

TO: Senator Florence Shapiro and Senator Royce West
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FROM: Tom Hill / Winfree Academy - Grapevine Campus EMAIL: [REDACTED]
DATE: 13OCT06 (Friday)
RE: Interim Charge #6 - Evaluate the impact of successful school choice programs on students, parents, and teachers.

INTRODUCTION: I am the Senior English Teacher from Winfree Academy in Grapevine, Texas. I have been with Winfree for 5 years, and also have prior teaching experience in the Texas Public School System. I have driven 1.5 hours to work each way because we have such a unique educational setting, and from day #1, it has been both an exciting and rewarding experience. I would like to discuss several advantages of Charter Schools over public schools, and how Charter Schools can become a vital and valuable part of the educational process.

The first advantage of a Charter School is that it can provide a viable choice to those who are frustrated for whatever reason with the traditional public schools. The current high dropout rate from public schools is one indicator that shows there is a problem with traditional public schools, and Winfree Academy attempts on a daily basis to give our students a viable choice. We currently have 5 campus locations in the DFW area, and are planning a new campus in Denton for the 2007-2008 school year. Our current campus locations are located in Grapevine, Richardson, Irving, Lewisville, and North Richland Hills. Our Grapevine campus is starting its 5th school year, and has averaged 300 enrolled students for each of the 1st 3 years. Our numbers grew last year when we opened a night session for students that work full time jobs during the day. The majority of our students are 'at-risk', but we continue to have many success stories each year. We have at the Grapevine Campus alone seen almost 300 of our students receive their diploma in just 4 school years!

A second advantage of a Charter School is that we have a self-paced environment. A self-paced environment attracts 2 types of students, including those who would like to move at a faster pace and graduate early, and also students who need more time to complete assignments than average. We have former students currently in college majoring in all types of fields including pre-vet, business administration, pre-med, education, pharmacy, and engineering. With our self-paced environment, students that do fall behind retain more hope of catching up because they are spared the embarrassment of being 'left behind the rest of the class'. Our staff has more 1-on-1 time with each student to encourage them to achieve individual progress in an environment that is not 'Teacher-Driven' but 'Student-Driven', which gives them more control of their own educational destiny. We motivate our kids to 1) realize the value of an education, 2) 'Dream Big', and then 3) Go chase those dreams. Many of our students come to us sorely lacking in motivation, self-confidence, and the ability to dream. To see students that have potential finally start to use it and achieve success and graduate is one of the most rewarding things I've enjoyed in my education career. As a teacher, the 1-on-1 time allows me more freedom to tailor my approach to each individual student than I did in traditional public education. To some students I become a role-model, to others I may be a father-figure, and still to others I may be their drill-sergeant, if that is what they need. Over a period of the previous 4 years, most of my students have come to value my 'motivational visits' when they 1-on-1. If I had a dollar for each time one of my students has looked at me and said, "Nobody has ever told me that before", I could retire right now as a rich man. Last year our students voted me both 1) Teacher of the Year, and 2) Teacher that made the biggest impact. It's a great feeling as an educator to know just how much your students appreciate what you are doing, and acknowledge the impact you are having on their lives.

A third advantage of a Charter School is that while we offer alternative approaches to education (i.e. self-paced environment, smaller class sizes), we also offer multiple learning opportunities both inside and outside of the classroom that traditional schools provide. Our self-paced curriculum in English/Language Arts is strong, and our TAKS scores reflect that. For Exit-Level ELA TAKS, our campus pass rate was 80% in December 2004. It improved to a 95% pass rate in April 2005. Of these 95% who passed, 61% of those students achieved the 'Commended Performance' level. Our learning opportunities outside of the classroom include our Goodworks Team, which I started along with several other staff members in January 2006. Our Goodworks Team provides Volunteer opportunities for students, staff, and interested parents. In September 2006, the Goodworks Team made a donation to the North Texas Food Bank that provided over 420 meals to those in need. The donation was voted on by our students

that had won in a 'Water Conservation' Contest sponsored in April by the Ft. Worth Star-Telegram. The Goodworks Team also developed a relationship with the Special Olympics, and provided over 24 volunteers to both the Regional Special Olympics Track Meet in April, and the State Meet in May 2006. We even produced a DVD Video including pictures and music commemorating the event that we shared with the entire student body. We are currently making plans for our volunteer opportunities for both staff and students for the 2006-2007 Special Olympic events. Most recently, the Goodworks Team has started a letter-writing campaign to a U.S. Army soldier in Iraq, and this is a very special soldier to us at the Winfree Academy - Grapevine Campus. In September 2006, I received a phone call at work from one of my former students, now PFC Brandon Harvey stationed in Iraq. He called to thank me for never giving up on him, and helping him in many ways to become the man that he is today. I must say, receiving a call from a former student stationed in a battle zone just to say 'thanks' will forever rank up near the top of my list of 'job satisfaction achievements'. I shared the experience with the student body, and we decided to start the letter writing campaign. So far, we have sent him over 50 letters and 2 large banners with signatures from both students and staff wishing him a safe return. Last week he wrote us back with 1) encouragement to our current students, and 2) offering to mentor them with advice on how to complete their education. Our current students look at him as a 'real live/real time' hero because just 2 years ago he was one of them. The Goodworks Team is currently planning to be part of the 'Welcome Home' entourage at DFW airport in December when he returns, and I'm sure there won't be a dry eye in the house.

CONCLUSION: School funding is not just about money, but about people, and my question to you is would you rather spend money on schools or prisons? Many of our at-risk students don't have any other options. If you take Winfree Academy Charter School out of the Educational Process, many of these kids won't graduate and will drop out, driving the already high dropout rate even higher. The end result will be more teens entering the Texas economy, but with no diploma and an incomplete education. It is my firm belief that over time, this would prove to be a serious mistake with long-term consequences. At Winfree Academy, we are making a difference in the lives of many young Texans today, and I ask that you allow us to continue. Please come to our Grapevine Campus for visit, and you will see for yourself.