



SUBMITTED TESTIMONY BEFORE THE SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE ON INTERIM CHARGE #5

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School choice is about empowering parents to put their child in a position to receive the best education possible for their needs. Texas, for its part, was an early leader regarding parental empowerment in public education. With the creation of public, open enrollment charter schools in 1995, we were among the first states to allow such schools to operate, and continue to support a comprehensive list of charter options, including open-enrollment, campus, and home-rule school district charters. The open-enrollment charter program has proven to be extremely popular, as the number of charters operating in Texas has risen sharply since the program's inception. However, the current hard cap of 215 on these schools has not been sufficient to meet the demand of Texas parents; every year, the wait-list for students wanting to attend these schools grows, tabulated most recently at 56,000 students.

As the choice movement picks up momentum nationally (in the last few years, Indiana, Arizona, and Louisiana have all greatly expanded the school choice options within their states), Texas is in danger of falling significantly behind other states when it comes to giving parents education options. There are a number of options the state could explore rapidly and effectively expand choice. Expanding the state's existing charter laws in a few key areas could significantly improve options for parents seeking alternatives to traditional public schools.

Texas need not stay behind the pack. It has a number of options it could implement to quickly empower parents seeking education options for their students. They include:

- **Home-rule School District Charters.** Totally unused under the state's education code, home-rule district charters have the potential to greatly increase parental involvement and local control in the operation of the school district. At present, the law does not provide adequate incentive for the creation of home-rule school districts. Creating more flexibility for these districts, such as loosening restrictions on getting quality instructors in front of the classroom (and moving ineffective instructors out of it), allowing for class size flexibility at the elementary level, and loosening seat time requirements could make them much more appealing (and potentially fiscally efficient) to parents, local administrators, and teachers. The creation process should also be streamlined and designed to give more power to local taxpayers and parents, including downsizing the voter turnout requirements to pass a home-rule charter and allowing local citizens to draft the charter themselves. Open Enrollment Charters. Texas needs to raise the cap on open-enrollment charters so that more strong charters may enter the market and increase competition that will drive out Texas' lower performing open-enrollment charter schools.
- **Campus and Campus Program Charters.** Texas should strengthen its parent-trigger law so that parents are empowered to more easily create campus-program charters.

- **Raise the Cap on Open Enrollment Charters.** As mentioned earlier, the hard cap of 215 open-enrollment charter schools in Texas is not meeting the demands of Texas parents. Removing the cap entirely would allow a competitive market to flourish that would give parents more options and create bottom-up accountability for the state's charter system to go along with the strong, state-driven accountability methods already in place.

At its heart, school choice is not just about empowering parents, but bringing excellence through competition to the education system as a whole. Expanding the state's charter laws is one way to pursue as much, as is exploring traditional voucher and education scholarship programs, which have a documented history of academic and fiscal efficiency.

Whether one is speaking in terms of academic performance, fiscal efficiency, or parental/local empowerment, increased school choice makes sense for Texas. While we do have a long way to go, that we could improve in this arena drastically, and rapidly, particularly through expansion of the state's charter school laws, represents an exciting opportunity going forward. Make no mistake; Texas should be a leader when it comes to school choice. Let's turn it into one again.