



Testimony

Testimony to the High School Success and Completion Initiative Council

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Thank you so much, members, for all of the time you've committed to this council, and thank you for hearing my testimony today.

You are familiar with the reasons we need this council. One out of three Texas high school students fails to graduate on time. In Houston and Dallas ISDs, fewer than half of high school students graduate in four years, and that number drops below 40 percent for minority students.

I'd like to share with you a statement made by Clint Bolick, former president of Alliance for School Choice, at our 2007 Policy Orientation. He said, "With statistics like these, we should not be asking whether a particular education reform is too radical; we should be asking whether it's radical enough."

Last week, you invited Robert Enlow of the Friedman Foundation to address the council. He pointed out that of the ten random assignment studies on the effects of school choice programs, all ten found positive academic results for participants. Eight of these were statistically significant. Furthermore, there is a substantial body of research showing that school choice increases not just the *test scores* of public school students, but public school *graduation rates* as well. No school choice study has EVER found negative academic outcomes for public schools due to competition. Just one illustration: in Milwaukee, the public school dropout rate has been slashed in half since that city's voucher program began.

I know there was discussion at last week's meeting about school choice, and I know that the draft action plan makes reference to a dropout recovery program. If you do plan to move forward with school choice as one component of this plan, you will undoubtedly hear backlash from public school employees and their representatives, saying that school choice drains money from public schools.

I performed some calculations for Houston ISD, which had a four-year high school completion rate of 43 percent in 2006. That rate indicates that Houston ISD loses 43 high school students EVERY school day.

For every graduating class, Houston ISD spends \$500 million educating students who never graduate with a diploma. Texas schools as a whole spend more than \$11 billion a year in such a manner. In fact, Houston ISD lost \$56 million in revenue that was allocated to these lost students in 2006 alone. That's more than the Milwaukee school choice program cost its first nine years combined.

I'm not picking on Houston ISD. I chose this district because, to its credit, it does its best to track down former dropouts in dropout recovery walks each school year. Yet the district still loses thousands of students and tens of millions in revenue every year.

I hope that *all* of the programs supported by this council are effective in improving graduation rates and post-secondary readiness for Texas students. But the fact is that we won't know the results of many of these programs for years to come, and we desperately need a safety net to catch those students who continue to fall through the cracks. That is why I hope you implement a dropout recovery program that can give immediate rescue to students who have already dropped out, or are in dire risk of doing so.

While not everyone representing the public school bureaucracy may agree, it is far better to educate a student in a non-traditional school setting, than in no school at all. ★