

**Prepared Testimony of  
Cheryl Washington, CEO and Superintendent of Shekinah Learning Institute  
Before the Senate Education Committee regarding SB 1830  
Tuesday, March 31, 2009**

Good Morning Madam Chair, Vice-Chair Patrick, and Committee Members. I'm Cheryl Washington, the CEO and Superintendent of Shekinah Learning Institute. I want to thank you Madam Chair, and Vice-Chair Patrick. Today I'll discuss two essential issues contained in this legislation – eliminating the cap on charter schools in the state of Texas, and allowing successful charter schools to replicate.

Getting right to the point, the Texas legislature should eliminate the cap of 215 open enrollment charters the State Board of Education is authorized to grant. The current cap needs to be lifted to meet the growing demand for charter school education in Texas. As David mentioned, an estimated 90,000 Texas students attend charter schools with well over 16,000 students currently on waiting lists. We need the supply to meet the demand! The mounting demand for charter schools shows they are effective, and that our Texas communities need, and want, options within the public school system.

TCSA, President Obama, and the U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan agree that the cap on charter schools is not benefitting our children, our economy, our state, or our country. In his remarks at the US Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, President Barack Obama couldn't have been clearer, "I call on states to reform their charter rules, and lift caps on the number of allowable charter schools, wherever such caps are in place." We also acknowledge though that any expansion of charter schools, "must not result in the spread of mediocrity, but in the advancement of excellence. That will require states adopting both a rigorous selection and review process to ensure that a charter school's autonomy is coupled with greater accountability."  
*(Remarks of the President Barack Obama, March 10, 2009 – "A Complete and Competitive American Education")*

As charter school results continue to increase in quality, the public demand for replicated schools also increases. Once we can effectively share success, we are truly on the brink of great promise in education reform. Local models that apply to one particular community can be transitioned into similar communities, for example my school started .... As one at-risk charter school,

servicing students in the inner-city of San Antonio and multiplied its success to 2 charter schools with 15 campuses across Texas, serving 1,700 students in 7 counties and 8 cities across the state of Texas. We have expanded with consistency annually because of the demand for our model and services. Radiance and Shekinah have impacted a variety of communities with diverse learning needs and have proven effective in securing educational partnerships that have resulted in academic success for non-traditional learners in grades Pre-kinder through 12 across the state of Texas.

#### *The Del Rio Story: Radiance to the Rescue*

"When traditional anecdotes are unable to solve real problems, a new remedy is sought." The parents, community, and students of Del Rio advocated for a middle school program in 2006/2007 because of the overcrowding in their one middle school that elevated to crisis discipline issues. Local students traveled 60 miles round trip to Comstock to secure a safe and adequate public education. We were able to partner our educational efforts with a real community need to extend and expand our model to serve these students. Parents had resorted to "home schooling" as a safe haven for their children and petitioned their legislators for school choice and change. To date, this campus has graduated two senior classes and tripled their enrollment based on safety and demand. In this unique community and diverse culture, enrollment has tripled with great success and satisfaction.

#### *The La Marque Cry for Help!*

Replicating, the same model in La Marque, Texas in the 2005/2006 school year, we were able to expand our services to rescue students that were falling between the cracks in the traditional system and offer them an opportunity to be educated in an environment with a smaller teacher/student ratio, using a proven practice for student learning and teacher effectiveness. The model has proven effective for meeting the educational demand in the inner city, rural counties, and unique communities, servicing students in our drop-out prevention and intervention programs, where many of the students are classified as educationally disadvantaged and at-risk of dropping out of school before high school completion. These students needed an alternative. And because this campus was geographically positioned at a time of need, Katrina, Rita, and Galveston students benefitted from its school program after the devastation that visited their cities and schools.

#### *A Scheduling Dilemma*

Charters are able to offer creative programming. One of our Olympic students was able to complete her high school career in 2004 at Radiance Academy in San Antonio and go on to college on scholarship and compete in the World Wide Olympic Games. Because of her rigorous training schedule, the traditional system was unable to offer an academic program that could meet her

educational need and allow her to graduate in time to meet the criteria for the college scholarship and meet the guidelines to compete in the Olympic games.

“Any disincentive that stagnates or hinders the movement of innovation and creativity that meets safety and security, academic, and actualization needs of students desiring to stay in school, muffles the humanitarian cry for help! “

Replicating best practices seems like a straightforward idea, but current rules make it difficult and time consuming for schools that are already strapped for human and financial resources. Charter schools with proven success deserve a streamlined process with less bureaucratic hurdles when looking to expand. Charter holders are qualified to establish new campuses if at least 75 percent of existing campuses are rated academically acceptable or higher. Campuses rated academically unacceptable for two of three preceding school years who not be able to replicate. In addition, charters that expand are required to notify the Commissioner, the Board of Trustees of local school districts and the Legislature.

As the charter school movement continues, so will the need and the demand for the highest quality charters with proven success. As we keep cracking the code on what works in certain communities and classrooms, we need to leverage that understanding so the maximum number of public school students can benefit.

Thank you for your time; I'll take any questions you may have at this time.

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