



THE ADVOCATE

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Salary Increase Due

Alarmed by indications that the NHMCCD Board of Trustees planned no salary increase for district employees for this academic year, last spring the AFT began to focus on the need for one. Increases in the general cost of living coupled specifically with the huge hit that employees are taking on reductions in health benefits warranted at least a 3% raise. Such a raise would have cost the district \$3 M. Employees were told that there was simply no money for a raise. However, the union did an open records request and proved in the February 04 *Advocate* that there was, in fact, \$3 M available. At the end of the 02/03 academic year, the colleges collectively returned \$3 M in surplus funds to the district. The district maintains 16% of the operating budget in reserves for emergencies. This additional \$3 M bumped the reserves to 17%. Make no mistake, the administration and the Board knew what the salary increase would have cost. It now appears that the Board may not have known about the \$3 M at the time salary decisions were made. The administration knew, and the Board should have known, about the \$3 M in surplus. Against this background, they told employees there was no money for a raise. The Board is complicit in the decision, but we must remember that they know only what they are presented by the administration. Perhaps the Board members need to ask more questions.

The administration's contention is that the \$3 M was a planned effort among the college presidents and DSTC necessary to achieve the district's current 17% reserve fund balance and that the \$750 stipend employees received would not have been possible without it. The AFT recognizes the importance of maintaining a reserve. It provides the district with favorable bond rating, which saves the district a lot of money, and it provides funds for an emergency. The district has dipped into the surplus to open Fairbanks Center and to add the second floor of Willow Chase. The Board sets the reserve rate of 16%. The rate is not mandated by law. It is a preference established by the Board. If the administration, and perhaps the Board, wanted to use the \$3 M for the reserve, then the Board could have passed a modest increase in property taxes in addition to the one they approved in order to provide a 3% raise, and that was the union's recommendation. The Board refused to do so. The union's concern is that the district has employees that are struggling to make it financially. Don't tell us that there is no money for a raise when, in fact, a raise could have been accomplished. Tell us the truth, that the administration and Board are more concerned about fund balances and their own public image regarding tax increases. It is difficult, however, to explain this value to some of our lower salaried employees who are having trouble with their own fund balance. Many of these employees are struggling with increased health benefit costs and are having difficulty making ends meet. The union's fear is that some of them may be foregoing important health care for themselves and their families. It is difficult to explain to them that the administration and Board chose the fund balance public image over their welfare. It is even more difficult for them to understand when they visit the DSTC and see the spending that went into it.

The one-time \$750 stipend we did receive did not go to base salary. This stipend did help in a small way. However, it came nowhere near addressing the increased costs related to health care alone. Moreover, had the \$750 at least been applied to base salary, we would continue to receive it each year, and it would be factored in for percentage raises. The decision not to add the

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Salary Increase Due (cont'd)

stipend to base salary will affect each of us for the remainder of our careers in the district. To really understand the effect of not receiving a raise this year, let's take a look at an employee with a salary of \$60,000. A 2% raise this year would have provided this employee \$1,200. If we assume a 2% raise each year for the next ten years, the 2% on that initial \$1,200 compounded annually would equal \$262. When one factors in that the employee would receive that initial \$1,200 each of those ten years and that money would be factored into future percentage salary increases, the loss to the employee over ten years is significant.

According to the administration, each 1% increase in salary costs the district \$700,000 (plus 16% of that figure which would have to be added to or left in the fund balance). Including the fund balance requirement, a 2% raise would have cost \$1.6 M. The \$3 M that went to surplus bumped the reserve to 17%, 1% above the Board preferred minimum of 16%. That 1% equaled approximately \$1.37 M, almost enough for a 2% raise. Had they known of the \$3 M, and again, they should have, the Board could have chosen to use that 1% over their preferred minimum and given employees at least a 2% raise. Instead, they were complicit in taking a pound of flesh from employees and depositing it in the fund balance.

Spring has arrived again, and the administration will soon begin its work on next year's budget. A major priority must be to remedy the loss of ground employees have suffered. There is plenty of justification. The Consumer Price Index is determined by the Department of Labor. They report that the cost of living in the Houston area increased 2.8% for 2003. They report an increase of 2.7% so far in 2004 with steady increases in medical and energy costs, showing a 4.2 % increase in medical costs and 3.8 % increase in energy costs in the last twelve months. College employees certainly understand the enormous increases in health costs. Co-payments went up, deductibles were instituted, and coverages went down in so many areas that it would be difficult to calculate the actual percentage increase in costs. ERS of Texas has announced a projected deficit for 8/31/05 of \$104.3 M and indicated a rate increase of 7.14% in premiums to avoid the deficit. Some of the increase will be picked up by the state, some by employees. This increase assumes benefits, which were dramatically reduced for 03/04, will hold constant at this

reduced level. Gasoline prices hit record highs in Houston in March 04. The cost of sending our children to college is increasing. For instance, University of Texas has announced a 26% increase in tuition and fees for next year. After a 9% increase this year, A& M just announced an additional 21% tuition increase for next year. University of Houston has announced an anticipated 25% increase in tuition and fees for next year. Other colleges are likely to follow that lead.

In the budget hearings last year, as they failed to approve a salary increase, one Board member remarked that college employees would just have to tighten their belts just like people in private industry were having to do. It is worth knowing that the industry average for salary increases for 2003 was 3-4%, exactly the amount the AFT recommended for our employees for 03/04.

District employees should have received a 3-4% salary increase for this academic year. The Board failed to keep us even despite Dr. Pickelman's goal that employees should not lose ground in salaries. Considering CPI, dramatic increases in the cost of health benefits, and the projected increase in premiums for 05, to simply get us even would require an increase of 7-8% for 04/05. Remember, this figure would only put us even with where we were in May 2003. To provide an actual increase in purchasing power would require more.

If you read the article titled "Some Belts Pinch Harder than Others" in the November/December 2003 Advocate, you saw the salaries of upper level administrators. It is clear that a percentage increase dramatically favors them over lower paid employees. 8% of the Chancellor's \$179,000 salary is \$14,320. 8% of a staff member's \$23,000 is \$1,840. The AFT recommends an across the board dollar amount in a salary increase for all employees. Perhaps the Board should average administrative salaries which range from \$86,000 to \$179,000, take 8% of that average, and provide that dollar amount across the board to all employees.

The Board could have chosen to provide a raise this year. They made a choice. Now it is time for them to choose again. Let us hope that they remember the oft cited line, "Our employees are the district's most valuable asset," and choose as if it were true.





Credit Where Credit Is Due

The January/February issue of The Advocate included an article on the inconsistencies coming from the administration regarding interims being able to apply for positions they occupy. The inconsistency came to a head when one interim appeared to be singled out under a “policy” that had not been written yet. The Chancellor has now made it clear that he does not believe interims should be allowed to apply for the positions they occupy. His fear is that interims would be hampered in making hard decisions for fear of harming their chances of securing their positions full-time (there is some merit to that concern). Based on this thinking, he declared that interims could not apply, this despite the fact that some previous interims had been allowed to apply or were simply appointed. When informed that some employees are currently interims who accepted their positions without being told that they would not be permitted to apply, Dr. Pickelman decided to grandfather them and allow them to apply. However, he refused to grandfather the interim Vice President for Educational Programs and Resources at NHC, apparently believing that she had been told prior to accepting the position that she would not be able to apply. Some of us knew better. An outcry went up from faculty and staff. Dr. Pickelman, who made the grandfathering decisions, heard from concerned employees as he visited various divisions at NHC. In each meeting, he defended his position and the “policy.” In the meeting with my division, he acknowledged two important points, that there had been poor communication between Dr. Sam and the interim as to whether or not the interim could apply and that the “policy” was not actually a policy yet. When the January/February Advocate came out, the conversation on this topic escalated. Shortly after its publication, Dr. Sam sent

out an email stating, “To resolve the issue of whether individuals currently in interim positions may apply for the substantive positions, EC decided today to grandfather all those who are now in interim positions. This means that all those in interim positions as of today may apply for those positions. A policy on the eligibility of future interim appointees to apply for substantive positions will be distributed shortly. Thank you. David S.” Credit for this decision belongs to the Chancellor. In high profile conflicts, one fear that the union has is that the administration will, in spite of our best efforts, box itself into a corner and then find themselves unable to move. It appeared that was where the vice president interim issue was headed. It takes some courage for the Chancellor to reverse a decision in a conflict that is so public. The AFT salutes Dr. Pickelman’s willingness to reconsider under such circumstances. What is needed is a clear, consistent, written policy in place before the college begins to operate by it.

After the announcement reversing the decision came out, a number of people thanked and congratulated the AFT. My response was that Hilary Clinton probably got it right: it takes a village. The AFT’s role, no doubt, was influential. We all need to remember that many people were talking about this one. It took a whole village to get the right outcome. Again, credit goes to Dr. Pickelman. I have seen many administrators who, even when dead wrong on an issue, defied the village.

Alan Hall

Principles of Fair Hiring

The Executive Council’s decision allowing current interims to apply for the positions that they are temporarily filling is good news. The decision comes after months of confusion and frustration over the issue of the eligibility of interims. The history of hiring interims in the district is one of seemingly conflicting practices. The “policy” denying interims eligibility apparently originated with the Chancellor some time ago. But few people were aware of the “policy.” At a meeting with NHC’s Languages and Communications Division and the Chancellor prior to the EC’s decision, the faculty insisted that it is unfair to apply the “policy” in the case of NHC’s VP of Educational Programs and Resources where the candidate was not explicitly made aware of it prior to accepting the interim position. The Chancellor maintained that enforcing the “policy” was fair in the case in question, but that he was “willing to be proven wrong.” Indeed further investigation of the facts did just that. The interim had not been explicitly told, and the Chancellor

reversed his decision. But there are lessons to be learned that transcend the particulars of that case. The last issue of The Advocate highlighted a number of hiring scenarios across the district that were of dubious integrity. The AFT’s concern is not with the personalities involved, but with the process. The cases are merely the symptoms; we must treat the cause.

From what was gathered during NHC’s Languages and Communications Division meeting with the Chancellor, we can conjecture as to what the cause might be. When asked about the origins of the policy that interims are barred from applying for the positions that they are temporarily filling, the Chancellor did not have any written policy to point to (as one does not exist). Instead, he mentioned a handful of reasons to have such a policy and added, “I feel strongly about it in here,” as he rapped his fist against his gut. As one would naturally suspect, a strong feeling does not translate into a



Principles of Fair Hiring (cont'd)

well-articulated or properly communicated policy. Not surprisingly, others in the administration were not clear about the Chancellor's feeling and were therefore not in a position to inform the candidates applying for interim positions that they are ineligible for the fulltime slots. The Chancellor himself acknowledged that his "policy" was "not communicated well." Also when asked about the date at which the "policy" went into effect (since it certainly has not always been applied in the past), the Chancellor claimed that it is a *de facto* policy that has been in effect "for some time." No documentation has been offered indicating precisely the time and date at which his "policy" went into effect. Likewise, it is not clear why some interims appear to have been exempted from it. Currently, the EC is preparing to put the "policy" into written form to end any misunderstandings.

The cloud of vagueness and ambiguity surrounding the cases of interims is not unique. It is representative of other hiring confusions and related egregious practices across the district. Obviously all of the problems do not originate with the Chancellor. The personalities and particulars of each case are different, but the cause seems to be the same. Some hiring scenarios across the district seem to be operating according to subjective and implicit policies. This is a dangerous practice as it allows for the policies to be selectively applied and to be concealed (deliberately or by accident) from the job candidates. The AFT would like to propose four principles of fair hiring that all hiring policies should adhere to. The list is not exhaustive, but it is a good start. By comparing the recent contentious hiring scenarios with the principles on the list, it becomes clear how

things went wrong. It is our hope that the administration heeds the four principles as they formulate all hiring policies in the future.

- 1) A hiring policy should be fair. It should not discriminate against any individuals or groups.
- 2) A hiring policy should not be vague or ambiguous. It should be in the form of clearly written statements, not feelings or emotions, so that it can be communicated to everybody without equivocation.
- 3) A hiring policy should be in print along with the date it goes into effect. It should be written in a document that is made available to all district employees as well as to all external candidates.
- 4) All job searches across the district should be able to abide consistently by the policy. In other words, it should not be selectively applied. Ideally the policy should provide sufficient guidelines to make negligible any idiosyncratic or subjective factors that unavoidably enter a search.

The AFT is optimistic that adopting these principles will help avoid hiring confusions like the ones that recently took place. If we have erred in these judgments, then we are willing to be proven wrong.

Nick Oweyssi
Professor of Philosophy
North Harris College

Good Things

After a Board of Trustees meeting in February, I made a point of thanking Dr. Ron Stauss, Information Technology Vice Chancellor, for going above and beyond the call of duty to solve an email-related problem of mine last year. Dr. Stauss remarked that it was nice to hear something complementary because he's used to only hearing complaints and problems. At that moment I decided that I would highlight in [The Advocate](#) some of the good things done by the district administration during the current academic year. There are a couple of decisions regarding faculty workload that deserve to be recognized as good things.

At the very start of the academic year, I discovered that there is confusion concerning the Distance Learning workload. The policy is that DL classes may constitute no more than 50% of a full-time faculty member's workload. The problem is that some colleges interpreted this to mean that a faculty member who teaches five classes per semester may not teach more than two DL classes per semester, while other colleges inter-

preted the 50% as applying to the whole academic year so that a faculty member could teach two DL classes one semester and three the next. The AFT contacted the office of Dr. Steve Head, Executive Vice Chancellor, for clarification. His office settled the matter in a just a few days and made sure to communicate the proper interpretation of the policy to all of the relevant administrators. Here is the message from Dr. Head's office sent this past August:

"The intent of EC was that the total workload for a 9 month period would not exceed 50% in Distance Learning/Flex teaching assignments. This means that faculty with a five class load could teach three DL/Flex class in the fall, but would then teach two in the following spring. The total sections offered would be ten, and only five of those could be DL/Flex. Fall and Spring Semester workload assignment for Distance Learning/Flex will not exceed three classes each full semester. Summer Distance Learning/Flex workload assignment will not exceed one class each term. Responsibility for



Good Things (cont'd)

Distance Learning/Flex workload assignments rests with the colleges based on need and in accordance with the Distance Learning Plan. Exceptions to the guidelines, including overload assignments, are approved by College VPs of Instruction.”

The AFT agrees with the EC’s interpretation because it is consistent with the interpretation of 50% of a full-time workload in other policies. Moreover, we applaud Dr. Head’s office for resolving the matter so quickly. It ended months of confusion among North Harris College’s administrators. Interestingly, it seems that none had bothered to contact the DSTC for clarification. All it took was a phone call from the AFT to Dr. Head’s office and it was settled within the week.

The second workload issue that merits highlighting is that of counting the May minimester as part of a full-time faculty member’s workload. Last year, faculty members who wished to teach the minimester would be paid according to the adjunct rate. The EC has recently decided to allow the May minimester to count towards fulfilling the summer load of a 10.5 month contract. Here is the message from Dr. Head’s office sent in February of 2004:

“A class taught during the May minimester may count toward fulfillment of the summer workload with the following provisions:

- 1) Faculty may use the May minimester class in combination with a regular class for either the first or second summer term (based on college scheduling needs) to make up a summer load.
- 2) If the May minimester class is not used in combination

with a regular summer term class, the faculty will be paid at the adjunct rate. The May minimester cannot be used alone to make a summer load.

- 3) The May minimester class may be combined with a Distance Learning class during one of the regular summer terms to make a full summer load.
- 4) Faculty are expected to be on campus four days per week regardless of the workload combinations (NHMCCD Policy DBC) with the exception of Study Abroad classes.
- 5) Study Abroad classes may not be used to make up any part of regular summer load. Faculty participating in Study Abroad classes during the summer term will be paid at adjunct rates.
- 6) Exceptions to any of the provisions listed above must be approved by the College President.
- 7) These policies are effective May, 2004.”

Most faculty members I have spoken to are delighted to be able to use the May minimester as part of their workload. It makes summer teaching much more enjoyable. The AFT agrees with all but one item in the policy. The only thing that puzzles the AFT is item #5 which does not allow Study Abroad classes to count towards a full-time load. The AFT hopes to pursue the matter by requesting an explanation for excluding those classes. Overall, however, both of the workload policies mentioned here are good things.

Nick Oweyssi
Professor of Philosophy

Small Proposal

Last summer at North Harris College we were asked to come up with ways to save money because of the decrease in funding by the state. A number of proposals were made and implemented, saving money at North Harris. However, we at North Harris, and indeed all of our sister institutions in the NHMCCD district, will be facing difficult economic times for the foreseeable future. And to make matters even more complex, teachers are currently being asked to devise and implement policies to increase retention and to ensure that more students are successful in our classes—the state wants to see the number of successful students go up, and the costs to the state go down. Thus it feels like we are facing a double-barreled shotgun. What to do?

As an English teacher, I would not presume to speak for any of the other disciplines, but I feel safe in believing I would have

the support of my colleagues throughout the district in making the following small proposal, which, I believe, would not only have a large impact on our student success rate and retention, but would also would save the district money in these hard times.

I propose that NHMCCD outsource the grading of essays in English classes. Such a move would ensure the retention and success of many more students, save money, increase the morale and health of a large number of teachers, and place NHMCCD in the forefront of what is an increasingly popular national trend in the global business community, giving us national publicity and enhancing our already prestigious reputation.



Small Proposal (cont'd)

Implementation

A skeptic might ask how such a proposal would work, but a little thought can supply at least a framework for such a system. While the details could be hammered out by a district-wide committee, I envision something along the lines of the following. First, nearly all students now compose their papers on a computer. Here at North Harris we have only two hot, crowded computer classrooms, but nearly all of our teachers, even in conventional classrooms, have their students go to the Learning Center to compose their papers on computer. So student papers are already in digital form. Next, almost without exception, our students are computer-savvy; they know how to activate their e-mail and surf the internet. Finally, many students are already routinely asked to submit their papers before they turn them in to professors to plagiarism-checking sites such as Mydropbox.com and Turnitin.com. So, given that papers are already in digital form, our students are computer savvy, and many are already used to submitting papers to an off-campus, electronic location, all we need to do is contract with an off-shore company such as 24/7 in Bangalore, India, to provide the service.

As Thomas L. Friedman points out in *The Houston Chronicle* (2-26-04; 26A), this company is already providing services and technical support for many US firms and computer giants. It has a highly trained work force who can speak and write English, and I am sure such a company would be happy to enhance its revenue stream by being the first in a new field.

As I envision it as a department here at North Harris, we would submit to the company our General Evaluation Standards (see the Department's web site) and a list of "correction symbols" drawn from the students' current English handbook. Then each teacher would set up his own "class" where he would post any additional standards he chose. As with the plagiarism-checking services, I am sure we could specify a twenty-four hour turn-around time for papers, ensuring that both student and teacher get timely feedback on the student's progress.

One objection to this procedure might be that we would be turning over the grading of papers to non-credentialed workers (ones without an M.A. in English), but the actual assignment of grades would still be in the hands of qualified, credentialed English teachers here at North Harris College. The situation would simply be the modern equivalent of a system that prevailed many years ago right here in Texas. For example, when I taught at Southwest Texas State University (now Texas State University) back in the sixties, I had the services of a "grader," a senior English major, for ten hours a

week. The grader would read each student paper and mark all the problems in grammar, punctuation, sentence structure, spelling, and diction. These graders were paid little as student workers. My proposal is merely a contemporary updating of this once-common custom.

Cost

At this point, administrators are probably wondering how outsourcing the actual grading of English papers could possibly **save** the college money if the school does not actually fire the English teachers already employed. Yet many companies now outsource repetitive, time-consuming tasks that used to consume their most valuable resource—their human capital—so that these individuals can use their time more productively. Why can't we in the education field do the same thing?

To be specific, English teachers spend an inordinate amount of time reading and grading student essays. It is the one characteristic that sets our group apart from many of our colleagues. Most English teachers that I have encountered love their profession and enjoy teaching and interacting with students, but I have never encountered one who looked forward to sitting down with 25 freshman comparison-contrast papers. Further, grading essays takes tremendous amounts of time. On average, grading a regular freshman essay (not a research paper, which takes substantially longer) takes approximately ten minutes. Multiply that by 25 students per class, and that by six essays per semester (two other writing assignments are consumed by a substantially longer research paper), and that by four classes (the fifth is usually a sophomore literature class). The grand total is 100 hours a semester grading papers! That is why many professional organizations, such as NCTE, advocate that composition teachers have only four classes per semester. Yet here at North Harris, as at most community colleges, English teachers are routinely supposed to teach five classes.

Some will object and say that this total is an exaggeration because at North Harris a number of classes are limited to only 20 students (because of computer lab limitations), while others are limited to 15 (the so-called pilot classes), and that by the end of the semester attrition has removed half of all students anyway. My answer is that I did not count the research papers, which take substantially longer to grade, nor the sophomore classes, which also typically have at least one ten page research paper and three or more essay exams. Yes, English teachers at North Harris have looked for ways to lighten the load of so many hours grading papers. Why? To have more time to spend on actual teaching and on one-on-one conferences with students. And here is where the savings



Small Proposal (cont'd)

come in. If English teachers did not have to spend so many hours grading papers, I feel confident that they, my colleagues, would readily embrace teaching five full classes. According to Dr. Harrison, Dean of Languages and Communications, this semester at North Harris College ten of the eleven full-time English teachers are only teaching four classes because they are in the pilot program, tutor in the writing lab, or on special committees. If all taught five classes, the college would save \$16,320 (at \$1,632 per class, adjunct pay). Out of that savings, of course, the off-shore workers would have to be paid. But according to Rami Shafiee, Professor of Economics at North Harris, a tech worker in Bangalore, India, for example, gets between eight and thirty dollars per hour. Since grading English papers is universally thought to be less demanding than other forms of technical work, we could probably employ someone to grade papers for ten dollars an hour. That would cost the school \$1,000 per teacher (100 hours of grading times ten dollars per hour) to outsource the grading of papers, but it would actually save 632 dollars because each teacher would now teach five full classes in addition to their other duties, for a total savings to North Harris of \$6,320. In addition, English teachers would probably not object to teaching even six classes per semester if **all** grading was outsourced, for an even larger savings.

However, the real benefits of this plan are not strictly economic (although what I outline below could have a far-reaching impact on the bottom line at NHMCCD).

Benefits

The benefits of this proposal would accrue to both students and teachers, just as similar outsourcing has raised productivity and increased customer service in other industries. As reported by Thomas L. Friedman in a second article in *The Houston Chronicle* (3-4-04; 26A), many companies outsource what the head of an Indian firm, MphasiS, calls "grunt work" so that their U S employees can "focus on customer service and thinking creatively about client needs." If English teachers were freed from such "grunt work" (grading freshman essays), they would be free to do the kind of thinking and the kind of client-intensive interaction that would ensure greater success for our students. Let me use my situation this semester as an example. Besides teaching four classes, I have in the works a number of projects related to teaching and the success of not only my own but all of the students taking English at North Harris: I am on a flex-writing committee which is striving to come up with a way to set up English 1301 (as well as the DS and ESL classes that feed into it) as a competency-based class where students will progress at their own rate to complete the competencies required of college writers. Building the competencies and

giving the student multiple paths to achieve them is a large undertaking. I am also working through technical difficulties to put on our network a CD on poetry I developed last semester on sabbatical. I have initiated a working group to look at the evaluation standards we as a department use to grade student papers. I regularly update and keep current the English Department web page, and I regularly revise my own extensive web pages set up for each of my own classes. I have worked with ESL faculty to clarify their outcomes for 0306, and I am working with a colleague to set up our Grammar Proficiency Exam online as a database. Also on my desk are projects uncompleted from past semesters, such as editing and producing a new edition of *Composite*, where students can showcase their writing ability and at the same time provide models for other students, and completing an expanded list of tests on novels (which need to be edited before they can be used) for our 1302 classes. My colleagues here at North Harris have equally full plates.

What happens is that many projects that could directly benefit students take an inordinately long time to complete because I, like my colleagues in the English Department, typically have only a few weeks at the beginning of each semester, and a few weeks near the middle of a semester, to devote to such work. My time during all other periods of the semester is devoted to grading and returning student papers. What if I had the 100 hours mentioned earlier to work on these projects and to spend more one-on-one time with my students? I am confident that many more students would succeed in my classes. If all English teachers had that extra time to devote, what could not be accomplished?

Therefore, students would benefit from the extra time teachers could spend with them as well as from the additional materials teachers could develop. Teachers would also benefit. Freed from the grunt work of grading and able to spend more time with their students and on improved means of delivering instruction, English teachers throughout our district would be a positive force for change in education.

Thus, instead of bemoaning the loss of U S jobs to firms off shore, let us embrace this practice and put it to use to benefit our students and a large group of our faculty. Let us embrace globalization, the tidal wave of this new century, and prepare our students to succeed in it.

Robert Miller
Professor of English
North Harris College



Social Security

The AFT routinely sends out email alerts to NHMCCD employees regarding Social Security. We are prevented from taking a political stand in favor of H.R. 594 in those emails since they are on district email. We urge employees to contact members of Congress about Social Security, but some employees are unclear on the issues and don't know what to say. This article provides background on the issue and makes clear what the AFT believes should happen.

The vast majority of Texas educational employees work in institutions that do not participate in the Social Security system. A nasty surprise awaits many of these employees when they retire. They may think that they have qualified for full Social Security benefits, based on their own work for other employers who did take part in Social Security, or based on their spouse's work at a job covered by Social Security.

However, when they retire these employees find out that their Social Security benefits are cut--in some cases even eliminated--because federal law deems their TRS/ORP pension a "windfall" that justifies cutting their Social Security benefits.

Windfall Elimination Provision

Suppose an employee qualified for Social Security benefits by working for another employer before she went to work for the college district. Or suppose she worked somewhere part-time evenings, weekends and summers to qualify for Social Security. What happens when she retires from NHMCCD which doesn't take part in Social Security? She faces a severe cut in her Social Security benefits, because federal law contains a so-called "windfall elimination provision." Under federal law, instead of receiving 90 percent of the first \$606 of average pre-retirement earnings, she receives only 40 percent. That's a \$303 cut in her expected Social Security benefit.

Governmental Pension Offset

Consider the case of a widow eligible to receive a survivor's benefit of \$600 a month from Social Security. Suppose that she retires from NHMCCD and in her own right has earned a TRS/ORP pension of \$900 a month. Federal law imposes a so-called "governmental pension offset" that reduces her Social Security survivor's benefit by two-thirds of the amount she receives from TRS/ORP (if an ORP participant takes a lump sum upon retirement, Social Security annuitizes it to determine a monthly amount). That happens in this case to be a \$600 offset--which means her survivor's benefit is reduced to zero.

Under current law, by working briefly just before retirement for one of the handful of Texas school districts that pay into Social Security, a TRS participant can avoid the offset and

reinstate the full spousal or widow(er)'s benefit under Social Security. This option is not available to ORP participants.

However, Congress has passed and President Bush has signed H.R. 743, a bill that eliminates the so-called "last-day exemption," effective July 1. Under Section 418 of H.R. 743, an employee's work in that last job before retirement generally must last at least 60 months to avoid the offset.

Our grass-roots campaign against this provision of the bill blocked its passage over the past 16 months. However, now the provision ending the last-day exemption will take effect July 1, 2004.

Our fight against this measure has been uphill all the way because the provision killing the last-day exemption was embedded in an otherwise benign bill that protects disabled and elderly Social Security beneficiaries from fraud. Many House members who agreed with us about the unfair GPO were hesitant to vote against the bill on final passage because of its other, benign provisions. The House leadership forced the final vote under a "closed rule" so that House members could not help school employees on the GPO issue without killing the whole bill and hurting millions of other beneficiaries. The House leadership also cast the final vote as one pitting Texans against the rest of the country because the last-day exemption has been used mostly by Texas school employees.

The key vote came on the move by Rep. Martin Frost, Democrat of Dallas, to re-frame the issue in our favor. Under Frost's proposal, H.R. 743 would have been reopened to amendment and Section 418 killing the last-day exemption would have been deleted and replaced with the Social Security Fairness Act, repealing the GPO and the similar Windfall Elimination Provision outright.

Frost's move to defeat the "closed rule" sought to avoid the trap set by the leadership, allowing the House to keep all the good provisions of H.R. 743 and give relief from the GPO not just to Texas school employees but to all the hundreds of thousands of public employees hurt by it across America.

When Frost's procedural move was defeated by a vote of 226 to 197, the die was cast, and the final vote on passage of H.R. 743 was a lopsided 402 yeas to 19 nays, with 11 not voting.

Texans who deserve extra credit for speaking out in support of Texas school employees, in addition to Frost, are Rep. Gene Green of Houston, Max Sandlin of Marshall, Chet Edwards of Waco, Ciro Rodriguez of San Antonio, Solomon Ortiz of Corpus Christi, Nick Lampson of Beaumont, Ruben



Social Security (cont'd)

Hinojosa of Mercedes, Sheila Jackson Lee of Houston, and Jim Turner of Crockett.

On the key procedural vote engineered by Rep. Frost, all Texas Republicans voted against Texas school employees except Ralph Hall of Rockwall. All Democrats present voted with Frost in defense of employees interests and against the unfair GPO. Democrat Lloyd Doggett of Austin, a leader in our three previous battles against this legislation over the past year and half, was absent on this vote and the vote on final passage, having remained in the Rio Grande Valley to campaign in the primary election forced upon him by redistricting. However, Doggett was in close contact with our other House allies and stood ready to fly back to Washington, D.C., if it appeared his vote would make the difference.

How Do We Get Congress To Undo The Damage?

A piece of legislation called the Social Security Fairness Act would end this unfairness. The bill would repeal both the "Governmental Pension Offset" and the "Windfall Elimination Provision." The author of the House version of the Social Security Fairness Act, H.R. 594, is U.S. Rep. Howard McKeon, a California Republican. The bill currently has 322 cosponsors. The identical Senate version, S. 349, is by Sen. Dianne Feinstein, Democrat of California, and has 29 cosponsors.

These lawmakers need our help to recruit more cosponsors for the bill from among the Texans in Congress. The 23 Texans who deserve to be thanked immediately are: Chris Bell of Houston, Henry Bonilla of San Antonio, Michael Burgess of Highland Village, John Carter of Round Rock, Lloyd Doggett of Austin, Chet Edwards of Waco, Martin Frost of Dallas, Charles Gonzalez of San Antonio, Gene Green of Houston, Ralph Hall of Rockwall, Ruben Hinojosa of Mercedes, Eddie Bernice Johnson of Dallas, Sheila Jackson Lee of Houston, Nick Lampson of Beaumont, Randy Neugebauer of Lubbock, Solomon Ortiz of Corpus Christi, Ron Paul of Surfside, Silvester Reyes of El Paso, Ciro Rodriguez of San Antonio, Max Sandlin of Marshall, Pete Sessions of Dallas, Charles Stenholm of Abilene and Jim Turner of Crockett.

You can say thanks on the AFT toll-free line to the U.S. Congress switchboard, 1-800-839-5276. Give the name of your member of Congress and ask the operator to connect you.

If your U.S. House member is one of the nine not yet on that cosponsor list, you need to call him or her to urge co-sponsorship of the Social Security Fairness Act. The nine who need to hear from us are Republicans Sam Johnson of Plano, Joe Barton of Ennis, John Culberson of Houston, Kevin Brady of The Woodlands, Kay Granger of Fort Worth,

Jeb Hensarling of Dallas, Mac Thornberry of Clarendon, Lamar Smith of San Antonio, and Tom DeLay of Sugar-Land.

Among these nine, Tom DeLay, as majority leader of the U.S. House, is in an especially strong position to advance the Social Security Fairness Act, if he chooses to do so. If you are in his legislative district, make sure he hears from you early and often on this issue of common sense and basic fairness to teachers and school employees.

Also please call and ask your two U.S. senators, Republicans Kay Bailey Hutchison and John Cornyn, to sign on.

What Are The Chances?

The truth is that none of these bills stand a chance of passage unless there is a sustained outcry from public employees across the country. Almost everyone admits the law is unfair. The union has dozens of other organizations allied with it in support of efforts to change the law. But fixing the problem will show up as red ink on the federal balance sheet (in other words, as an increase in the cost of Social Security). That makes our battle considerably harder to win at a time when the projected federal budget surpluses have suddenly vanished and the talk in Washington is all about a long-term shortfall in funding for Social Security.

This situation makes our battle harder, but not impossible. More than half the members of the U.S. House have cosponsored one or another of the bills cited above that would fix all or part of this problem. What these House members and all their colleagues need to know is that a whole lot of their constituents care deeply about passing this legislation and will not be satisfied with lip service. That's where you play an essential role.

The only way to win passage of this Social Security fairness legislation is to inundate Congress with your messages. The following pages contain (1) talking points we encourage you to use in your contacts with the Member of Congress for your area and your two U.S. Senators, followed by practical pointers on how to convey your message by phone, e-mail, or letter; (2) a sample letter to those who represent you in Congress.

Talking Points

- Please support the bill to establish the Social Security Fairness Act repealing the Social Security "Government Pension Offset" and the "Windfall Elimination Provision."
- Instead of honoring public service, both of these provisions harshly and unjustifiably punish those such as



Social Security (cont'd)

Texas school employees who have earned public-sector pensions in addition to qualifying for Social Security benefits.

- This punitive legislation targets hundreds of thousands of teachers, school support personnel, police officers, firefighters, and other public servants, for it applies only to those who receive public pensions; recipients of private pensions are not subject to the same penalty.
- Although these pension-benefit reductions were enacted to curtail payments of windfall benefits to highly paid individuals, they have had and continue to have devastating, unintended consequences for low and middle-income public employees.
- These Social Security benefit cuts targeting teachers and other school employees have the perverse effect of discouraging qualified individuals from entering the education profession - at exactly the time when our nation faces a severe shortage of qualified educators in the classroom.
- Teachers and other public employees adversely affected by these benefit cuts are asking for nothing more - and nothing less - than the Social Security benefits they have earned.
- Please tell me what you have done and will do to enact this Social Security Fairness Act.

Sample Letter to U.S. Representatives/Senators

Dear Representative/Senator (Last Name):

Please support H.R. 594 to establish the Social Security Fairness Act repealing the Social Security "Government Pension Offset" and the "Windfall Elimination Provision."

These two provisions harshly and unjustifiably punish those such as Texas school employees who have earned public-

sector pensions in addition to qualifying for Social Security benefits. This punitive legislation targets hundreds of thousands of teachers, school support personnel, police officers, firefighters, and other public servants, for it applies only to those who receive public pensions; recipients of private pensions are not subject to the same penalty.

While these pension-benefit reductions may have been intended to curtail payments of windfall benefits to highly paid individuals, in practice they have had and continue to have devastating, unintended consequences for low and middle-income public employees.

[If you have your own or a coworker's personal story about the damage done by these benefit reductions, you can plug in a short version here.]

By targeting teachers and other school employees, these Social Security benefit cuts have the perverse effect of discouraging qualified individuals from entering the education profession--at exactly the time when our nation faces a severe shortage of qualified educators in the classroom.

Teachers and other school employees adversely affected by these benefit cuts are asking for nothing more--and nothing less--than the Social Security benefits they have earned.

Please tell me what you will do to ensure enactment of the Social Security Fairness Act in this session of Congress.

Thank you for your service and for your attention to my concerns.

How to Direct Phone Calls, E-Mails, and Letters

District employees will receive via email methods of reaching members of Congress via telephone, email, and regular mail.

Alan Hall

Monthly AFT Dues

Full-time Faculty	\$26.55
Full-time Professional Staff	\$23.00
Full-time Support Staff	\$19.40
Adjunct Faculty & Staff	\$10.00

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STUDENT LOAN CONSOLIDATION PROGRAM

AFT members can now take advantage of the lowest interest rates on student loans in history, and cut their monthly student loan payments by up to 54%. Learn more about the AFT PLUS Student Loan Consolidation Program today by calling an AFT-dedicated loan counselor toll-free at **1-800-936-4976** or visiting www.aft.org/aftplus/consolidation for more information.



4/04

USE THIS AD IN APRIL 2004



Faculty and Staff Excellence

The Employee Federation of NHMCCD would like to recognize this year's Faculty and Staff Excellence Award winners. Congratulations to each of you.

Faculty Excellence

Bryan Barrows (NHC)
 Diana Cooley (NHC)
 Lourella Cruz (CFC)
 Susan Edwards (CFC)
 Megan Franks (NHC)
 Ron Heckelman (MC)
 Suann Hereford (KC)
 David Jensen (TC)
 Cliff Jones (CFC)
 Mike Krall (MC)
 Bliss Mayberry (KC)
 V. C. Patel (TC)
 Sue Thornton (NHC)
 Lee Topham (KC)
 Glenn Ware (NHC)
 Mark Whitten (MC)
 Bruce Zarosky (TC)

Staff Excellence

Sharon Alewine (TC)
 Rochelle Broom (NHC)
 Joann Engallina (NHC)
 Gilda Foster (KC)
 Francisca Garcia (KC)
 Charlotte Gates (NHC)
 Laura Gervais (CFC)
 Cindy Harris (CFC)
 Dulcie Mohammed (NHC)
 Duy Nguyen (TC)
 Joe Powers (NHC)
 Lisa Rickord (MC)
 Julie Ryals (KC)
 Pat Smethers (TC)
 Kathy Snow (CFC)
 Tom Taylor (MC)
 June Welch (MC)

The Adjunct Excellence Award process is still being completed at some campuses. The winners will be recognized in the next issue of [The Advocate](#).

Also, a special note of congratulations to AFT member Jeff Edwards. Professor of Economics at CFC, who was recently elected Treasurer of TCCTA.

Joining the AFT — We Have a Commitment

The union encourages employees to join not because they feel the need for job protection but because they share our values. If you have read [The Advocate](#), you know what they are. We do not see ourselves as simply members of an employee organization. We see ourselves as vigorous champions in a cause. We believe employees should have a voice in their professional lives. For over twenty years, we have remained steadfast in fighting for the welfare of employees of the district on many fronts. Our resolve is unwavering and has led to phenomenal growth. Membership is valuable. We are committed to a cause. We have a commitment to one another.

Membership Eligibility

The AFT continues to be surprised to find staff members who are unaware that they are eligible for membership in the union. Our name is the American Federation of Teachers, but for years staff members have been eligible. Membership is open to full and part-time faculty and staff up through the dean level.



In Memoriam

Velma Trammell’s husband, Jimmie, passed away on March 22, 2004. Velma has served as president of the union’s PSRP chapter for several years. PSRP, Paraprofessional and School Related Personnel, consists of professional and support staff members. Her position places her on the AFT Executive Committee. Every year, the AFT hosts a springtime celebration in April or early May. Velma and Jimmie several times have graciously offered their home across the street from NHC for the parties. The preparation for these events is not insignificant, and the AFT has always appreciated their generosity. The parties held there have been among the most popular that we host. The atmosphere has always been warm and inviting. Members and non-members who have attended always left with a smile on their face, in part due to Jimmie.

Jimmie was a longtime union member with the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, and he always enjoyed hosting our parties and swapping stories. The truth is, we mostly listened to his because they were better. His engaging personality and years of experience caused even the most talkative among our crowd to sit and listen. He was one of the most unassuming men I ever met, and yet, in a crowd of some fairly strong personalities, he held court.

One thing that was most memorable about him was his smile. You never talk to people who knew him without their mentioning that smile. Even in some pretty tough times, he kept upbeat and smiling. I visited him at home about three weeks ago at a time when he was suffering the effects of his illness. I was on my way to a function and decided to drop over to see him on the way. My plan was to stay for half an hour at most because I didn’t want to tire him. I stayed over an hour, and we laughed the whole time. His mind was sharp, and he was as funny as ever.

A second memorable characteristic was his genuine kindness. He treated people he met with dignity and respect, and he was genuinely interested in what they had to say. There is a remark one sometimes hears in tributes to people, including Eugene V. Debs, a powerful union leader and social reformer in the late 1800’ and early 1900’s. Speaking of him, someone remarked, “A kinder heart never beat.” One can easily apply that assessment to Jimmie Trammell.

Alan Hall

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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|----------------------|----------------------|------------|
| Alan Hall, President | North Harris College | ACAD 217-G |
| Velma Trammel | North Harris College | WNSP 174 |
| Nick Oweyssi | North Harris College | ACAD 221-A |
| Bob Locander | North Harris College | ACAD 270 |
| Allen Vogt | North Harris College | ACAD 264-C |
| Rich Almstedt | Kingwood College | FTC 100-G |
| Laura Yates | Kingwood College | SFA 113-D |
| Richard Becker | Tomball College | E-271-D |
| Julie Alber | Montgomery College | SSC 205-A |
| Heather Mitchell | Cy-Fair College | TECH 216-H |



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