

Texas School Alliance Testimony on SB 1301

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The Texas School Alliance (TSA) comprises 31 of the state's largest districts, serving over one-third of the state's total pupil enrollment and nearly half of all English language learners in Texas. TSA is opposed to SB 1301 that allows students eligible to participate in a public school district's special education program and that have been diagnosed with autism or an autism spectrum disorder to attend any public school in their district or another district, or a nongovernment entity that provides education to students with autism.

While the bill does require qualifying schools to provide information to parents on students' academic progress and requires the administration of either state assessments or nationally norm-referenced assessments, it does not provide for any particular level of required performance. It also does not provide for any consequences should the private provider fail to demonstrate adequate levels of performance.

In fact, the bill does not require private providers to comply with the vast majority of laws and regulations that currently apply to traditional school districts. These laws provide for everything from minimum teaching qualifications to immunization requirements to academic and financial accountability provisions. Under this bill, although the private institutions would receive tax dollars, they are not required to:

- Employ teachers who have a college degree or any other particular form of training;
- Demonstrate any particular level of success in serving students;
- Comply with the state's student discipline and school safety requirements;
- Comply with open records rules; or
- Offer the state foundation curriculum covering the basics of reading, writing, mathematics and science.

The Texas School Alliance believes that the state should not abdicate its responsibility in overseeing the education of its neediest students. While we believe that contracting for private services for students enrolled in special education programs is part of a sound educational program, we think that continued public accountability for the use of funds and the academic needs of students remains necessary. When a district contracts with a private entity, it remains accountable for the use of public funds and can choose to stop contracting with an entity that is not providing sufficient services.

If students with autism are not receiving the services they need through the public school system, then it is incumbent on all of us to determine how to improve services. School districts, the state, and parents must work together to determine how best to make this happen.