

# State Board of Education

1701 North Congress Avenue  
Austin, Texas 78701-1494  
(512) 463-9007

March 29, 2009



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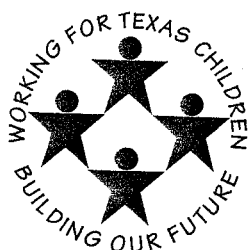
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(512) 463-8985



The Honorable Florence Shapiro  
Senate Education Committee members  
Texas Capitol  
P.O. Box 12068  
Austin, TX 78711

Re: SB 1830 and SB 308

Dear Chairwoman Shapiro and members:  
I would like to offer my support for Senate Bill 1830 and SB 308 authored by Sen. Dan Patrick to remove the cap on open-enrollment charter schools in Texas.

As a former chairman and vice chairman of the State Board of Education's Committee on School Initiatives that oversees the process to award new charters, it has been my privilege the last six years to promote strong charter schools in our state. I believe charter schools offer the best vehicle for expanded school choice in our current public school system. More opportunities for choice would be beneficial for both students' academic needs as well as parental and community involvement.

Charter schools are more likely than traditional public schools to be focused around specific instructional goals, and many target students who are falling through the cracks and are at risk of dropping out of school. When parents have an opportunity to select their child's school based on these educational programs rather than being assigned a school based on where they live, they are more likely to stay involved and informed about the innovations offered. Class size in charter schools also tends to allow more individualized instruction to meet the child's needs, particularly in the elementary grades where charter school students are more likely to spend multiple years with the same teachers.

The popularity of charter schools in Texas is evidenced by the number of students willing to be placed on a waiting list as they seek an opening at the school of their choice. During the 2007-08 school year, almost 17,000 students remained on waiting lists across the state, with the typical charter school showing 100 students awaiting an opening to attend. To expand these educational choices so more students across Texas can take advantage of charter school innovations, it will be necessary to remove impediments to charter growth – as well as the cap placed on their numbers.

In the six years I have worked with charter schools as a member of the State Board

of Education, tremendous interest has been shown annually by non-profit groups who wish to expand the charter school options in Texas. Several hundred interested parties and officers of governing boards attend the charter school orientation each year, sponsored by the Texas Education Agency's charter school division. We typically see about 50 applications completed and submitted by our February deadline for new charter school applicants. These applications then are forwarded to independent reviewers, who score the applications based on their proposed educational proposals. Those that meet our minimum cutoff score are reviewed by the Texas Education Agency to verify governance compliance, ensure that legal requirements are met, and to ascertain the financial viability of the proposed charter entity. State Board of Education members then interview those applicants who initially have met all our requirements for new charter holders -- this number has averaged 20-22 in recent years -- and those with the best proposals, most effective education plans and evidence of fiscal stability are awarded new charters. Removal of the cap on open-enrollment charter schools would allow this process to commence again, with steady growth in charter choices across the state as the goal.

Thank you for considering legislative measures that would free up Texas' charter schools to expand and become more successful, while also encouraging new charter operators to pursue additional academic innovations in our state. With only 2 percent of Texas public schoolchildren enrolled in charter schools, there is room for measured growth in this industry without harming the traditional schools with which most of us are familiar. The State Board of Education members remain committed, as are members of the Senate Education Committee, to seeking how we can improve the instructional programs offered by our public schools and keep more parents involved in their children's education.

Sincerely,



Gail Lowe  
State Board of Education  
District 14