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Testimony before the Senate Committee on Education August 24, 2012

Good morning Chairman Patrick and members of the Committee. My name is Matt Prewett and I'm a volunteer with the Texas Parents Union. Our organization's goal is improved public education options for every family in Texas.

After talking with parents, educators, and social workers over the last two years, it is my opinion that Texas families would be greatly served by increased public school choice. Even in scenarios where the district/campus may be considered "exemplary" by Texas accountability system, we still have children whose needs are not being met. A friend in an education agency said it well when he said "For all the talk of 'individualized' and 'differentiated' instruction, schools remain designed for mass instruction."

I believe four categories of children quickly fall outside this mass-instruction model and would often be better served by smaller, specialized schools:

- 1. children from low-income households**
- 2. children with special-needs (autism, ADD/ADHD, dyslexia, etc.)**
- 3. high-ability and gifted/talented children (top 2-5% in measured intelligence)**
- 4. children with emotional / behavioral issues (many of these are high-ability students, also)**

I think that we are taking care of many children in category #1 (low-income households) by providing the option of charter schools in urban areas, although I am concerned about poor children in non-urban neighborhoods. Are we funding charter-schools adequately, where a parent or educator could start a charter school if they felt a specialized school could better serve the children in a particular area?

I am very concerned about children in the other categories. Since these children are a relatively low percentage of students in any given district, it is very difficult for parents to persuade the school board to provide different options. Districts will frequently require that parents gather 100 signatures before they even discuss the matter in a school board meeting. Gathering 100 signatures is difficult when the children make up a small percentage of the student body, especially when districts aren't able to share contact information. As a result, many of these parents are having to homeschool or pay for a private school and forego the public education funding allocated for their child.

Each of these children has different, yet very important needs that require specialized attention. We believe that districts should strive to offer a wide variety of options to meet these needs and allow parents to choose the option they feel is best for their child. However, it is essential that we provide parents and educators with the ability to create alternatives if/when the district refuses to create these options. We believe that this can be accomplished by expanding the charter school system and providing adequate student-centered funding for these children.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts on this very important subject.

Best regards,
Matt Prewett
Volunteer – Texas Parents Union