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## John Folks: The TT Interview

by [Morgan Smith](#) | 10/12/2011 | [2 Comments](#)

**KEYWORDS:** [John Folks](#), [82nd Legislative Session](#), [Public Education](#)



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When John Folks was named Superintendent of the Year at an annual gathering of the state's education leaders earlier this month, 4,000 administrators and school board members rose to give him a standing ovation.

A fierce advocate for Texas public schools, the silver-haired chief of San Antonio's Northside Independent School District was a familiar figure at committee hearings and in the halls of the Capitol during the 82nd Legislature, where he frequently testified on the perils of reducing funding to public education.

Folks has led the state's fourth-largest school district since 2002. He began his more than four decades in public education as a teacher in Port Arthur. Later, he served as state superintendent of public instruction in Oklahoma, the top education post in his home state, and as superintendent of Spring ISD outside of Houston. On Friday, he spoke to the Tribune by phone about school finance lawsuits, spinning state cuts to public education and the upcoming transition to end-of-course exams. What follows is an edited and condensed transcript.

**TT: There's been a narrative developing out there that budget cuts to public education were not as bad as expected. What are your thoughts on that?**

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**Folks:** Well, first of all, I think [it's] wrong. School districts are having to make pretty draconian cuts. At Northside we have cut \$60 million, and we actually have almost 970 [fewer] positions than we had last year. A lot of that cut took place in positions that were outside the classroom. We cut 32 counselors. We cut 28 coaches. We cut academic coaches. We cut 17 administrators. We cut 53 central office positions. I could go on and on, but about \$48 million of what we cut was outside the classroom.

We did have to cut \$12 million with in the classroom, and that basically caused an increase in class size — a very small increase in class size. So I think it is probably correct when people say, "Well, we are not seeing the kind of cuts that everybody predicted or the effect of those cuts." They will. It will be long term. When you take out the academic support many our teachers have had when working with kids who are struggling with their learning, when you do the kinds of things we've done, it's going to have a dramatic impact, but it's not going to be immediate. And for them to say that the cuts did not have any effect about a month or two after school started is really disingenuous.

**TT: Most school districts are enacting the bulk of their budget reductions in the second year of the biennium. Are the cutbacks you've made going into this year going to be enough, or are we going to see more next year?**

**Folks:** No. We've made our cuts this year. We actually cut a little more than what was required to be cut by the Legislature. We decided to do that all in the first year because we wanted to do it. We wanted to get it over with. We wanted everything set in place. Then, of course, not knowing what would happen in the future — whether there might be another shortfall, proration might come, what other things might hit us in this biennium — we can at least say that we have taken care of this initial cut. We did not defer our cuts to the second year, and I feel really good about that.

**TT: Have you seen an effect on recruiting or retaining the top staff that you need?**

**Folks:** This year recruitment wasn't an issue because we hired very few new teachers. We had teachers leave because of turnover — resigning, retiring, leaving, whatever — but then also we had to add some teachers because of growth. That was probably four to five hundred positions we had to fill, and we filled those with existing teachers. So we did very little recruitment. What's sad about it is there is a lot of good young people out there that finished their college degree in education who want to be teachers, but there are no jobs for them.

The other issue on retention is that when we made our cuts, our board and [I] said that we want to do it in such a way that it affects the classroom as little as possible and that we save jobs. So we did it. Actually, we did not fire or let go anyone because of the budget, cuts because we just absorbed that and moved a lot of people around.

**TT: How do you feel about the transition to end of year exams and the STAAR exam?**

**Folks:** I am really concerned about it. I am very worried about it. Here we are moving to a new test when a lot of people thought — and the Legislature portrayed it this way — we are doing away with the TAKS test. Well, in reality, the Legislature actually instituted more testing with third- through eighth-grade and end-of-course testing, but they are also making the test much more rigorous, much more difficult. They are going to be timed tests. They will be four-hour tests. In the past, we have not placed a time limit on students taking the TAKS test.

So there are a lot of things there that I am very concerned about, but the main thing is: Why didn't they give us some relief from this when they cut \$5.3 billion out of public education? They talked about cutting \$4 billion out of the Foundation School program, but they cut another \$1.3 billion out of the grants and other revenues, like this money that was there to do a lot of tutoring and special help with kids who were struggling. So here we are going to a new test — one that is going to be much more difficult, much harder for kids, it's going to be timed, expectations much higher — and the Legislature said, "That's all right. Y'all go ahead and do it, but we're going to cut your \$5.3 billion." That is not right.

**TT: Will Northside join a school finance lawsuit?**

**Folks:** We will be a part of a lawsuit, and I will say that. We are aware of the Equity Center, and we are aware of what their arguments are, and we agree with their arguments. From a legal perspective, we agree exactly with what they are doing, but we are going to wait and see what David Thompson and his firm comes up with because he was very involved in the last lawsuit. We were a part of that lawsuit in the West Orange Cove case, so we are going to wait and see what their legal arguments are and then our board is making the decision [about] which lawsuit to join — one of them or both of them.

The bottom line to that is no matter which lawsuit you're in, in the final analysis, the school districts — if they are a part of the Equity Center or the Thompson lawsuit — are going to be sitting on the

same side of the court room versus the state. The twist on the arguments maybe a little different, but the basis of the argument is that Texas is not adequately funding education. We have a very inadequate equitable and inefficient system. We have an instance of a statewide property tax. We have no meaningful discretion, and I think both groups will be arguing very similar points.

**TT: This the eighth time a major legal challenge has been filed against the state related to state finance. What can be fixed this time around?**

**Folks:** Two things have to happen. Number one, the state of Texas is going to have to figure out a revenue stream that will be sufficient to fund our public schools and the growth that we have in Texas. We grow 80,000 kids a year, and also, of course, have the additional costs that are associated with education. And when they dropped the \$1.50 to \$1 as far as the property tax compression, they passed that business margins tax, which is falling short almost \$3.5 billion each biennium in collecting the amount of money to replace that tax compression. That's one thing they have to solve — the structural deficit that is associated with that margins tax.

The second thing they have to do is address equity. Equity may not be a part of the words in the constitution, but efficiency is. How can you say a system is efficient when one district has \$4,800 per student and another has \$9,000 to \$10,000 per student? We have one of the most inequitable and inefficient systems of financing schools of probably any state around.

Those are the two things in my opinion that the state needs to address. They've got to get serious about how are we going to fund public education. Of course tied to that question is: Do we support public education? I can't see how you put public education as a priority and cut it \$5.3 billion.

**TT: Is the only way the Legislature can make school finance policy with the cover of the courts? Should that be the case?**

**Folks:** My answer to that is, why do we have to have the courts holding a gun to the head of the Legislature to do what's right about public education? We ought to have the leadership and statesmanship in this state, as great as this state is, to find a solution and solve this problem in the right way — adequacy and equity — without the Supreme Court saying you have to fix it. Yet historically that has been the case. I think the Legislature many times has become reliant on the Supreme Court to say, "This is what you have got to fix." That gives the Legislature someone to blame: "We have to do this because the court said we have to do this."

To me, that is not leadership, and that is not statesmanship. They need to do it because it is what's right for the kids of Texas.

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