



Testimony

Who Should Decide What is Best for Your Child?

Presented before the House Committee on Public Education

by The Honorable Kent Grusendorf, Director

Key Points

- While Texas is a leader on many fronts, it is sadly behind on education reform.
- The Texas Supreme Court called upon lawmakers to “upend an ossified regime ill-suited for 21st century Texas.”
- The Legislature holds the key to unlocking parents’ ability to improve the educational welfare of millions of Texas children.
- Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) provide an exciting opportunity for Texas children and for the quality of life of future Texans.

Nothing is more important to the future of society than the education of our youth. To paraphrase Aristotle: The fate of empires is dependent on the education of their youth.

Speaker Straus has asked you to consider the issue of education choice in preparation for the upcoming legislative session. In doing so you should take a close look at the concept known as Education Savings Accounts.

This will be the most important issue before you during your entire tenure in the House. Your decisions will impact the lives of millions of Texans for decades to come. Your decisions will not only impact those kids in school today, but their children, their grandchildren, and the overall well-being of our state for years to come.

Five million kids attend Texas’ public schools, and many are well served. Unfortunately, however, thousands are not being served well and deserve a way out of the trap they find themselves in today. The Legislature alone holds the key to their futures.

As the Austin trial judge stated in his recent school finance ruling, the school system is failing to meet the needs of “hundreds of thousands” of Texas students. And as the Texas Supreme Court said in its final ruling, “We hope the lawmakers will seize this urgent challenge and upend an ossified regime ill-suited for 21st century Texas.”

I urge you to heed both of these judicial findings and deal with this critical issue head-on.

According to the Texas Education Agency, almost one million students are now assigned to failing schools in Texas—called PEG schools because they have been rated as under-performing over the past three years. Although some assigned to these failing schools may be receiving a good education, many others are not. Likewise, some students assigned to excellent schools may not be receiving a quality education even though the school is rated as excellent. Every child is unique and has differing needs. Society will only prosper when those unique needs are met.

A critical decision is: who will decide? Thomas Sowell said it best: “The basic question is not what is best, but who shall decide what is best.” All kids do not fit into the same mold, and who is better to determine the individual needs of each child than the child’s parent in consultation with experts as they see fit? Government’s role should be to facilitate that right to decide, not to dictate the decision. The ability to vote with our feet is the essence of freedom.

Although Texas is a leader on many fronts, we are behind on education reform. About half the states in the U.S. allow some form of private educational choice. Texas has none. The time for Texas to become a leader on education has arrived. As the Texas Supreme Court indicated in its final ruling on the school finance case, “school choice has proven to be

smart policy.” Now is the time to adopt “smart policy” and assure every child in Texas the best education possible tailored to his/her individual needs.

Education Savings Accounts provide an exciting opportunity for Texas children and the quality of life for future Texans. ESAs will allow parents to customize educational services for the specific needs of each of their children. Participating parents would agree to accept less than the cost to the state for public school education, and in doing so, would receive an account which could only be used to purchase educational services such as accredited private school tuition, online educational services, books, tutors, therapists, public school services, testing, etc. The account would be accessed through a limited-use debit card and be subject to audit to avoid fraud and abuse.

Funds not used in one year would be rolled over for use in future years and could be used for college tuition upon graduation from high school. This ability for parents to shop for better services would dramatically change and improve the delivery of all educational services. Just as football teams compete for the best quarterbacks, parents and schools would compete for the best teachers, which would dramatically improve teacher pay as dollars move from wasteful administrative pay to where it matters—teachers.

This kind of shift in the allocation of educational resources would dramatically improve education in Texas. Empirical evidence proves that when parents are given a choice to vote with their feet, public schools improve. Therefore, all Texans benefit whether they participate in the ESA program or not.

Under such a program, fewer students will drop out of school, thousands of additional kids will graduate from high school, thousands will be better prepared for college, thousands will never go to prison, academic standards will improve, and the Texas economy will boom. Many otherwise unable to will attend college.

Taxpayers will save money, teachers will finally be paid and treated as professionals. Education choice will be a win-win for everyone except those with a vested interest in the bureaucracy of the status quo.

The future well-being of our state depends on wise legislative action. Liberty is a precious thing and what is a more basic freedom than the right to determine the educational needs of your child? Who decides?

Every one of your constituents should have the freedom to make the choices they feel will be best for their individual children. Every child in Texas deserves no less. ★

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