



Good Morning. My name is Rona Statman and I represent The Arc of Texas, a statewide organization that advocates on behalf of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The Arc has worked for over 50 years to improve services, supports and funding for all special education students in Texas.

I find it unfortunate that I need to be here today to testify in opposition to SB 1000. I also find it distressing that parents from the disability community are divided on this issue. It is unfortunate because we all care about the same thing, that all children with disabilities receive a free appropriate public education. What we disagree on is what needs to be done to ensure every child receives an appropriate program. The Arc of Texas and the vast majority of other statewide disability organizations do not believe a voucher program is the answer.

So how did we get to the point where some parents are willing to give up on public education? In our opinion, a small group of dedicated parents got fed up with the lack of an appropriate education for their child. I understand their frustration because I talk to parents with children with every disability label including Autism, just like them every day, parents who find themselves in a battle with the school district just to get them to implement the law. I try to help these parents understand the system and how to effectively advocate for their child. These parents want the public education system to work for them. For many it does and for many it does not. Unfortunately, when the schools program is not working, a parents advocacy is usually not enough to persuade a school district to try something new or different, when the school doesn't want to do it, even when there is documentation that what they are doing is not working and research to show them a better way to do it. So some of these parents decided enough was enough. They had the means to take their children out of public school and pay for private school. As we know most parents do not have this as an option and do not want this as an option. They want the public school to simply do what the law requires. Instead of looking at how to fix the problems in public education SB 1000 offered these families a way out, a way to get what they needed for their family, a voucher that would give them choices. It sounds great on the surface. But when you look deep down into what a voucher really does, the costs are too great. Not just the money but the cost of eroding the very foundation of The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act to teach every child and to have high expectations that all children can learn and succeed in our public schools.

What SB 1000 does not do is address the needs of the entire disability community. It does not take into account how this legislation would adversely affect both students with Autism and students with other disabilities who for a variety of reasons choose not to or are not able to participate in a voucher program. SB 1000 does not address how we could improve special education services for all students with disabilities. It does not consider that there are many things we have not done yet that we must do to improve services for all students. If the entire disability community had been asked what needs to be done we would have come up with real solutions.

If we had been asked what needs to be done we would have suggested: improving teacher training on research based practices such as the professional development institutes in SB 840, revising TEA rule to expand the Autism supplement, restoring the regular education teacher training requirements that were repealed two sessions ago as proposed in SB 603, reapplying for the Federal State Improvement Grant after we realized we were the only state that did not have one, examining the Rider 55 high cost funds and how to most effectively use them, improving the monitoring, complaints and due process systems so parents who cannot get the school to provide training for teachers or research based practices for their children have a system that responds to their needs, employing highly qualified teachers and developing a certification for teaching students with Autism.

If we had done these things we would be in a different place. We would be working together on solutions instead of opposing each other and more kids would be getting better services. Special Education has very little resources as it is. We need to work together to make the system work for everyone. We cannot afford to have a system that allows a school district to decide to serve these kids or not. What is the motivation for the school district to improve their services for the students who are not using a voucher? We are not talking about money, we are talking about the purposes of the federal law, that public schools must provide appropriate services for all students. That must be our only mission. A voucher program only serves to undermine that mission.