



*Written Testimony for the Senate Education Committee Hearing,
October 13, 2006*

School Choice Recommendations

Background

A new vision for public education is imperative. The social, demographic, and economic conditions evident in 1854 with the signing of the Common School Law by Governor Elisha Pease do not exist today. The state is wealthier and more urbanized; rapid transportation is available; instantaneous communications are commonplace; various forms of management techniques to flatten organizations have been successfully implemented in the private sector; choice and competition are proven to work; knowledge is more freely acquired and is universally exchangeable. Despite this, the public education system, at its core, is largely unchanged: rigid and monopolistic. It is time for a change in the operational structure of public education.

Changing the system is necessary on its own merits. But there are three factors that lend an imperative to reform:

1). The performance of Texas public schools

The Texas Education Agency's 2006 Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) report reveals that 19% of Texas schools failed to meet federal AYP requirements.¹ Although this represents a slight improvement since 2005, one-fifth of public schools are still failing Texas students and their families.

Additionally, only 7% of Texas schools were rated "exemplary" by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) in 2006, while nearly half (48.8%) of schools were rated only "acceptable", or were rated "unacceptable."² To be rated "acceptable" by TEA requires that 60% of students pass the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS)

¹ "19 Percent of Texas Schools Fail to Meet Federal Standards," KVIA.com, August 17, 2006;
<http://www.kvia.com/Global/story.asp?S=5295931>

² Texas Education Agency Press Release, August 1, 2006.

resident will pay⁶; the rest of their tuition is covered by the state. To be clear, the student's choice of which university to attend determines where public money will be spent. Enrollment in Texas public universities increased 18.5% between 2000 and 2005⁷ - outstripping the growth in public school enrollment - while giving students the choice to attend any university in the state system (assuming entry requirements are met). Allowing all students to choose which school they attend, and hence where and how public money is spent, both increases accountability and gives students and their families far greater control over the quality of education that students receive.

Recommendations

A meeting of the State Senate Committee on Education in Houston on October 13, 2006 to evaluate the impact of successful school choice programs on students, parents, and teachers, should point legislators in the direction of school choice programs and the establishment of a distance learning network, both of which have had very positive outcomes in states where such programs have been initiated. While the Texas Conservative Coalition Research Institute advocates a comprehensive school choice program incorporating both public and private schools, in the absence of such a reform, the following recommendations are made to legislators:

➤ *Implement a comprehensive public school choice program in Texas*

The Public Education Grant Program (PEG) is the only school choice program that currently operates statewide in Texas. The program is extremely limited. To be eligible, students must attend a school in which at least 50% of students have not passed either the TAKS test or the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills test (TAAS) in 2 of the 3 preceding years. If they meet this requirement, students can opt to attend another school either in the same or a different school district. However, the school chosen by the student is not required to accept them.⁸

The PEG program should be expanded into a comprehensive public school choice program for which all students in Texas are eligible, regardless of the academic performance of their current school. Any student wishing to transfer from one public school to another should be permitted to do so.

To ensure that all students are able to participate in the school choice program, school districts should not be permitted to reject transfers. Should overcrowding result, campuses should utilize temporary classrooms, which are commonly used in fast-growth districts where facilities construction and renovation cannot keep pace with enrollment growth. Available classroom space should not be held out as an excuse to deny entrance for a student, and as a nefarious method to undermine the purpose of the school choice program.

⁶ Tuition Fees and Rate, University of Texas at Austin;
http://www.utexas.edu/business/accounting/sar/t_f_rates.html

⁷ "Participation Forecast, 2005-2015," Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, January 2005.

⁸ Texas Education Code, §29.201 to 29.205

full-time in a school district or charter school would be allowed to take one or more courses available on the virtual network.

The SBOE should establish an initial maximum per-student course cost of \$400. This amount plus 20% (a maximum of \$480 per course), would be paid to the "home" district in which a student participating in the distance learning network is enrolled. The home district would be required to pay the SBOE-approved cost to the district or charter school providing the electronic course, while keeping the additional 20% to cover its own administrative expenses.

When the virtual school network is operational, students would be able to enroll on a combination of courses offered electronically by the virtual network, and courses taught in the traditional way by their "home" school district. By ensuring that only strongly-performing school districts are able to contribute courses to the virtual network, the system will allow all students, regardless of the performance of their "home" school district, to have access to the highest quality of education provided in the state. Equally, a broader curriculum is made available to all students, since they can enroll in courses provided by the virtual network in addition to those taught in their school district.

Further benefits of a distance learning network include:

- Transportation cost savings (especially in rural districts) resulting from courses being available via the internet;
- Students who have dropped-out or are at risk of dropping out of regular schooling have an additional option for completing their studies;
- Improvements for home-schooled students, who would have access to the best resources that the distance learning network can provide; and,
- Strongly-performing students can accelerate their achievement by studying courses above their grade level.

Conclusion

A statewide school choice program would be beneficial for students from all backgrounds, and is the best way to address the problems of an education system that currently fails to deliver an adequate level and quality of education in one fifth of Texas' schools. Injecting a measure of choice into the system, both through a comprehensive school choice program and a statewide electronic distance learning network, will give students the opportunity to receive a better quality education, and will provide poorly performing schools with a much-needed incentive to improve their performance.