

## **CURT PARSONS: SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE HEARING ON H.B. 3678**

My name is Curt Parsons. I live in Hamlin, Texas. I have come to speak in favor of House Bill 3678.

My working life has been devoted to Texas public schools. I have been a schoolteacher, athletic coach, campus administrator, district administrator, and Superintendent. I have served 37 years total in service to our Texas public schools. For 22 of those 37 years, I was a District Superintendent. For 12 years I was the Superintendent in the Spur Independent School District in Dickens County. And most recently, for 10 years I was the Superintendent for the Hamlin Independent School District in Hamlin, Texas. I have now retired, but continue to live in Hamlin, Texas and keep in close contact with the schools and new Superintendent of Hamlin ISD.

While I was the Superintendent of Hamlin ISD there were various court rulings involving student speakers and religious expression at school events. Kelly Coghlan was the attorney for a little girl involved in the federal case of *Ward v. Santa Fe ISD* who successfully defended that students' right to express a religious viewpoint without discrimination from the school district. It was at or around this time that I came in contact with Mr. Coghlan. With much help from Mr. Coghlan, and through various exchanges between him and me, Hamlin ISD drafted several board policies dealing with student expression. The School Board adopted these policies to try to bring our school district in line with the law. These policies essentially provided for a limited public forum at various school events in which students were allowed to publicly speak— including ballgames, pep rallies, and graduations.

The policies included careful detail as to how volunteer students would be selected based on neutral criteria, and otherwise how the policies would be administered at the campus level.

Students were very respectful of the opportunity to publicly speak. And, to my knowledge, there has never been any abuse of the privilege arising out of this right to student expression under our policies. Many other school districts have inquired about what we are doing and how. The policies have certainly worked well for us for more than 6 years.

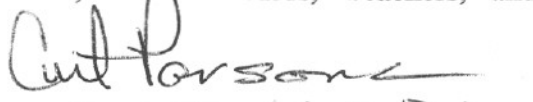
I have carefully read and studied HB 3678. I believe that the essentials of the Bill and what has been in policy and practice in Hamlin ISD, are very much the same. Both provide for a limited public forum in which students speak, and both provide for equal protection of voluntary student-initiated expression of faith-based viewpoints on otherwise proper topics, and without discrimination.

Student expression and free speech are of great value in education. Students need opportunities to organize thoughts and present them orally to a live audience. As students have opportunities to express themselves freely in education settings, their education and their school become more their own—something they can value.

After reading and studying H.B. 3678, and based upon our experience with essentially the same policy as is attached to the Bill, I strongly believe this needs to become law.

There is lot of confusion out there today in school districts across Texas. They are all asking: “What can we do?” “What does this law allow?” “What does that court decision prohibit?” “What does the law really say about this or that?” I know, because I was one of those Superintendents asking these questions; and all of my current Superintendent friends continue to ask these questions.

Active superintendents and Boards of Education need some definitive answers in the area of student expression. And perhaps, more importantly, Texas students need to be allowed to voluntarily express religious viewpoints on otherwise appropriate topics, without discrimination. This Bill under consideration addresses these needs. And I respectfully recommend its passage. It would greatly help school districts, Superintendents, School Boards, Teachers, and Administrators. Thank you.

  
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