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# No magic hat for Austin schools' budget woes

## Editorial Board

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Tonight, Austin school trustees will consider a budget plan that would make deep cuts to district classrooms. Superintendent Meria Carstarphen is proposing a budget that would eliminate about 350 teaching positions and a third of the district's school librarians, and it would even pare back pre-kindergarten programs.

But let's not point fingers at Carstarphen or school trustees for the projected \$113 million budget shortfall the district is facing the 2011-12 school year. Let's put the blame where most of it belongs: the Texas Legislature.

If the Legislature follows through with plans to cut public education by nearly \$10 billion, it will leave school districts across Texas in financial crisis.

At this stage, the state budget would gut public education and other things, such as health care for the poor through the Medicaid program, to help balance the state's two-year budget. The projected shortfall is about \$27 billion for the next two-year budget cycle if the state maintained current spending levels.

Carstarphen said the district can't absorb huge cuts from the state on top of reduced revenue from declining property values. Something has to give, and that means cutting bone, as there is little or no fat left to slice. Carstarphen deserves credit for serving up a budget for the current year that was balanced largely by eliminating administrative positions and other nonclassroom-related expenditures. She spared classrooms, and the value of that is evident in the big academic gains Austin schools made during the past school year. All but one school was rated acceptable or better.

But she is not a magician, and besides that, there are few rabbits left in the district's financial hat. One big one is its healthy rainy day fund, about \$142 million. A portion of that should be used to deal with the shortfall. We also believe it's time to seriously consider selling the Carruth Administration Center on West Sixth Street, the district's administrative headquarters that is valued from \$29 million to \$35 million.

Carstarphen has offered other recommendations that include increasing teachers' workloads. She will ask school trustees to approve a plan that requires teachers to teach six out of eight periods instead of five.

A district-appointed task force also has proposed shutting down as many as nine schools to save money and better utilize district facilities. The move is premature and ultimately might be more costly because it would shut down high-performing schools that are doing a great job of educating poor minority students, who tend to be the most at-risk of dropping out of school. As dropouts, those students become a drag on the community by expanding the welfare and prison rolls. We need them to be productive citizens who add to the tax base.

Last year, trustees voted against handing Carstarphen extra powers to address budget woes by blocking her request to declare financial exigency. We supported Carstarphen's request to use that tool as the

best way to make personnel cuts because it offers protections against lawsuits in cases involving employees with multiyear contracts. It has come to that again, and trustees should seriously consider giving her that authority.

There is still uncertainty at the Legislature, so we urge Carstarphen and trustees to avoid rushing into cuts. There is time also to look at creative solutions outside of the district, such as partnering with the city, county, Austin Community College and private sectors to share expenses or raise money for schools.

The budget crisis no doubt will spur discussions about a tax rate increase. All of those things are on the table. But don't make the crisis worse by closing schools or programs that help students succeed.