

Perspectives

ON TEXAS PUBLIC POLICY

August 22, 2003

Texas School Choice: Separate and Unequal

An open discussion on vouchers, traditional public schools and Texas charter schools

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This testimony was presented to the Subcommittee on Alternative Methods of the Selected Committee on Public School Finance. Mr. Tatum was invited to join the committee as a guest panelist to participate in an open discussion on the subject of school choice in K-12 education in Texas.

AUSTIN, TEXAS – Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen of the committee. My name is Brother Tatum and I currently serve as the president of the Texas Preparatory School located in San Marcos, Hays County, Texas. Texas Preparatory School, formerly, San Marcos Preparatory School, is a state funded charter school approved in June of 2000 by the Texas State Board of Education. Texas Preparatory School was chartered to serve students in grades K-8th in a four counties service area which includes Hays, Caldwell, Comal, and Guadalupe counties. While this area of Texas is naturally beautiful, the South Central region of the state has the highest percentage of economically disadvantaged people, second only to the people living along the Texas-Mexico border. We are challenged daily with the task to improve the economic and educational divide within our communities. In order to do so, parents will need to be involved, and should have the right to choose the educational environment best suited for their children.

Texas State University-San Marcos (Texas State) and the San Marcos Consolidated Independent School District (San Marcos ISD) in Hays County are perfect examples of the extremes in the economic and education divided within our community. Texas State is one of the state's largest and wealthiest public higher education institutions, while San Marcos ISD serves some of the state's poorest most undereducated kids in overcrowded public school facilities. A San Marcos middle school, in fact, was recently designated one of only six "unsafe" school campuses in the state by the Texas Education Agency. It is important to note that this designation was determined by information provided to the Agency by the San Marcos School District which was required by the federal "Leave No Child Behind Act." According to the *San Marcos Daily Record*, this past April a San Marcos ISD male employee was arrested for the sexual assault of a male high school student in the men's room. Currently, the San Marcos school board is working to pass a multimillion dollar bond on the backs of the poor, young, and elderly citizens during this economic slowdown.

As Texans, we invest an incredible amount of money into our public school systems. Although money is important, utilizing the money you have to effectively educate students is more important. In order to assist schools and help eliminate the need for more administrative



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personnel, the state should lift some of the many burdensome regulations from public and private schools. Alleviating some of the bureaucracy will allow for innovation and encourage opportunities for alternative delivery systems.

Now is the time for the leadership in Texas to make 'more' suitable provisions for the support and maintenance of an efficient system of public schools. Although innovation, competition and accountability has existed in early education and child care and post secondary education for years, Texas and the country to a larger degree, have been less willing to embrace competition for K-12 education, this in spite of low performance from many of our public schools. According to the 1998 Reading Report Card for the Nation and the States, published by the National Center for Education Statistics, "America's public schools have utterly failed the poor; over half of low-income 4th graders cannot read with understanding." On pages 58-59 of the January 8, 1998 edition of Education Week, "Two-thirds of low-income 8th graders cannot multiply or divide two-digit numbers." Competition in K-12 education will provide many benefits for the people of Texas. The creation of neighborhood schools, community involvement and identity, stimulation of residential and commercial development in poor communities, relief in existing overcrowded public schools and most important, improved access to education for all children regardless of race, sex, religion, and social-economic condition, to name a few.

US public schools are overcrowded. Currently, 22% of schools are at least 6% over capacity and 2/3rds of US schools are in need of constant maintenance, violating building codes, or require outright replacement of decaying facilities. Low student achievement, overcrowding and unresponsive school boards have caused many of us to give up on the traditional public school system's ability to educate all children. We are in the midst of the largest demographic shift in the history of Texas. By 2005, half of all Texans will be people of color. By then, 50 percent of all K-12 schools will be composed of students of color. By 2030, about two-thirds (67%) of all Texans will be people of color.

Charter schools play an important role in choice for Texas education. Charter schools provide an option for parents, regardless of their income. Charter schools provide the opportunity for parents to become heavily involved and empowered to make a difference in the education of their child.

According to the Center for Education Reform 2000 Study, in comparing Texas charter schools with traditional public schools, charters contain higher percentages of African Americans (33% vs. 14%), Hispanics (43% vs. 39%), and economically disadvantaged children (52.6% vs. 48.5%). However, even with these factors in the mix, continuing students in charter schools (students enrolled in a charter school in the previous year and continuing in the charter school in the current year) show greater improvement in their state mandated test scores in both reading and math than do continuing students in traditional public schools with identical student characteristics.

Although charter schools may not be the answer for every Texas household, we must take notice of the impact these schools are having on students, parents and teachers throughout Texas. More than half of charter school students, most of which were at risk of dropping out passed all TAAS tests given, with at least 67% passing at least one. The percentage of at-risk students in charter

schools passing all TAAS tests increased by 15.9 points vs. a 5.2 point increase for all students, according to this study. Yet in Texas, according to the *Alliance for Sound Education Policy*, “charter schools are funded by the state at approximately 50 to 60 percent of the amount per pupil spent by traditional public schools. Based on the cost function model predictions used by actuaries today, the average charter school spends over \$4,000 per pupil less than a traditional public school with identical characteristics and identical student performance. In charter schools, the focus is on the learner and learning, not on the teacher and teaching. Based on recent surveys, parents, students and teachers are highly satisfied with their charter school experience. These schools are challenging the traditional public schools to be more effective.”

Growing up in abject poverty in the inter-city of Ft. Worth, Tarrant County, Texas, during hard economic times and now serving as a president of a charter school in a predominantly low-income region of the country, I know firsthand the importance of educational choice for all children. If it is our desire to elevate the next generation, we have an obligation to provide exceptional educational opportunities for all students. Parents deserve the right to choose the educational environment best suited for their children, teachers should have the freedom to try innovative learning methods and students should feel safe and enjoy learning. Traditional schools have not changed their delivery methods in over 100 years, but students have changed, learning styles are different and in order to meet the diverse needs of our students, varying methods of delivering education must exist.

Kyev Tatum is a licensed minister with the African Methodist Episcopal Church and serves as an advocate for school choice for the Texas Coalition of Average-Americans United for Sound Education (The Texas CAAUSE). He also serves on the Executive Board of Directors for Eagle Academies of Texas and Region XIII, Education Service Center in Austin, Texas. Brother Tatum is the former branch president of the Texas Hill Country Branch and 3rd vice president of the Texas State Conference of Branches of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In June of 2000, his wife Martha Tatum was elected the youngest woman and only ‘woman of color’ ever to serve on the San Marcos City Council in over 150 years. Brother Tatum is the founder of the Mitchell Center Boys & Girls Clubs of South Central Texas which holds the charter for Texas Preparatory School in San Marcos, Texas. For more Information please contact Phone: 512-805-2240, Fax: 512-805-2250 or email: kmt@mitchellcenter.org