

TEXAS ★ BAPTISTS

BAPTIST GENERAL CONVENTION OF TEXAS

Senator Florence Shapiro | Chair
Senate Education Committee
P.O. Box 12068-Capitol Station
Austin, TX 78711

August 23, 2012

Dear Senator Shapiro,

Throughout our sixty-two year history the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission has consistently opposed legislation to create a private school voucher program in Texas. Our first point of opposition to a voucher system stems from our support of religious liberty for all and a traditional view that tax dollars should not be used to propagate any religious belief. Vouchers for private, religious schools amount to government support of religion. As Baptists, we believe these schemes are contrary to the historic Baptist commitment to soul freedom, religious liberty and the separation of church and state. By funding pervasively religious institutions, vouchers promote religion and violate the consciences of those taxpayers who disagree with religious teachings of the schools. We believe that to fund religious instruction with tax dollars goes against the very heart of the intent of the authors of the First Amendment to our Constitution. Authentic religion must be wholly uncoerced. Religion should depend for its support on the persuasive power of the message it proclaims and not on the coercive power of the state.

In addition, there are many thriving religiously-affiliated private schools in Texas. They have at the core of their identity religious teachings and values. It is very important to protect the sanctity of religious content in religiously affiliated schools. Vouchers are tempting to many, but tax payer money comes with strings attached. Tax dollars *should* come with strings attached as a means of accountability for state funds, those dollars are a tool of accountability for the state. Religious schools who take advantage of vouchers will have to deal with invasive state regulation. State money to religious schools creates a climate of compromise. Government regulation of religious schools will increase, changing the way in which they provide education. Political demands for accountability in performance will reach those schools previously unencumbered by such standards.

Finally, a private school voucher system will undoubtedly lead to costly, prolonged and possibly unsuccessful litigation at the expense of the state. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the *Zelman* case that the specific conditions in Cleveland led to the creation of a voucher program that did not violate the First Amendment. However, the First Amendment sets a floor, not a ceiling for protecting religious liberty. Clearly, the wording in the Texas Constitution goes further. Our state constitution begins with Article 1, the Bill of Rights. In Sections 4, 5, and 6 it is evident that Texas makes a priority of the protection of religious liberty and religious expression.

In Section 7 of the Bill of Rights there is a strong prohibition against funding sectarian (expressly religious) purposes, including education, with state money.

The Texas Constitution Article 1 - BILL OF RIGHTS

Section 7 - APPROPRIATIONS FOR SECTARIAN PURPOSES

No money shall be appropriated, or drawn from the Treasury for the benefit of any sect, or religious society, theological or religious seminary; nor shall property belonging to the State be appropriated for any such purposes.

We should honor the wisdom of the drafters of the Texas Constitution and not sacrifice this important protection of religious liberty.

While no specific bill is being heard at this interim hearing today, we thought it appropriate to remind you of our consistent, long-held opposition to private school vouchers. We believe that religious education and religious liberty flourish when a free church operates in a free state. We look forward to the upcoming 83rd legislative session and working with the Senate Education committee to insure that Texas provide the best possible education for all our children.

Sincerely,



Susan (Suzii) Paynter
Director, Advocacy Care Center and Christian Life Commission