



March 29, 2007

Senate Bill 1506 Testimony

The Texas Association for the Gifted and Talented (TAGT) is a statewide non-profit educational association that represents over 3000 members who are mostly educators and parents of high potential students identified as gifted and talented under Texas law. TAGT provides extensive continuing education opportunities about gifted education and gifted student development for educators as well as parents. Additionally, TAGT is committed to advocating for the unique educational needs of this high potential population.

On behalf of the Texas Association for the Gifted and Talented (TAGT), I thank you for this opportunity to provide written testimony on Senate Bill 1506. While TAGT supports the idea that all parents should have a choice as to where they educate their children, we strongly oppose this bill. The association is opposed to any type of school voucher that potentially diverts money from public education to private schools; we believe public funds belong in public schools. In addition, despite safeguards designed into the bill, it would make educational accountability and financial transparency significantly more difficult; it may also create an opportunity for even greater inequity for these economically disadvantaged students than already exists. Once a bill of this nature is passed, whether it is called a voucher or by some other euphemism, it becomes that much easier to add other groups of students to the list.

The identification and support of the unique needs of each learner should be the goal of our public educational system, rather than the segmentation and dilution of available precious resources. This bill creates a classification of the student population based solely on geography and socioeconomic standing that would allow public taxpayers' dollars to be diverted to nonpublic institutions. TAGT believes that public dollars should be used to provide enhanced services to public schools to meet the needs of special student populations. To open the door to a special class of students creates a constitutional issue of equity across all populations.

We know that gifted and high potential students in the many Texas' school districts have struggled to adapt to an educational system that does not challenge them to the capacity of their capability or gifts. Yet TAGT as an organization stands firm in the belief that Texas' public schools are the appropriate environment to invest in and affect standards of excellence in the delivery of educational services for each student.

TAGT is committed to the proposition that every child should have the best possible education they can receive, regardless of their gifts, disabilities, or their socioeconomic standing. But in most cases, state vouchers would not cover the full cost of a private school and thus would not help economically disadvantaged students whose parents could not pay the difference. Who is responsible for protecting the interests of the students whose parents cannot afford the additional expense of a private school?

The loss of funding via school vouchers may undermine the ability of public schools to provide needed services; many districts may be forced to cut useful academic and enrichment programs with the migration of their students and public funds to other public school districts or private schools. This puts the students this bill is intended to protect at even greater academic risk.

What of students in these urban schools who have special needs that are guaranteed services under federal law? Once a child leaves the public school system, the mandate for the delivery of appropriate services no longer exists. Some students may be penalized because a parent chooses a nonpublic school without a full understanding of this situation. Is this a service or disservice to the child?

Private schools have no obligation to the public to provide all data germane to its student population. How does this increase educational accountability? Private schools have no obligation to the public to provide all records as to how funds are spent. How does this create greater financial transparency? Private schools may choose to accept or reject students without explanation. How does this provide appropriate educational opportunities for all students?

There are many fine private schools, but not all private schools are superior to public schools. The point is that they are private, not public, and are not required to meet the same standards and accountability that public schools must meet. When different schools are allowed to play by different rules, there is no fairness.

TAGT believes a better goal would be to improve, strengthen, and properly fund programs that educate children in the public schools. Vouchers should not become a commodity for even greater inequity than what already exists. The goal of government should be to adequately fund public school programs already in place; that is the best way to ensure that the needs of all students, including those in poor, urban school districts are met. It is the only means of having financial transparency, appropriate accountability, and equity for these expenditures.

Respectfully submitted by
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