

## **Texas Discusses Vouchers for At-Risk Students**

By Connie Sadowski

School Reform News

Heartland Institute, Chicago IL

Texas state Sen. Kyle Janek (R-Houston) authored S.B. 1506—if passed and signed by the Governor, would allow the State Comptroller’s office to give students vouchers “escape poor-performing, inadequate, or unsafe schools.”

The bill stipulates that no more than 5 percent of the students in each district may receive a voucher. Qualifying districts include the Austin, Dallas, Edgewood, Harlandale, Houston, Fort Worth, North Forest, San Antonio, and South San Antonio independent school districts. Eligible students must also be either at risk for dropping out, taking special-education courses; bullying victims; or have limited English proficiency.

A qualifying student must live in a county with more than 750,000 people, and his current school district must have at least 90 percent economically disadvantaged students. Also, only current public school or first-time school attendees from low-income families are eligible.

The receiving private schools are not an agent of the government, the bill text continues, and schools maintain autonomy to “allow maximum freedom” to provide for the educational needs of students “without governmental control or influence”.

“Texas schools are not serving Texas students,” Janek explained. “Are we supposed to just abandon the students who are in failing schools now while we work on long-term fixes?”

### **Steadfast Opposition**

Janek believes the bill will “make public schools happy” because under his proposal, 10 percent of the per-student funding stays with the public school the child left. But many education lobbyists are not educating their members on the actual merits of current voucher legislation, he said

For example, the Texas Federation of Teachers (TFT), representing more than 56,000 teachers and support personnel, steadfastly opposes any voucher program. In a March 3 e-mail, members were directed to contact legislators to oppose vouchers because “resources should be spent on improving educational opportunity in our public schools for all students, not serving a select few in private settings.”

The TFT alert urged members to oppose SB 1000, a school choice bill for students with autism, but did not provide a Web link or an outline of the text of the bill for interested members to read. It did urge the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to instead pursue federal grants to provide training for autism for public schoolteachers.

Texas Freedom Network, a watchdog group working to “counter the religious right”, claims on its Web site that “fly-by-night schools would open looking only to make a profit,” and “the state would be powerless to prevent unaccredited unqualified schools from taking taxpayer funds.”

But according to SB 1506 text, each qualifying school must be accredited with an approved accrediting association. Additionally, each school is to administer a nationally norm-referenced test and student learning; voucher students would be tracked, and an evaluation and impact study of the program is required—paid for by privately funded grants.

Peggy Venable, Texas director of the national free-market group Americans for Prosperity, challenged education lobbyists to more adequately inform and poll their members about vouchers in her March 16 alert to members.

Venable says vouchers will help public schools, but believes legislators have “long been harassed by the educator lobby to avoid meaningful discussion of vouchers.”

“It is time for legislators to show some leadership and put the schoolchildren of Texas first,” she said, “not the self-serving education union lobby.”

### **Tripled Spending**

For decades, Texas education reforms have “tripled per-student spending, increased teacher salaries, and decreased class sizes,” said Jamie Story, policy analyst for the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a free-market Austin think tank. “Those reforms have led to little, if any, improvement in test scores, and they certainly have not helped subvert the alarmingly low graduation rates of today.

“True graduation rates in Texas are around 67 percent,” Story continued. “High school dropouts cost taxpayers money.”

A modest school choice program that increases private school enrollment by less than 5 percent could save the state “\$55 million each year in increased tax revenue and decreased Medicaid and incarceration costs,” Story said.

### **Sound Proposal**

According to the Institute for Justice, a civil-liberties defense group, the program set forth in SB 1506 is “consistent with the Texas Constitution, which has never been interpreted to forbid education programs simply because some might choose a religious option,” said senior attorney Clark Neily.

“We are confident the program will survive any constitutional challenge by opponents of educational opportunity,” he concluded.

David Contreras, spokesman for Confia, a group of Hispanic community leaders across Texas that encourages civic involvement, said he hopes teacher organizations will consider other cities’ and states’ success with vouchers “do the right thing ... to improve education outcomes and decrease Texas’ dropout rate” instead of trying to block the program.

The bill will “actually help educators because vouchers have proven to increase a student’s academic outcomes by better engaging parents and their at-risk kids,” he explained. “This bill seeks to reduce discrepancies between the quality of schooling that children in disadvantaged areas are getting and the quality of schooling in the high-income areas.

“State officials, educators, and parents should embrace this voucher bill for the dollars it will save by increasing the number of students who will stay in school and succeed—all because they are given a choice,” Contreras concluded. *Connie Sadowski* ([connie@ceoatx.org](mailto:connie@ceoatx.org)) directs the *Education Options Resource Center* at the *Austin CEO Foundation*

### **For More Information:**

**SB 1000** by state Sen. Florence Shapiro (R-Plano):

<http://www.legis.state.tx.us/BillLookup/Text.aspx?LegSess=80R&Bill=SB1506>

**SB 1506** by state Sen. Kyle Janek (R-Houston):

<http://www.legis.state.tx.us/BillLookup/text.aspx?LegSess=80R&Bill=SB1000>