

**Testimony of Sonya Kirkham, Colonies North ES Principal
Senate Committee on Education Public Hearing
March 31, 2009**

Good morning, I'm Sonya Kirkham, principal of Colonies North Elementary School in Northside ISD. Thank you Chairwoman Shapiro and members of the Senate Education Committee for your support of public education.

I also am here to testify in favor of Senate Bill 1818.

My school is one of 15 campuses in Northside ISD that has a population of political refugee students. Our refugee students began arriving in May 2007 and currently, we have 61 refugee students enrolled in grades pre-k through fifth grade.

Before coming to America, these children were living in squalid refugee camps and spent their days simply roaming the land. Their "homes" might have consisted of a hut made from mud bricks. There was no electricity, no plumbing, and certainly no modern conveniences of any kind. Hunger was a constant, and disagreements between friends and family were worked out by physical fights or beating.

They have witnessed violence you and I can not even fathom. Students in one family at our school saw more than 160 women and children massacred in their village. The psychological impact is immeasurable.

Every single day, my staff and I grapple with the many challenges that this very special population presents. When our refugees first began arriving at our school two years ago, we had no play book to follow – just our instincts about what was best for these children.

To reiterate what Dr. Folks said, our refugees are far from your typical ESL student. Their social and behavioral needs are so overwhelming that much of the time intended for academic learning instead must be used to show these children how to function in their new world.

Everything is brand new to them, from holding a pencil, to using the bathroom to sitting in a chair for several hours a day. Even the structure of a school day is a shock to their system. We must also teach them that fighting is not an acceptable way to work out their differences. And in the cafeteria last year, we had to have a special lunch line for our refugee students, because they have no idea what American food looks like or tastes like, much less how to order it. This year we use a picture system because of students who have religious dietary restrictions.

When it comes to reading and writing, we literally are starting from scratch. We start at the very beginning, teaching them the alphabet and the sounds that letters make. Our students who first arrived two years ago have made great progress, but our fifth graders are just now reading on the first grade level, which means they can handle a Dr. Seuss book but not the higher level vocabulary of the TAKS test. It takes five to 10 years to

learn a new language, but taking a standardized test in, say, science is much, much more difficult than functioning at a social or conversational level.

To make matters worse, our refugee children have virtually no parental support at home. Because their families have no form of transportation and little money, their world does not go far beyond school and the apartment complex where they live. That means their social context is extremely limited, and that can hinder them academically. For example, a TAKS question might use the “beach” as a setting. These children may have seen a picture of a beach or an ocean, but they’ve never seen one in real life. That puts them at an immediate disadvantage.

All of these challenges are compounded the older a student is when he or she arrives in the United States. Simply put, we need more time to get these students on the path to success. We have just six hours a day for academic instruction, and, in each school year, less than 120 days before first TAKS test is administered.

As Dr. Folks said, we welcome these children, who are now part of our school’s multicultural identity. We are not suggesting that accountability be waived for these students – only that we be given more time to help get this very special population on track.