

Testimony by Bob Schoolfield

I'm speaking on behalf of two organizations; the Austin CEO Foundation, which I co-founded 19 years ago and Texans for Parental Choice in Education, a grassroots organization, that I have been volunteering to expand for the last 4 years.

After 20 years, I have become weary of coming to these hearings, but I end up coming when I think of the students being handicapped by chronically failing public schools. This 20 year impasse, I think, is related to Texas's large land mass. In every rural county, the major employer is the school district, which make the superintendents the political bosses of the district.

I want to thank this committee and especially Sen. Shapiro for guiding SB 738 to the governor's desk. I believe it is the most significant parental choice bill passed in 20 years.

I support Taxpayer Savings Grants. However, I would suggest a less deceptive name like "Parental Choice Scholarships". The public school lobby is too extensive to be deceived by a name, which the current numbers at this hearing demonstrates.

Voucher programs are the most powerful type of legislation for delivering the most parental choice quickly. Unfortunately, both liberals and conservatives fear this type of legislation. Liberals fear their tax money going to a religious school, in spite of the Supreme Court's rulings. They also claim "accountability" problems, even though the current accountability system allows chronically failing schools to keep their doors open. Some conservatives fear the potential regulation of the private school industry that would follow vouchers.

There are two other approaches to parental choice; the expansion of charter schools and scholarship tax credits, both of which I believe have less opposition. They are less powerful than vouchers, but in the long run, they could eventually deliver as much parental choice as vouchers.

Increasing the number of SBOE charter schools would expand parental choice. It should be easy to pass such a bill.

Finally, I would recommend a scholarship tax credit bill because it arouses less fear for both liberals and conservatives. For liberals a tax credit bill doesn't open the floodgates that vouchers do. Even with passage of the bill, no scholarships will be awarded until the scholarship tax credit idea is sold to businessmen as a better use of their tax payments. Conservatives know that tax credit money is private money and that the bill's private scholarship organizations provide a layer of protection for the private school industry.

But none of these approaches are mutually exclusive. If each were put in separate bills, perhaps one of them would pass. Call it Legislative choice.