

October 13, 2006

Dear Senator Shapiro and the Senate Education Committee:

My name is Melanie Watson. I am not able to make the trip to Houston, but I ask that you listen to these words, as they come from my heart.

As a native Texan, I love this state. My parents taught me "Texas Pride". Today, it is my wish that Texas will be the first state in the nation to offer parents the freedom to choose where their children are educated

My parents met, not too far from your Austin office, at the Texas State School for the Blind on Lamar Street. In the 1930's and 1940's my grandparents had a school choice, and my parents were educated in the most appropriate setting. They became successful business people because of their parents' choice of education.

I am the single (divorced) mother of two boys, a five year old and a nine year old. Their education does not come lightly to me. When Nicholas was five, and I realized private school was no longer a realistic option for us, I made a spreadsheet of top public school districts. The districts were measured by top level consistent academic performance.

After studying local crime stats, logistics, and specific neighborhoods, I choose a school district in North Texas. As a recent divorcee, it was not easy to buy a home, but I worked hard, jumped through hoops, and made it happen. I was proud of the accomplishment of buying an older, two story home, in a good school district. The post divorce stability I wanted for my boys, had been accomplished.

That was three years ago.

Last week I spent countless hours packing up our belongings, finding help to move furniture, and made what seemed like a thousand trips to a storage facility in my VW Beetle. Our home was foreclosed August 2006.

How did this happen? This can happen when lawmakers place an importance on invisible geographical boundaries, before the importance of visible constitutional rights.

Upon enrolling at the new school district, my son, Nicholas, began to regress. Month after month- year after year- he was not reading or writing. I agreed to multiple school district assessments. Each time Nicholas was assessed, I was told the test results were normal for his above average IQ. When I asked about his lack of progress, I was informed he was not succeeding because "he lives in a broken home."

In 2005, on my own, without cost to tax payers, I received information that would help us understand Nicholas, and teach him how to read. I went to the school with diagnosis data from Texas Women's University, MHMR and a private doctor. The school district

refused to accept the data from the above sources, nor would they allow me access to all educational records, and filed a lawsuit against me.

I asked TEA to access a neighboring district, which already had children from my town attending there because of a boundary dispute. I was denied. I asked the district to attend a different school. I was denied.

What else could have been done? I could not afford private school. We could not buy another home. Home school was not an option. There was no choice but to send my struggling child into a hostile environment day after day.

Standing up to this district, and standing up for my son was my choice. As you can imagine a "David and Goliath" type battle was time consuming, draining, and costly. The school district has unlimited resources, tax dollars fueling a big law firm, and all of the evidence, versus me, a single mom, in bankruptcy, and with very (VERY) limited resources, and the burden of proof.

Ms. Shapiro, if my son would have had the opportunity for school choice, I would likely still have a home and a job, as we would not be forced into litigation. My boys would still have stability. I would not have had to find private educational resources like tutors and educational experts for Nicholas. Taxpayers would not be paying the school district's law firm to litigate me, but most importantly, my son would have been properly educated a long time ago, the first time he was left behind.

Please consider any legislation that would give students and parents the dignity of school choice. The education system is very broken when governmental school staff are so powerful they can easily smother, and snuff out, our individual rights, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. And for what? Constitutional rights be damned, for an invisible boundary zone?

Please feel free to contact me, as I want to assist and be part of the solution and help with Texas education reform.

Sincerely,

Melanie Watson

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