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Testimony before the Senate Committee on Education Opposing SB 127

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On behalf of the more than 65,000 education employee members of Texas AFT, I am here to testify in opposition to SB 127. Texas AFT supported the state's initial experiment with charter schools. Our hope was that charter schools would be laboratories of innovation, with high quality standards, offering lessons in best practices that could be widely applied throughout our schools.

Thus far, we have been disappointed with the results, particularly as we have witnessed the proliferation of more than 450 campuses, operating under a limit of 215 total state-granted charters approved with too little regard for educational quality. Eleven annual state evaluations of Texas charter schools have consistently documented the fact that these schools by and large produce "lower TAKS passing rates in all tested areas compared to traditional school districts statewide."

We are very concerned about the provisions in SB 127 that would amend extensively current law regarding the establishment, operation, and expansion of state open-enrollment charter schools. Texas first needs charter quality control and a focus on promoting high quality charter schools before considering charter expansion. That requires strong state and local oversight enforcing high academic standards, effective school governance, and efficient financial and business operations. Texas needs comprehensive charter-school-reform that combines strong new quality standards, increased oversight, and accountability to increase the number of excellent charter schools.

SB 127 eliminates the cap on state open-enrollment charters

Texas charter schools have a long history of problematic performance results. Eleven years of official state evaluations of Texas charter schools have consistently concluded that traditional public schools perform as well as or better than charter schools. A recent study of Texas charters by RAND education researchers reached the same conclusion. Excellence in Texas charter schools is the exception, not the rule. The inconsistencies in the quality of Texas charter schools should give pause to those considering increasing or eliminating charter school caps, particularly when such proposals are not matched with significantly increased accountability.

SB 127 would go in the opposite direction, seeking even less oversight and quality control than the current inadequate system. The legislation would allow existing charter entities to “self-authorize” establishment of an unlimited number of additional campuses, even if a charter entity has had campuses rated unacceptable and even if as many as 10 percent of its current campuses have been rated below acceptable in the previous two years. Expedited approval for new charter campuses might make sense if limited to consistently exemplary charter operations—not merely acceptable ones—but affirmative approval by the state should always be required.

SB 127 establishes a new ill-defined and unlimited state charter category

SB 127 would authorize the State Board of Education to grant a new type of open-enrollment charter for a school “intended primarily” to serve students with disabilities. These charter schools would not count toward the 10-per-year limit on new charters proposed in the bill. There is no definition of what is meant by “intended primarily” nor is there any requirement that the charter school continue to serve students with disabilities after the charter is granted.

SB 127 makes state charters all but permanent

The provision for automatic 10-year renewal of any charter that merely succeeds in avoiding revocation does not contribute to promotion of quality in these schools. Charter renewal should be subject to a review of the charter’s performance and should be examined in light of the charter’s likely future contribution to state educational goals.

SB 127 redefines dropout and completion just for state charter schools

SB 127 would apply to charter schools a unique and lower standard of dropout and completion rates. This proposal is particularly striking in light of controversy over the lack of conformity among various dropout accounting methods. SB 127 redefines dropout and completion just for state charter schools. SB 127 would apply to charter schools a unique and lower standard of dropout and completion rates. This proposal is particularly striking in light of controversy over the lack of conformity among various dropout accounting methods. If an easing of accountability for dropouts is going to apply to charter schools, it should also apply to traditional public schools serving similarly at-risk students.

There are better ways to increase available charters

The quickest and most efficient way to increase the number of high quality charter schools in Texas would be to simply shut down charter campuses with consistently low academic or administrative performance. Charter schools are freed from many of the requirements facing traditional public schools, most significantly the obligation to educate all students that come in the door. There is no reason to continue charter school experiments that fail to provide a useful and informative alternative to other educational models. Closing low-performers would allow significant room under the current cap to grant new charters to promising programs and would free up resources to assist and expand better performing charter schools.

Promoting other chartering methods—district and campus charters and university and college charters—would help fulfill demand for the charter model. Converting current state open-enrollment to those other types would also free additional state open-enrollment charters. For example, Dallas County Community College District could probably operate its state open-enrollment charter Richland Collegiate High School of Math Science and Engineering as a college charter school.

The bottom line is that Texas needs high-quality charter schools, not just more charter schools. SB 127 would not move us toward that goal.