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May 7, 2007

Texas Senate
Senate Education Committee
Austin, Texas 78711

Re: Testimony in favor of H.B. 3678 to Senate Education Committee

To Members of the Senate Education Committee:

I apologize for not being able to personally appear before this Committee, but due to my residency in Illinois and other scheduling conflicts, I have designated Kelly Coghlan to appear on my behalf to offer my testimony in favor of H.B. 3678.

I have been in public education since 1962. I was a public school superintendent in Illinois and Oregon from 1976 to 2004. From 1989 through 1993 and from 1998 through 2004, I was the superintendent of Washington Community High School District, in Washington, Illinois.

Over four years ago, our School District adopted the model student speaker policy that was drafted for us by attorney Kelly Coghlan, which is essentially the same as the model policy of H.B. 3678. Although the ACLU is very active in our community in Illinois and once successfully sued our school district, the ACLU has expressed no objection to the adoption and implementation of the model policy or to the students' voluntary expressions of faith that have occurred under the policy.

After more than four years of experience, we have had no problems concerning this policy. The model policy translated the legal principals governing student speech into practical terms that could be adopted as local policy for our school district.

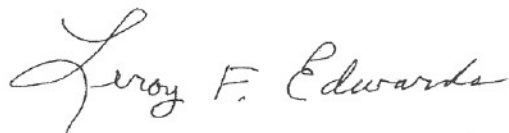
With no prompting from the school or any school officials, our experience has been that once students knew that they would not be punished for expressing a faith-based viewpoint, many students opted to voluntarily give a prayerful statement, and/or read a faith-based quote, and/or express faith at graduations, opening or morning announcements, and other school events. Illinois isn't exactly the Bible Belt, so this was somewhat surprising.

In four years of experience under the model policy, we have never had a student abuse the privilege, embarrass the school district, or in any way misuse or exploit any speaking opportunities. We believe that allowing students to publicly speak before school audiences is an educational growth experience for them.

If a school district is going to allow students to publicly speak, then they need to have a written policy that outlines exactly how the students are selected based upon neutral criteria and what the students may and may not do. With clear guidance provided by the model policy (of the type included in H.B. 3678), it showed us how to remain neutral in matters of student's faith-based viewpoints and how to assure that the private expression of any such faith-based viewpoints were not attributable to the school district.

Based upon our excellent four year experience under the model policy, I recommend adoption and implementation of the model policy of the type that is offered under H.B. 3678. After reading and studying H.B. 3678 in light of our own experience, it is my opinion that every school district, school teacher, principal, and superintendent in America would greatly benefit if their State would adopt this law.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Leroy F. Edwards". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the typed name.

Leroy F. Edwards