



Senate Bill 1000
Input to the Senate Education Committee
March 27, 2007

ATPE OPPOSES PRIVATE SCHOOL VOUCHERS FOR STUDENTS WITH AUTISM

Senate Bill (SB) 1000 as filed by Shapiro would take money away from public school programs for students with autism and give it to unregulated private schools.

- **Private schools are NOT required to hire educators who are trained and certified** to teach special education students. Public schools must hire certified educators to work with students with autism. The state has the authority to ensure high standards in the preparation and staff development of educators who teach students with autism, but the state has that authority only in the public schools.
- **Federal and state laws require Texas public schools to provide services for children with autism**, regardless of how many students enroll at each school. If the Legislature adopts SB 1000 as filed, all public schools will continue to be required to provide services for students with autism, but they will have to do so with less funding from the state. For example, even if nine out of 10 students were to leave a public school program and enroll in private schools, the school district would still have a duty to hire certified personnel and provide the same services for the one remaining student. The only difference is that the public school would only 10% of the funding it previously received.
- Families who enroll their children with autism in private schools **lose rights** that are currently afforded to them within the public education system. These include the right to work with school personnel to devise an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for their child and the right to file a complaint or pursue legal action if the child does not receive appropriate services.
- Private schools serving students with autism are **NOT required to comply with state and federal regulations** that are designed to protect students. Public schools are regulated by such laws as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), but private schools are not held accountable for meeting the educational needs of students with autism. For example, there would be no requirement for private schools to provide an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for each special education student.
- Major advocacy groups for people with disabilities **oppose** private school vouchers for students with autism. The Texas Council on Autism and Pervasive Developmental Disorders, established by Gov. Rick Perry to make recommendations for improving state services for individuals with autism, **did not recommend private school vouchers** in its State Plan.

- Transportation is costly and burdensome for families who send their children to private school because private schools **do NOT have to provide transportation** like public schools do.
- Private programs for students with autism in more rural areas of Texas are few and far between. Therefore, **SB 1000 as filed does NOT give those students a choice.**
- Vouchers might cover a portion of the cost of educating a student with autism, but many parents still could not afford the additional costs of enrolling their children in private school. Studies suggest that parents who choose private school placement would pay out of pocket an average of at least **\$10,000 more** than the amount of the state-provided voucher.
- Unlike public schools, private schools are **NOT required to accept all students with autism.** Costs and/or profit considerations would motivate private operators to accept only those students functioning at a higher level. Lower-functioning students requiring more costly care could be denied admission.
- The commitment of public education to the **inclusion of special education students** in the regular education program wherever possible is **NOT a possibility for private programs** that cater only to special education students or students with autism.
- SB 1000 as filed could allow **more than \$200 million to be moved from public school programs for special education** students to unregulated private programs.
- All students with autism deserve an excellent education. If the state truly wants to help those students, it should concentrate its legislative efforts on improving the services that are available through the public education system to **all students**, not just benefiting the parents of a select few who are able to enroll in the best private programs.
- Rather than voting for vouchers, legislators should consider other proposals to provide meaningful help for students with autism: improving and mandating training for all teachers of students with autism; providing health care coverage for autism; collecting and disseminating best practices information among autism service providers; empowering parents to discuss the educational needs of their children through the Admission, Review and Dismissal (ARD) committee process; and taking advantage of available federal funding that the state has chosen not to request for special education services.
- **SB 1000 as filed purports to offer choice, but private school vouchers are simply the wrong choice for our state and the students it serves.**

On behalf of the 108,000 members of the Association of Texas Professional Educators, we urge you to oppose private school vouchers and VOTE AGAINST Senate Bill 1000 as filed.