

My name is Peyton Wolcott and I am here to register on SB 597. I'd be happier with this legislation if it contained a little more transparency and accountability language; here's why.

In verifying information I receive from a variety of sources for the no-ads website I maintain as a full-time self-funded volunteer, I contact those involved, be they schools, vendors, lobbyists, elected or appointed officials.

Used to be, I'd file public records requests -- until my school superintendent friends pulled me aside and said, "We feel like you're attacking us. Please just ask and we'll tell you." This is Texas, the friendly state, so we took them at their word and started asking them to please put their check registers online. The good news is that they have, in large numbers. In just over 4 years we've gone from a handful of districts to over 2/3 of all local Texas school dollars now available for public viewing at ISD websites.

Following on this, when I began receiving a great deal of information about a certain charter school operation I contacted the superintendent. This was June 2. On June 5 came an email saying he was at an education conference and would get back to me the next week when he got back to the office.

It's been 9 1/2 months and still no information.

Here's the thing. Our Texas ISD superintendents, who are hired by elected trustees, listened to their citizens and trustees and put their checks online.

Our charter superintendents are appointed by board members who are also appointed, and we have only scant information about any of them, plus we have to travel to Austin to get it. When someone runs for our local school board we can ask them lots of questions before we vote. We also require that they be US citizens. Even though many schoolchildren and many millions of dollars are involved we do not collect citizenship information on charter operator applicants. On applications for this outfit in particular have noted reference to "volunteer" accountants.

I'd be a lot happier with SB 597 -- would feel our children's money is more carefully safeguarded -- if in exchange for the PSF guarantee we required:

- proof of US citizenship for all board members and key administrators
- outside third-party annual audits for the term of the bond* *posted online.*
- online check registers

These 3 small things would together represent a positive step towards a meaningful dialogue with our charter operators, a dialogue that's open, friendly, responsive, transparent and accountable, a dialogue in keeping with our great state's leadership role in the national check register and financial accountability movement.

** With a requirement that the audits be done in accordance with generally accepted accounting principles.*