commissioner. For a more detailed description of the State Compression Percentage, see "CURRENT PUBLIC SCHOOL FINANCE SYSTEM - Local Funding for School Districts." Furthermore, a school district cannot annually increase its tax rate in excess of the district's "rollback tax rate" without submitting such tax rate to a

referendum election and a majority of the voters voting at such election approving the adopted rate.

### *All Districts*

A school district is also authorized to issue bonds and levy taxes for payment of bonds subject to voter approval of a proposition submitted to the voters under Section 45.003(b)(1), Texas Education Code, as amended, which provides a tax unlimited as to rate or amount for the support school district bonded indebtedness.

Chapter 45 of the Texas Education Code, as amended, requires a district to demonstrate to the Texas Attorney General that it has the prospective ability to pay debt service on a proposed issue of bonds, together with debt service on other outstanding "new debt" of the district, from a tax levied at a rate of \$0.50 per \$100 of assessed valuation before bonds may be issued. In demonstrating the ability to pay debt service at a rate of \$0.50, a district may take into account State allotments to the district which effectively reduces the district's local share of debt service. Once the prospective ability to pay such tax has been shown and the bonds are issued, a district may levy an unlimited tax to pay debt service. Taxes levied to pay debt service on bonds approved by district voters at an election held on or before April 1, 1991 and issued before September 1, 1992 (or debt issued to refund such bonds) are not subject to the foregoing threshold tax rate test. In addition, taxes levied to pay refunding bonds issued pursuant to Chapter 1207, Texas Government Code, are not subject to the \$0.50 tax rate test; however, taxes levied to pay debt service on such bonds are included in the calculation of the \$0.50 tax rate test as applied to subsequent issues of "new debt." Under current law, a district may demonstrate its ability to comply with the \$0.50 threshold tax rate test by applying the \$0.50 tax rate to an amount equal to 90% of projected future taxable value of property in the district, as certified by a registered professional appraiser, anticipated for the earlier of the tax year five years after the current tax year or the tax year in which the final payment for the bonds is due. However, if a district uses projected future taxable values to meet the \$0.50 threshold tax rate test and subsequently imposes a tax at a rate greater than \$0.50 per \$100 of valuation to pay for bonds subject to the test, then for subsequent bond issues, the Attorney General must find that the district has the projected ability to pay principal and interest on the proposed bonds and all previously issued bonds subject to the \$0.50 threshold tax rate test from a tax rate of \$0.45 per \$100 of valuation.

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