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TEXAS AFT TESTIMONY TO THE SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE REGARDING
SB 183, SB 1301, AND SB 2204

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We share with you a deep concern for the welfare of students with autism and other Texas students in special education programs. Our concern expresses itself in support for a variety of bills, most of which have received a hearing or (we hope) soon will. We are pleased at the reception this committee has given to Senator Lucio's SB 100. The members of Texas AFT, both teachers and paraprofessionals, tell us that they want more and better training in how best to serve special education students, especially students with autism spectrum disorders. We consider private-school vouchers a costly diversion from what educators, parents, and the State Autism Council have identified to help all students with disabilities.

The following are some of our main concerns about these voucher bills:

- The parent chooses services from a private entity, at taxpayer expense--with no agreement by the school district and no ruling by an impartial arbiter on the sufficiency of public schools' services as a prerequisite.
- The bills subtract funding from public schools, but public schools need to maintain the infrastructure and staffing necessary to serve students who depart for private school but who remain entitled to return to the public schools at any time.
- Parents, by opting unilaterally for private school, lose federal legal rights regarding the quality of services provided to their children.
- Accountability for quality of services is severely impaired. For example, in the public schools parents can compel action to abide by the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP), but these bills provide at most for a nominally "similar" goal-setting exercise that is not legally enforceable. State curriculum standards and other quality safeguards--e.g., regarding qualifications of personnel--do not apply.
- The private school could still refuse a student admission on the basis of criteria prohibited for any public school--e.g., a student's disciplinary history or a business decision not to serve students with particular categories of need that the school is not prepared to meet.

There are better alternatives that will help all students with disabilities in our public schools. We are encouraged to see bills that have been filed to improve services for students with disabilities by training educators dealing with students with disabilities in the general classroom, providing intensive transition and employment services for students with disabilities, and by creating a statewide autism spectrum resources program for families in need of coordinated services. These

bills will help to reach the goals of the State Autism Council, which has recommended as its paramount priority not vouchers but research-based, up-to-date training to enable all school personnel to provide high-quality services for students with autism spectrum disorders. Many of these bills are broad enough in scope to assure the same level of training and improved services for all students with disabilities. Still other bills will provide important safeguards for students and parents by demanding higher qualifications for school personnel serving students with disabilities and by providing for improved dispute resolution in special-education cases.

Texas AFT urges you to adopt this proactive package of alternative measures to improve education quality and services in the public schools directly for all students with disabilities. Proposals for private-school vouchers are a divisive distraction from this proactive agenda.