



THE ADVOCATE

News From the Political Front

The fallout from the state's \$10 billion deficit was a bloodbath the likes of which most of us have never seen. Social programs were slashed, state agencies were sent scrambling, and even CHIPS, which provides medical coverage for children of indigent parents, suffered. It was painful to watch leadership in Austin turn their backs on crying needs, even as they continued to cling to their determination not to raise taxes, a vow most popular among middle-class/wealthy conservatives. Instead of raising the revenue necessary to deal with the deficit, these leaders shoved responsibility for doing so to the local level, causing local governments to raise taxes or, in effect, taxing state employees by taking money out of their paychecks to pay for benefits. These leaders, no doubt, will run for office next term boasting that they did not raise taxes, all the while hoping voters will ignore what really happened.

Legislative action in the House was particularly troubling to watch. Suspending rules in order to bypass public hearings and debate, the House railroaded through a number of bills harmful to educational institutions and employees. The votes on these bills were typically along party lines. One such bill, HB 2, deals with retirement. Since the college does not participate in Social Security, the Social Security Opt Out Provision requires that employees contribute to a state qualified retirement plan, for us either TRS or ORP. The legislature passed a law preventing employees hired after September 1, 2003 from participating in TRS or ORP for three months. Federal law mandates these employees to contribute to an individual retirement account formerly designated for our adjuncts, TIAA-CREF. This arrangement allows the legislature to claim employees are covered by a state retirement plan but allows the state not to contribute anything to retirement for ninety days. Therefore, with some minor variations resulting from complicated rules, a new faculty member at NHMCCD with a beginning salary of \$35,000 will contribute monthly 6.2% of her salary, \$180.83 for three months, but the state will make no contribution. Instead, the college will contribute 1.3%. After three months, the employee will contribute 6.65% and the state 6% to TRS or ORP. For the first three months, the employee loses 4.7% in retirement contributions.

A major change is legislation altering the retirement age. In the past, college employees have been able to retire at age 55 with ten years of eligible service and continue to have their health insurance paid by the state. New legislation requires that in order to retire with health benefits, education employees must be 65 with ten years of service or they must meet the "rule of 80" (age plus years of service must equal 80), whichever comes first. Some employees will be unable to meet this new requirement and will be unable to retain health benefits upon retirement, a huge loss.

Legislation was passed that delays enrollment in health benefits for three months for employees hired on or after September 1, 2003. That means that all of our new employees hired after that date will not only lose 4.7% in retirement contributions but will be without health coverage for three months.

Cuts in state funding placed a strain on NHMCCD and its employees. The district met the challenges through cutting budgets, freezing hiring, and reducing staff through attrition and other, sometimes painful, methods. Employees felt the strain professionally as we struggled to meet budget challenges, and we have already begun to feel the strain personally as we face paying more for health benefits. As of May 1, visits to primary care physicians increased from \$15 to \$20, and specialist visits went from \$20 to \$30. Co-pays for a hospital stay went from zero to \$100 per day up to a \$500 maximum per stay. If an employee is ill and must be in the hospital three times in one year, she will have a \$1,500 co-pay. However, she will also now be responsible for 20% of the bill instead of the previous 10%. Outpatient co-pays went from zero to \$100 per visit. Prescriptions increased \$5 for a thirty-day supply. Mail order prescriptions are now mandatory for maintenance drugs and now cost three co-pays instead of two for a three months'

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Education for Democracy —

Democracy for Education

The Advocate congratulates NHMCCD on thirty years of providing quality education.





News from the Political Front (cont'd)

supply. A recent change does allow employees to fill maintenance prescriptions locally for a surcharge of \$15 to \$45 for 90 days depending on the brand. Some employees cannot afford to pay for three months at one time but are now required to do so using Merk-Medco. There is a new \$50 per person deductible on prescription drugs. Perhaps most frightening, if an employee has a catastrophic illness like cancer and experiences \$1,000,000 in medical bills, she will now be responsible for \$30,000 instead of \$15,000. \$30,000 is more than many of our employees earn annually. These increased costs in health benefits will have a significant effect on many employees. If you are familiar with Georgia Fields' health problems and the union's efforts to raise money on her behalf, you understand what health insurance cuts mean. Another employee contacted me with a similar concern. This person, a juvenile diabetic for many years, went from paying \$800 annually for several necessary medications to \$2,000 annually beginning May 1. My fear is that these increases may put health care out of reach for many employees.

Amid these concerns about what the state's shortfall would mean to college employees, last May there were rumors that the NHMCCD Board of Trustees was considering only a modest tax increase, perhaps .5 cents per \$100 valuation, and planned to offer no salary increase to help employees with these costs because of the Board's concerns for taxpayers. The union argued vigorously that employees had to have a salary increase that would allow them to cope with these significant increases in health costs as well as other cost of living factors such as energy, education, and so forth. Our argument was that a one-cent increase would generate approximately \$6.4 million. According to Cindy Gilliam, Vice Chancellor of Business affairs and CFO, a 4% salary increase would have cost about \$3 million. Therefore, a 1.5 cent increase would have generated enough revenue to help ease the district's budget woes and provide employees a reasonable (4%) cost of living increase to help prevent employees' losing ground financially, something some of the local school districts have managed to do facing the same budget problems we face (Spring: 3%; Conroe: 2.5%; Humble: 2 to 4 % for staff and administration, \$1,115 for faculty; Cy-Fair: 2%; Aldine: no increase but a step on the salary schedule). A 1.5 cent tax increase would cost the average homeowner an additional \$17.25 annually. However, ignoring the fact that they had actually lowered the tax rate four times in the last six years, the Board chose to raise the tax rate only .9 cents and to provide no salary increase. The Board at one point considered a 3 cent increase. By settling on .9, they set the tax rate at 11.45 cents per \$100 valuation, lower than the 12.28 rate the college used in 1996. In a public budget workshop, Chancellor Pickelman argued strenuously that something had to be done to ease the burden of increased health costs but was met with resistance. The Board's arguments included concerns about how to justify any increases in salary or benefits funds to the taxpayers. A Board member argued that employees would just have to tighten their belts like everybody else, arguing that similar problems exist in the business world. It is worth noting that when things are bad in education, boards tend to be quick to point out that things are also bad in business. However, when things are robust in business and we ask for significant increases in salary and benefits, boards are quick to point out that education is different than the business world and we should not expect to enjoy comparable salaries and benefits. Finally, after considerable discussion, the Board did agree to a \$750 one-time stipend, money that does not become part of base salary, to help with increased benefits costs.

We are grateful for this modest stipend, and some would point out that the Board made a \$4M adjustment in faculty salaries last year. However, that adjustment primarily went toward changing our summer school compensation and moving some faculty to 10.5 month contracts. In fact, some senior faculty actually lost money (as much as \$2,000) in this new arrangement. This stipend, while certainly welcomed, fails to address the real financial challenges college employees face. The stipend will not adequately address the health benefits increases for many employees and does not begin to help address other increases in the cost of living. The Chancellor also implored the Board to provide funds for new hires on or after September 1 so that they will not have to risk three months without coverage. Scenarios were presented regarding what a serious illness might do financially to these employees. The Board flatly refused, again arguing that a three month delay is standard business practice.

The bottom line is that college employees are already losing ground financially and will continue to do so. The Board must begin now to look to next year to remedy this enormous problem.

Federation Wins Growth Award

Alan Hall

For the last four or five years, our local union has consistently taken second or third place annually in percentage growth among unions affiliated with the Texas Federation of Teachers. This year, the TFT's state convention was held here in Houston. We are proud to announce that, at the awards ceremony, our union was recognized for first place for percentage growth. That makes us the fastest growing AFT affiliate in the state in the percentage growth category.



Caution is Appropriate

In the face of cuts in state funding resulting from the \$10 billion deficit, one approach used to trim the budget at NHC bears watching. Dr. David Sam has initiated a practice for reducing staff without having to lay off any employees. If a critical position becomes open, rather than consider hiring from the outside or promoting from the inside, the administration will first attempt to create a lateral move for someone whose job can be eliminated. If that person is capable of doing the critical job, a lateral transfer is made with no increase in salary, and the person's original job is eliminated, thus saving that salary. When I asked Dr. Sam if he was suggesting that the eliminated job was not necessary in the first place, he said absolutely not. The job functions were important and would be divided up among other employees. When I asked if the other employees would receive additional compensation for the extra work, the answer was not automatically, that the new duties are evaluated through HR to determine if additional compensation is warranted. Well, in these difficult times, we can all manage to sacrifice. However, the college must be cautious not to overload employees who are already doing full-time jobs. The domino effect of moving people around and reassigning their job functions can go only so far without overly burdening other employees. We must also remember that reassignment of tasks should only be temporary. When the budget crisis passes, it would be easy to forget that employees are doing their jobs and parts of someone else's and simply leave them in that condition. That would be easy, and it would be wrong.

A second concern the AFT has about this practice is that the college insure that qualified employees are moved laterally. We have already had a situation that appears to violate that principle. A position opened, a hiring committee was formed, and several qualified internal candidates applied. The committee set up interviews, but just before they began, the interviews suddenly were cancelled. For each of the candidates, the job opening would be a promotion. The administration found someone they believed could do the job who was in a position that could be eliminated and for whom the new position would be a lateral move. The problem was that the employee did not meet the advertised minimum requirement of a bachelor's degree. In fact, the employee did not have an associate's degree. When I questioned Dr. Sam about these circumstances, he said that if the administration believes that an individual is capable of doing the job, an internal employee may be transferred without the required credentials. In this case, the administration reworked the job description and credential requirements. In the end, the employee's prior level and compensation were the same as the new position. We are in a place where credentials matter. NHC must be careful not to run rough shod over qualifications in overreaching for budget savings.

Certainly, the AFT supports the idea of not laying off employees, and we recognize that the district, per Dr. Pickelman's edict, has not laid off anyone. However, we must remember two things. We must not unduly burden employees who are already working hard, and we must be careful regarding qualifications. We are, after all, an educational institution that promotes the value of having the right credentials.

Alan Hall

Adjunct Excellence

The Employee Federation of NHMCCD would like to recognize the 02-03 Adjunct Faculty Excellence Award winners. Congratulations to each of you.

John Payne (TC)
Sandra Grebe (TC)
Donna Tollett (TC)
Sandi Dehaini (KC)
Martha "Susan" Schilling (KC)
Cynthia Kessler (KC)
Marilyn Baralt (KC)
Julie Shannon (KC)
Gaylynn Ratliff (NHC)
Patricia Thompson (NHC)
Charles Vickers (NHC)

Staff Excellence

In the May 2003 edition of The Advocate, we recognized the 02-03 Faculty and Staff Excellence Award winners. However, we inadvertently left off the name of one of the staff winners from Cy-Fair, Mr. David Dorsey. We apologize for the error, and we'd like to take this opportunity to officially recognize Mr. Dorsey as a recipient of this prestigious award.





Reflections of a TFT 2003 Convention Delegate

What a thrill it was for me to be a voting delegate, along with Alan Hall, NHMCCD Union President, at the bi-annual convention of the Texas Federation of Teachers, held in Houston at the JW Marriott Hotel from July 26th to 28th.

The procedural rules for qualifying voting delegates, presenting resolutions, speaking on motions, taking votes, and other such matters, while numerous, made for a very efficient and open meeting. Initially, delegates voted by raising voting cards. Typically, on those matters where a clear consensus did not exist, a call for a role call vote was made that gave each local (local chapter) a voting strength that is a proportion of their membership. Our local had six votes. Our delegation (Alan and I) was unanimous on all votes. On those matters with which I was not familiar, Alan provided a quick explanation that made sense to me. I abstained from voting on one resolution that easily passed. The resolution stated that the TFT "will oppose any attempt to remove the '10 percent rule' until a better way to provide minority students with access to a college or university education is found." I will leave it to another time to get into my opinion that people should be treated according to reasons other than an increasingly difficult to define "minority" status that is most often, in our culture, a reference to racial characteristics.

The only constitutional amendment submitted and quickly passed without much discussion changed the word "teacher" to "school employee." Likewise, since all officers were unopposed, the election process was uneventful.

Most of the time for discussing and voting was spent on about a half a dozen of the 49 submitted resolutions that dealt with the possible merger of the Texas Federation of Teachers with the Texas State Teachers Association. One would think that since unions typically base their strength on the number of members/voters that it would be a good idea for unions to combine their membership. The AFT officers spoke in favor of the merger, as did most of the locals with smaller membership.

It was more often the larger locals that opposed the merger, and the Houston Federation of Teachers (HFT) was the most open and active in their opposition. As I understand them, the reasons for opposing the merger by the large AFT locals are that their identity/name would be changed, the TSTA has a smaller membership in the area covered by the larger locals, and the TSTA has less money and, as some think, a large outstanding debt.

The issues/decisions surrounding the merger of the AFT and the TSTA were not resolved, but I suspect it will only be a matter of time before the merger occurs.

The speaker at the Convention Awards Banquet and recipient of the Child Advocate Award was the former member of Texas House of Representatives, Paul Sadler. His primary message was that the TFT should increase efforts to seek the support of moderate Republicans. Mr. Sadler, a Democrat, said that some conservative Republican legislatures were not supportive of Texas educators because they believed that there was little chance of getting their votes. However, given the current strength of the Republican Party in Texas, Mr. Sadler said it is necessary to have the support of moderate Republicans to get legislation passed that is more favorable to Texas educators and students.

Concerning issues that more directly relate to our AFT Local and higher education, I was very surprised to learn that our AFT Local was the only institution of higher education that had a delegation attending the convention. Some of the resolutions passed at the convention focused on improving conditions for all teachers in Texas. Most notable of these resolutions to me is the resolution that the TFT "will continue to work for the repeal of the Government Pension Offset and the Social Security Windfall Act." So it seems that our local has been the standard bearer for representing the needs of higher education with the TFT. It was most gratifying to see the obvious strong influence Alan has with the other shakers and movers at the convention. I observed many of the officers and delegates approach Alan for his counsel and support.

One final observation is that an inordinate amount of attention may be given to the Union's role in resolving employee grievances compared to our other very worthwhile pursuits. Only brief attention was given to employee grievances at the convention. There was brief mention of the successful resolution at the state level of a few employee grievances. I was glad to learn that the TFT sponsors five or so people that actively lobby the Texas legislature in support or opposition of bills that affect the lives not only of academic employees but also of students in the state of Texas.

Glenn Ware
Professor of Criminal Justice
North Harris College

Georgia Fields Fundraiser

Don't forget to check www.friendsofgeorgia.com for the latest information on fundraising efforts for Georgia. A benefit is coming up Saturday, September 27.





So What Constitutes a College-level Course?

Those of us in higher education, like our colleagues in public schools, have seen educational theories, fads and management styles come and go *ad nauseum*. From total quality management, to open concept, to learning colleges and learning communities (the public school version of this approach is called Tribes), we have seen it all. One constant in all of these theories and practices is an ever-increasing emphasis on finding ways to increase student success. While the AFT is all for student success, we are not willing to pursue it while sacrificing high academic standards. A legitimate fear is that faculty will feel a subtle but genuine pressure to water down course content. In fact, one dean has expressed to us this very concern. In fact, the dean is troubled that a watering down may have already occurred. Here in the district, the AFT has spent 23 years advocating quality instruction, and we will remain vigilant to see that standards do not erode. We believe that it's a good idea to check with one another from time to time, and this topic merits such a self analysis.

We invite faculty to write to the editor their views on what constitutes a college-level course, and the AFT will publish as many responses as possible.

Adjunct Dues Rate

At the 2002 AFT national convention in Las Vegas, the delegates passed a constitutional amendment providing a reduced union membership dues rate for "contingent employees, such as adjunct employees, making less than \$10,000 per year." The amendment allows for a reduced rate for a period of two years. We are now in the second year of this reduced rate, and we hope that many of our adjunct faculty and staff will continue to take advantage of this special reduced rate of \$10.00 per month, a significant decrease from the previous \$14.65 per month.

AFT Dues Increase

The AFT National has increased the local dues rate by \$.40/month in order to cover increased operating costs. The new monthly dues rates, effective October 1, 2003, are as follows:

Full-time Faculty: \$26.55
 Full-time Professional Staff: \$23.00
 Full-time Support Staff: \$19.40

The Adjunct Faculty & Staff dues will remain at the special rate of \$10 per month for the next year.

Membership Eligibility

Membership is open to all full and part-time faculty and staff. Faculty up through deans and professional and support staff up through directors are eligible.

Employee Federation of NHMCCD Website

The Employee Federation of NHMCCD unveiled its website last spring, and we hope you've had a chance to take a look. Features of the website include an electronic union application that can be filled out and submitted online, as well as information on dues rates, benefits, professional development opportunities, special events, and union news. Links to the websites for the Texas Federation of Teachers (TFT) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT) are also available. Check out the new website at <http://aft-nhmccd.org>.

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9/03

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SEPTEMBER
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AFT – American Federation of Teachers



Why Join?



The union is a professional organization regularly engaged in many activities. Membership dues support a host of activities and events, and membership is a bargain. If you believe faculty should have a voice in educational issues, you should join. If you believe employees should have a voice in the political process, you should join. If you believe in the value of employees helping out each other, you should join. If you believe employees should be treated with dignity, fairness, and respect, you should join. Your dues help support these values. Membership should not be thought of as only for “protection,” but if you need help in a conflict, we will be there for you. Don’t join because you think you might get into trouble. Join because you embrace the values we embrace.

CALL FOR ARTICLES

We invite all employees to send us their opinions, news, questions and so forth. The Advocate is a forum for information and free interchange of ideas. Send your articles to Dawn Baxley, Editor, MC, or e-mail: dawnb@nhmccd.edu, or submit to any of the other following officers:

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**Join the AFT
Call Alan Hall**

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