

# Senate passes bill hoping to decrease school dropout rate

AUSTIN (AP) — Senators voted Thursday to lighten up on a school attendance law that some said was adding to the dropout problem. They also approved a bill to increase benefits for retired teachers.

The Senate, however, rejected a measure to attract industries to smaller communities, with the main complaint that the proposal fostered secrecy in government.

Sen. Bill Haley, an architect of 1984 school reform legislation, said legislation had addressed attendance in a "negative fashion" by disallowing credit for a class if a student had more than five unexcused absences in a semester.

A Haley bill that cleared the Senate on voice vote Thursday would amend the law to require that a student attend class for 80 days in an 86- or 89-day semester to receive credit. The bill makes no distinction between excused and unexcused absences.

School districts would be required to set up attendance committees that could grant credit to a student who attends school for fewer than 80 days because of extenuating circumstances.

Sen. Steve Carriker, D-Wichita Falls, complained that he could see a "much more complicated bu-

reaucrazy developing."

But Sen. Gonzalo Barrientos, sponsor of several bills to reduce the number of school dropouts, supported Haley's bill. Barrientos, D-Austin, said witnesses had testified that the unexcused absence rule had "caused students to drop out" because they had no incentive to return after receiving five absences.

Haley, D-Center, said, "For it to work, you've got to allow these kids a way back in, and this is that avenue."

Sen. Kent Caperton, D-Bryan, sponsored the proposal that would allow teachers at 55, with 20 years service, to retire and receive 90 percent of full benefits. A teacher with 30 years service could retire at any age and receive 80 percent.

Caperton's bill also would raise the state's contribution to the teacher retirement system from 7.2 percent to 7.65 percent, with that rate remaining in place until August 1993.

Sen. Bill Ratliff, R-Mount Pleasant, failed in an effort to bring up a bill he said would allow small cities to use a half-cent sales tax to create corporations to attract industry.

# J.C. Penney pursues policy of economic equality to minorities

WASHINGTON (AP) — Minorities feel most of the impact of unemployment and low-paying jobs, in what a senior J.C. Penney official described Thursday as "economic inequality."

Speaking to Senate Republicans and Hispanic leaders, Robert B. Gill, vice chairman of the board for the Dallas-based J.C. Penney Company Inc., said he believes "there are too many who just aren't sharing in the promise of America."

"If the economic pie was divided evenly and more people were able to participate in the economic mainstream, many of the other issues we're concerned about would simply vanish," Gill told the Senate Republican Conference's task force on Hispanic affairs.

Gill said some would argue that the "opportunity for economic equality is there for everyone to grasp."

But, he said, "the reality is that when you look at unemployment or low-paying jobs, most of the impact is felt by minorities, including a sub-

stantial number of Hispanics. To date, we simply have not done enough."

Eliminating economic inequality is vital to maintaining a strong America, Gill said.

"That's economic freedom, and it's fundamental to our health and our country's health," he told Hispanic leaders from around the country, who gathered for a spring meeting on the Hispanic work force.

Gill said J.C. Penney has been committed to minority economic development for years, establishing a Hispanic marketing coordinator in 1982 and publishing the first Spanish language guide in retailing — a guide to the J.C. Penney catalog — in 1979.

The company deals with more than 1,500 minority firms and the number increases yearly, he said.

In 1987, he said the company contributed \$1 million to the National Minority Supplier Development Council's business consortium fund, which provides working capital loans to minority owned businesses.

# Gulf Coast United Way announces funding cuts

HOUSTON (AP) — Problems at the city's largest homeless shelter for men continue to mount with the United Way of the Texas Gulf Coast announcing it plans to cut funding and place the Star of Hope on probation.

Lasker Meyer, chairman of the United Way board of trustees, said Wednesday the probation, effective immediately, represents a final warning phase that continued United Way funding is in jeopardy. The agency said it was slashing funding by \$131,000.

"The United Way and the Star of Hope did agree to implement a plan to improve operations at the men's shelter, but continuing concerns regarding overall management of the agency's entire operations, evidenced by its loss of certification of food stamp redemption, have led to a crisis in community confidence," Meyer said.

Federal authorities Tuesday canceled the mission's authority to accept and use food stamps saying the mission was not properly licensed and was accepting stamps as tent for upgraded beds in violation of federal policy.

Star of Hope President Don Johnson said United Way officials notified him of their decisions.

"They, as a funding agency, have to do what they feel is appropriate," Johnson said.

"We regret the position being taken by the United Way, especially at a time when the problems faced by our city's homeless are increasing, not decreasing," he said in a prepared statement.

Johnson denied the mission had violated federal food stamp policy, although he did say some men who signed over their monthly food stamp allotments of \$90 each were provided with upgraded beds that normally rent for \$3 per night each. These men received the free meals provided to all transients, rather than the upgraded meals that sell for \$1.50 each, Johnson said.

Meyer said putting an agency on probation is a seldom-used step taken "after other corrective measures have been ineffective and after there has been a written warning enumerating the United Way's concerns and expectations."

A management and operations review of the Star of Hope, expected to take from four to six weeks, will determine the length and terms of probation, he said.

The study will lead to recommendations on how to correct problems, Meyer said. And if Star of Hope is unable to meet those recommendations or if illegal or unethical practices surface in the review, "defunding and disaffiliation will occur," he said.

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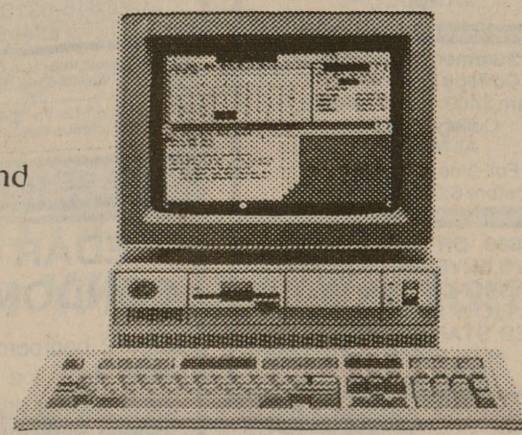
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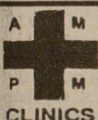
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