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## At forum, speakers tell state legislators of Arlington schools' woes

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ARLINGTON — Crowded classrooms, bare-bones supply budgets and aging technology resources were just a few of the problems more than 20 speakers shared with state legislators at an Arlington schools public hearing Saturday.

Nearly all requested relief for their cash-strapped district.

The forum, which drew about 150 people, was the brainchild of district Trustee Gloria Peña and state Sen. Royce West, D-Dallas. The two met in an airport in the fall, and Peña took the opportunity to question West about school funding. West, who serves on the Senate's education committee, told her that he wanted to hear more from the Arlington community.

Trustees in Arlington expect to use about \$17 million from the reserve fund to cover this year's budget. The district has about 63,000 students and 8,000 employees. School officials in Arlington and other Tarrant County districts have said legislative changes that froze state funding at 2006 levels are leaving them unable to deal with increasing costs.

### What speakers said

Several school principals spoke. They had to cut their campus allotment budgets, which pay for supplies like copy paper, by 15 percent during this year's budget process. Many expressed worries about increasing class sizes and possible program cuts. "It is the bleakest I've ever seen it," said Melinda Reeves, principal at Martin High School.

Parent Jenny Jenning worries that the district will lose teachers who are tired of struggling to do more with less.

Jimmy Womack, Arlington's transportation director, said legislators exacerbate budget problems when they pass unfunded mandates.

"You tell us we have to do these things, but there's no money set aside to do these things," he said.

### Legislators respond

Besides West, Saturday's panel included recently elected state Sen. Wendy Davis, D-Fort Worth, and state Rep. Chris Turner, D-Burleson. State Reps. Paula Pierson, D-Arlington, and Diane Patrick, R-Arlington, were also there, as were representatives from the office of state Sen. Chris Harris, R-Arlington. The legislators said they are committed to making sure schools have the resources they need.

"We can't kick this can down the road any longer," Turner said.

West, though, asked why the district had not tried to raise local taxes to provide itself some relief. Arlington's maintenance and operation property tax rate is \$1.04 per \$100 of assessed value. With voter approval, the district could increase it by 13 cents, raising an additional \$33 million a year, officials say.

West urged the crowd to give lawmakers input as the legislative session continues.

He also said increasing funds for education could mean some tough choices. Legislators would have to find another funding source or reallocate funds from other areas, West said.