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TESTIMONY OF THE TEXAS FEDERATION OF TEACHERS
ON SB 840
BEFORE THE SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE
TUESDAY, MARCH 27, 2007
BY ERIC HARTMAN, TFT DIRECTOR OF GOVERNMENT RELATIONS

The Texas Federation of Teachers is pleased to join in supporting SB 840 by Sen. Lucio alongside other advocates for children with disabilities.

The recent report of the Texas council on autism boils down to one urgent recommendation coming from the parents of these children: Ensure more and better training for the providers of educational services to students with autism in our public schools.

SB 840 responds directly to this concern, with training for teachers and teacher aides provided through professional-development institutes that teachers and aides will seek out. They will seek out these institutes primarily because under this bill the training offered will be up-to-date, intensive, research-based, and relevant to the needs of the individual students they serve. The stipend attached also will help, signaling the high priority placed on this training and the high value placed on the educators who receive it.

The legislation is modeled directly on the successful state program of reading academies that supported the Texas Reading Initiative. From 1999 through 2002, reading academies funded by the state provided state-of-the-art, intensive training, with stipends, for tens of thousands of teachers in grades K-3. The state saw the benefits in the high success rate of students on the first administration of the third-grade TAKS exam in reading.

Some good training in special education, and particularly in best practices for serving students with autism, already is available, but it is not being delivered rapidly and widely to all who need it. The educators least likely to receive this training currently are exactly those who need it most—the teachers and paraprofessionals in the regular classrooms where students with autism are placed under the policy of inclusion. These educators are eager to receive the necessary training. SB 840 helps ensure that they will receive it.

We are especially pleased that this legislation recognizes the central role of paraprofessionals in providing services to students with disabilities. Teachers will be the first to tell you that having a well-trained aide, often working with a student one on one, is a key to success in working with students with autism or other disabilities. Paraprofessionals who bear this responsibility need and deserve the high-quality, up-to-date training that SB 840 would provide.

This bill is one of several legislative proposals that TFT supports in response to the recommendations of the council on autism for better training of educators who serve students with disabilities. We believe that SB 840 may well be the single most important step you could take to help these students. Experience with reading academies tells us that eligible educators will turn out in droves for professional-development institutes following this model that will help them do a better job and that honor the importance of this work by providing a stipend.