



Texas Federation of Teachers aft, afl-cio

3000 South IH-35, Suite 175 ♦ Austin, Texas 78704-6536
512/448-0130 ♦ 1-800-222-3827

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Testimony to the Senate Education Committee Regarding SB 4

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Patty Quinzi, Legislative Counsel

The Texas Federation of Teachers represents more than 56,000 teachers and other school employees, both active and retired. TFT supported the initial Texas experiment with 20 charter schools, as part of the 1995 overhaul of the Education Code. But the annual official evaluations of the Texas charter experiment by the Texas Center for Educational Research continue to give us serious concerns over the expansion of charters and the ongoing exemption of charter schools from state quality standards, such as class-size limits and teacher certification.

In its eighth annual charter school survey conducted on behalf of TEA, the Texas Center for Education Research (TCER) found that students' performance on the TAKS in charter schools is "well below state levels," even when comparisons are made with other public school campuses that serve similar students. The study found that, compared to TEA-designated peer comparison campuses, the TAKS passing rates for charter schools were eight points lower in writing, 25 points lower in science, 11 percentage points lower in reading/English language arts, 14 points lower in social studies, and 19 points lower in mathematics.

The TCER report does not show much improvement in charter schools' historically poor dropout rates, graduation rates, attendance rates, and performance on advanced academic indicators. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, the report noted that the percentage of students saying they will return to their charter for the next school year has declined across years. Of the charter school students who are eligible to return to the same charter school, only 39 percent of them say they will return to the school next year. In contrast, the percentage of students reporting that they intended to return to their charter school was 55 percent in 2003 and 43 percent in 2004. The last time certification data was collected in 2003, only 42 percent of teachers at Texas charter schools held an educator certificate from Texas or any other state. Nearly nine percent had no college degree. And the annual teacher turnover rate was more than double the rate for traditional public schools--43 percent versus 18 percent.

The question in light of this bleak picture is whether SB 4 does enough to correct the chronic pattern of low performance in Texas charter schools. For instance, what is the justification for exempting from dissolution charter schools established before September 2002 with passing rates as low as 25 percent among students who are tested? And why should charters issued after September 2002 receive automatic exemption from dissolution, if their performance has been consistently below par?

We are also concerned about the tendency for low-quality charter schools to serve increasing numbers of alternative education students. The latest study found that 53 percent of charter campuses were evaluated under a less rigorous alternative accountability system for campuses serving more at-risk students--up from 19 percent four years earlier.

Charter schools under SB 4 would remain free to exclude students based on their history of discipline problems. When charter schools with such restrictive admissions policies do well, it calls into question whether their performance can be attributed to their program's merits or to their selective admissions policy.

Another issue concerns the proposal for Blue Ribbon schools, which would allow the highest performing charter schools to be replicated based on their high achievement levels. The concern here is that schools with restrictive admissions policies could earn rewards they don't really deserve, while others--for example, a school that actively engages in dropout recovery but has lower performance outcomes--receive no such reward.

We are also concerned about an additional commitment by the state to provide facilities funding when our public schools are already struggling for those limited funds.

Thank you for the opportunity to express our members' concerns.