

## Testimony before the Senate Education Committee March 27, 2007

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Shapiro and members of the Senate Education Committee.

I am Anna Alicia Romero, representing the Intercultural Development Research Association, a non-profit advocacy organization with a mission to create schools that work for all children.

Today IDRA is here to urge your support for public education solutions to the growing concerns around the education of special education students, namely those with autism. Creating a system of vouchers is a bad idea for the autistic school children who would purportedly be helped. It's a bad idea because of the adverse funding impact to the over 4.5 million students in Texas public schools.

We have various concerns, including:

- Families with the greatest financial need must not be ignored. The eligibility for participation in any program for special needs students should primarily assist those who can afford it the least. It is entirely possible that upper middle class or even wealthy families would be able to take advantage of the voucher. Where is the fairness?
- A proposal using a special needs group is only a first step toward a more expansive voucher program, as evidenced in Utah. That state started its efforts toward privatization with autistic children and in the past weeks passed a full blown voucher bill out of its legislature. That privatization scheme did not even receive the overwhelming support of the legislature. It passed by one vote.
- Privatization schemes are not the answer. Let us look at the shabby treatment of our Texas children through the now privatized services of CHiP, the Children's Protective Service, and the Texas Youth Commission. Let's not go down that road again.
- Given the enormous costs of special education voucher programs, very few students would be served at the expense of serving the greater number of students in public schools. Both Ohio and Utah have examples of vouchers targeting special needs children and just barely address the vast need that is so desperately required to serve children well.
- Any accountability should not allow for fuzzy research. A study of any voucher program should have complete and disaggregated data. The public must have the full picture of the issue, with a look at individual student categories. Just as we require maximum accountability from our public schools, so must we require it of any institutions receiving our tax dollars. Anything less would be irresponsible.
- And lastly, but most importantly, is equity. Full equity. And this is what Texas lacks. Over 25 years of court battles and legislative debates have not yielded full fairness in funding to the over 1,000 public school districts in our state. Texas ranks 39<sup>th</sup> in the nation in per pupil spending. Before we give up on our public schools, we must fully fund them.

Our focus must be on serving all our Texas students and serving them well. For that to happen, we must have the full commitment of the Legislature to tackle the real issues of equity.