

OU Testimony in Support of School Choice



Testimony Delivered to the Texas Senate Education Committee on 8/24/12

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee:

The Jewish people have earned their reputation as the “people of the book.” For millennia Jewish communities maintained and supported educational institutions, long before their host countries and societies thought the issue one of importance. Jews even risked their lives to educate their children, operating schools in the Nazi ghettos and under the watchful eyes of the Communist secret police.

It is keeping with this tradition that the Orthodox Union – the nation’s largest Orthodox Jewish umbrella organization representing Jewish communities across the country and in Texas – respectfully submits this testimony in support of the educational choice proposals before the committee today.

At the outset, we note that the Orthodox Union is proudly supportive of public education, and we believe every school – whether it be public or private – should be excellent. In fact our organization works with public schools in running youth programming for some 60,000 public school students nationwide. We support the school choice programs the committee considers today because study after study has shown that well-designed school choice programs benefit not only voucher recipients, but also those who choose to remain in public school.

In fact, I want to call your attention to a recent evaluation of a privately-funded New York voucher program publicized in the Wall Street Journal. The evaluation – conducted by two researchers from the Brookings Institute and Harvard University – found that students who received a voucher for three years were 24% more likely to attend college than those who did not receive a voucher. The evaluation employed a random-assignment procedure – the gold standard of research methodologies.

And as Mr. Cotlar from the Jewish day schools in Houston has already stated, Jewish schools do their best to accept every child regardless of family income. Our schools’ top priority is putting an excellent education in the reach of every child. The Taxpayer Saving Grant and scholarship tax credit programs under consideration will do just that.

Taxpayer Savings Grants give private school parents a portion of the funds that the state would have spent to educate their child. This innovative approach not only acknowledges the state’s commitment to every child’s education – whether they are enrolled in public school or private school – but also the savings that accrue to taxpayers when parents themselves cover a portion of the cost of education.

Scholarship tax credit programs incentivize taxpayers to support educational assistance organizations, which among other things offer scholarships for students attending private school. A diverse group of states – including Arizona, Pennsylvania, Florida, and Rhode Island – currently run similar programs. Most objective analysis has shown that these programs improve

student achievement and generate taxpayer savings. Moreover, these programs have proven a lifeline to Jewish schools struggling to balance their budgets while still accepting every low-income student who applies.

Moreover, we have religious reasons for supporting this legislation. The Jewish ideal of “*tikkun olam*” – repairing the world – is an overarching moral and philosophical underpinning to all that we do. For that reason alone, the Orthodox Union supports these programs. School choice programs are tied directly to the Jewish ideal of helping others in need. We must fund and find for others that which we value so very much for ourselves and our families. If we value a good education for our own children, we can’t be satisfied until every child, regardless of their religion, has access to a quality education of their own.

Bringing Taxpayer Savings Grants and scholarship tax credit grants into reality will help ensure that more children in Texas get the education they rightly deserve. The Orthodox Union and its thousands of families in Texas respectfully request favorable reports on these pieces of legislation.

Orthodox Union
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