

Date: May 3, 2007

To: Senator Shapiro and Senate Education Committee Members; P.O. Box 12068 Capitol Station Austin, TX 78711

From: Zenobia C. Joseph (Constituent/Educational Consultant)

Subject: Written Testimony on SB 2035 (Dropout Prevention)_zcj

1. **Preface:** On May 1, 2007, I (Zenobia C. Joseph, a veteran and elementary educator) provided oral testimony on SB 2035 (Dropout Prevention). Though Senator West's Academic Improvement Indicator Bill moved out of Committee, I understand that the Dropout Bill remains pending. Hence I write in hopes of ensuring that language, intent, and measures reflected in SB 2035 appear in "Eissler's House Bill" that should (as best I understand) reach the Senate Education Committee on or about the end of this week. While I support Senator West's efforts to author a bill targeting "at-risk" students in Grades 6–12, I contend monies must be found on a shoestring budget to address "at-risk" elementary students as early as Grade 3 in accord with intent of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act.

a. Purpose: My written testimony aims to remind each representative of the elementary–prison correlation, as well as elementary needs through relevant personal examples noted under leadership of four principals in five years (2001 – 2006) as Grade 4 educator and Teacher of the Year, Norman Elementary (2005), Austin Independent School District and as a Consultant 2007 administering Grade 4 Writing Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS).

b. Pending: I hope you will improve the effectiveness of SB 2035 or language in the House Bill to reflect early warning of "at-risk" students in Grades 3 – 12 in lieu of Grades 6 – 12. As a novice constituent willing to engage the legislative process, I will do my part too but hope my efforts prove more than a futile exercise! It is my intent to write to Congressman Obey (Chair) House Appropriations Subcommittee, FY 2008 Budget related to Secretary Spellings' testimony (March 14, 2007) <http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/2007/03/03142007b.html>; Congressman Miller (Chair), House Education and Labor Committee, Reading First Hearing and Members to urge funding for Senator West's bill. By reducing NCLB's Reading First six-billion dollar program expenditures highlighted by the Department of Education Inspector General's testimony (April 20, 2007), it appears federal dollars exist to fund this Texas education initiative.

2. Elementary Prison Connection.

a. Congress: During the House Appropriations Subcommittee FY 2008 Budget Hearing (March 14, 2007), Congresswoman Barbara Lee referenced (words to the effect), "There are counties in California that use third-grade reading scores to plan their prison populations for 20 years down the road," Bridgerland's Daily Newspaper Vol. 93, No. 123, Friday, May 3, 2002 http://www.iseesam.com/about%20us/documents/HJapachearicle5_3_02.pdf

b. Article: Dr. Jawanza Kunjufu states, "Governors review fourth grade Reading scores to determine prison growth. . . This has become an epidemic in the African American community where 63 percent of its fourth-grade students are below grade level," <http://www.africanamericanimages.com/Articles.htm> (2007).

c. Internet: Search "third grade reading and prison" via Google and 1,110,000 hits occur in 0.08 seconds. The first hit succinctly states, "During a recent visit to a maximum security prison in Virginia, where some 2,000 men are caged, I asked the warden to describe his most troublesome problem. I expected the usual answer – shivs, drugs, rapes, cellblock violence. Sure, he replied, all that is here. But his **major problem is illiteracy**. As many as **75 percent of the prisoners read at a third grade level**. On release, he said, they won't be able to find even unskilled jobs. Almost two-thirds will return to prison, <http://www.aliciapatterson.org/APF1904/McCarthy/McCarthy.html>.

3. **Bottom Line:** A plethora of research reflects correlation between elementary Reading scores and incarceration. It thus seems reasonable to conclude that allocating monies at Grade 6 equates to late vice early 'at-risk' intervention!

4. **Austin Independent School District (AISD):** Needs exist to focus monies in elementary vice middle school!

From on or about 2000 to date AISD's efforts targeting middle school students failed to eliminate the achievement gap. Notably, Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) Austin: Impacting Lives Project, 2000-01 mirrors language in SB 2035. "Why keep doing the same thing and expect different results?"

a. Disclaimer: In no way am I a subject matter expert on national GEAR UP data. I further acknowledge (as best I recall), Congresswoman Barbara Lee asking Secretary Spellings during the FY 2008 Budget Hearing, Why cut funding for GEAR UP and other programs that appear to be working? To that end, I strive to point out similarities in SB 2035 and GEAR UP Austin to persuade you to find monies to change bill verbiage to at-risk elementary students.

b. **SB 2035: Elementary Relevance** – Texas Education Code Section 29.081(d), "Student at risk of dropping out of school" includes each student who is under 21 years of age and who:

(1) 'was not advanced from one grade level to the next for one or more school years;' Texas Education Agency reflects the number of [AISD] students socially promoted, in part, from Grades 3 – 5 through "placement committees"

(4) 'if the student is in prekindergarten, kindergarten, or grade 1, 2, or 3, did not perform satisfactorily on a readiness test or assessment instrument administered during the current school year;'... Again, crucial data exists!

(6) 'has been placed in an alternative education program in accordance with Section 37.006 during the preceding or current school year;' . . . AISD maintains disaggregated "ACES" – alternative school setting data. In addition to disaggregated data, it serves well to review the overrepresentation of black males in Special Education!

c. Empirical Evidence related to Section 29.081(d), specified paragraphs:

(1) Placement: From 2001 – 2006, I retained no Grade 4 students regardless of failing performance and extensive documentation! In part, No Child Left Behind hinders Grade 4 retention with "three strikes, allegedly out" in Grades 3 and 5 related to assessment. Reality: Due to lack of accountability, Placement Committees place/"socially promote" elementary students to the next grade understanding that "they will be stopped in middle school." Until the law mandates monies and identification of "at-risk elementary students," any bill targeting middle school proves moot!

(4) Assessment Problems: Reading First Grant perpetuates segmented Language Arts instruction! Reality: From NCLB's inception to date, Grade 3 students arrived in Grade 4 unable to write a complete sentence. In part, my Grades 1–3 colleagues often stated, "I'm trying to squeeze Writing in!" With 90-minutes of uninterrupted Reading instruction mandate, teachers engaged a daily script. Despite Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, Chapter 110 – English Language Arts implementation excluded Writing and Speaking in absence of mandates. . . The same at-risk Grade 3 students who fail Reading TAKS may fail Grade 4 Reading or Writing TAKS and will be "at-risk" in Grade 6. Yet, no proactive summer school Reading or Writing intervention exists for "at-risk" students who barely pass! It remains imperative that proposed SB 2035 verbiage include a proactive concerted "holistic" approach to learning!

(6) § 37.006. REMOVAL FOR CERTAIN CONDUCT. (d) (2) the continued presence of the student in the regular classroom threatens the safety of other students or teachers or will be detrimental to the educational process. Reality: On few occasions when I invoked my right to request student removal, the face remained the same as reflected in staggering statistics: African-American (as documented) disrupted class to the point where I was unable to teach! Despite providing class work (which often remained undone), the alternative school setting equated to a "holding cell" with low academic expectations! Anecdotal records to date reflect this travesty. Therefore, it seems only reasonable to target at-risk elementary students already left behind who will be even farther behind by Grade 6! Evidence: Winn Elementary (AISD) Principal e-mail dated Dec 2006, ref. Difficulty with Grades 3 and 4 black boys.

5. **GEAR UP Austin:** Like SB 2035, AISD and Texas Empowerment Academy partnered with colleges, businesses, parents and community in 2000–05 to ensure a 3,300+ Grade 7 at-risk student cohort didn't "fall through the cracks."

a. Background: "Like many school districts around the country, the Austin Independent School District (AISD) is committed to encouraging at-risk students to have high expectations, stay in school, and complete the required courses to enter college..." http://www.austin.isd.tenet.edu/inside/docs/ope_2002_GU_Report.pdf.

b. Problem: Seven years after GEAR UP Austin targeted a Grade 7 cohort, AISD remains plagued by the same dropout issues. It proves problematic that SB 2035 excludes language to **mandate emotional intelligence training!** Is it possible to include professional development verbiage to improve teachers' delivery of services? I contend: No law or high school redesign will truly improve "at-risk" students' outcomes if teachers fail to understand their students!

c. Reality: Five years after GEAR UP Austin, the AISD Strategic Plan (2005 – 2010) states intent to eliminate the achievement gap between African-Americans and all students by 2010. Yet, my efforts from August 2005 to date to request the district **place milestones online** in a transparent act to show how it plans to eliminate the "gap" equates to a mere exercise in futility! Efforts include AISD teleconference with Dr. Guerrero and Joey Crumley (Dec 2005); Council Member Sheryl Cole, Office and E-mail (2006 & 2007), NAACP Meeting & Banquet (Aug and Dec 2005); AISD School Board Meeting and KAZI (FM 88.7) One-Hour Guest, Mar 2007. Curriculum Vitae reflects other efforts.

d. Task Forces: In absence of milestones, AISD task forces equate to action! GEAR UP Austin (2000); Interlocal [3-year] Agreement, AISD/UT-Austin (on or about 2003) to identify more minority middle school students; Cultural Connections to Teaching Task Force (2002–03), Joint AISD and City of Austin Task Forces on African-American and Hispanic Education and Quality of Life (2005-06); Strategic Compensation Task Force (2007); AISD Strategic Plan (2005 – 2010) to name a few. Clearly, more than words must be mandated to show transparency! Though AISD sought community input (Mar 07) regarding its Strategic Plan, how could citizens provide input if they knew not what the district intended to accomplish in six months, one year, or five? Based on my experience, I urge you to include language in SB 2035 to mandate districts place milestones online for citizens to track "at-risk" student dropout efforts!

6. **Mathematics, Science, and Technology Teacher Preparation Academies:** SB 2035 mirrors National Governors Association current Innovation America agenda and S761 Bill. C-SPAN's NCLB Math and Science Panels also focus on minority students' needs, but Writing instruction and elementary Gifted/Talented identification remain aloof. How do you expect to reach SB 2035 end goals in absence of Writing mandates to aid "at-risk" elementary students?

a. Writing: To convey one's ideas in Math, Science, and Technology requires Language Arts in its entirety, the ability to Read, Write, and Speak. "Remember, science is about hypothesis, experimentation," Dr. Shirley Jackson.

✖b. Reality: **All too often, society values writing in death** (e.g. suicidal note or a deceased loved one's letter). Truth be told, to increase job skills and students' employability the three "R's" must be taught explicitly. **I urge you to include "Writing" professional development mandates for teachers in SB 2035. Anything short of an explicit mandate perpetuates segmented instruction and equates to rhetoric vice reality of the bill's intent to teach children holistically!**

c. Congress: Bill Gates emphasized Writing needs during Senate Hearing (Mar 07), "Employers complain that high school graduates today lack basic writing and analytic skills required to succeed even in entry level positions..." Texas Public Policy Foundation also outlined financial impact of students' inability to write/learn basic skills (Mar 05).

d. President Bush, Urban League (2004): "And so we've got to make sure we continue to work not only in the early grades, but in the later grades in public education so that people can say, I've got something that means something. It's a – it's a certification for the ability to read, **write**, add, and subtract . . . to understand the sciences and maths, as well. That's possible, see," <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/07/20040723-8.html>.

e. Detriment: In Reading First's Investigative Hearing, Former Director Mr. Doherty testified that the law excluded "conflict of interest" language, which afforded circumvention of the law. Since 2001, I contend "at-risk" students arrived unable to write due to a loophole in the law, allowing teachers to "integrate" vice explicitly teach writing!

7. **Data:** Rep. McCollum (Minnesota) referred to a book entitled, "How to Lie with Statistics" as she questioned Secretary Spellings during the FY 2008 Budget Hearing, reference – Reading First and NCLB's alleged progress. In terms of Writing, I realize that Texas Education Agency Grade 4 data often reflects favorably but remains flawed by reality! For over 5 years, on Day 1 in two east Austin elementary schools, Grade 4 students arrived unable to write a complete sentence. This reality forced my colleagues and me to teach Writing from August through mid-February at the expense of Reading and Math. Under the guise of Reading, Writing tutorial often existed in **absence of funds!** Flawed data alone in no way addresses "at-risk" students' needs: Positive end result (Writing TAKS numbers) falsely indicates that students mastered Writing, but need help in Reading and Math. Nothing can be further from the truth. I **urge you** to close the Writing loophole in the law: Require specified time vice alleged integrated Writing instruction.

8. **Race Relations:** In my mind's eye, I see the face of a gifted orator – a black boy – whose fifth grade teacher sent him (my former student) back to me because she knew not what to do with him. Part of the problem: The student loved to write, but "we don't write in fifth grade" his teacher insisted. Equally problematic, the student stated making a pact with his "boys" – one gets in trouble, we all take the fall! Tired of being the only smart black boy, this student didn't bother to apply to magnet schools despite being identified Gifted/Talented. Might he be "at-risk" in Grade 6? It appears necessary for AISD to cross the I-35 Divide to incorporate diversity amongst teachers and students too! "You've got to think it's possible in the first place, otherwise you wouldn't insist upon it." President Bush (2004)

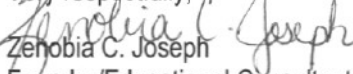
9. **Stipends.** While I appreciate SB 2035 incentive language and recognize merit-based teacher pay proposals, my experience reflects the need to consider monetary TAKS-incentives for parents and students who view testing from deficit thinking. Many parents ask, Will my child fail fourth grade if he/she fails TAKS? "No." "Well, it doesn't matter!" **Reality:** When parents have no TAKS buy-in, many "at-risk" children have no buy-in too! Rather than belabor what we already know, I feel the need to be innovative—think outside the box! How about proposing legislation to develop a 529 College Plan for students who score Commendable on TAKS and bonds for passage of each TAKS test?

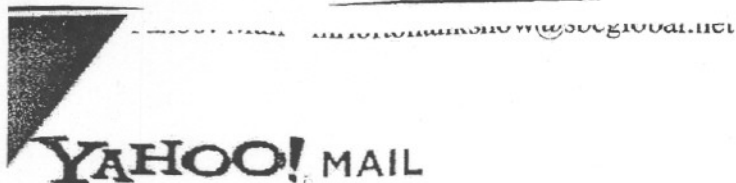
10. **Closing.**

a. Gratitude: I **appreciate Senator West's hard work over the past five weeks** in preparing legislation, in part, to include dropout prevention. I sincerely wish to thank him for conversing with me May 2, 2007 regarding my desire to include "at-risk" elementary student needs in SB 2035. Notably, I recognize budgetary constraints at the state level as exacerbated, in part, by federal level war spending. It is my hope that I may testify before Congress to state a classroom teacher's perspective regarding the need for Writing mandates under NCLB's reauthorization Sep 2007. I also hope Congress sees fit to curtail Reading First's billion dollar annual expenditures to fund SB 2035, or to find pilot grant monies perhaps, to fund "at-risk" AISD Grades 3 – 12 vice Grades 6–12. While my budgetary request may seem unattainable to most, I remain innovatively inspired as I sit listening to Samuel L. Jackson's biography. I am reminded of the Cannes Film Festival Best Supporting Actor Award created for Jackson's realistic portrayal of Gator (a crack addict) in "Jungle Fever." It can't hurt to ask; as FDR said: **The only thing we have to fear is fear itself!**

b. Accountability: In closing, I urge you to consider my painstaking efforts to hold AISD accountable for language stated in its Strategic Plan to no avail. Most constituents, I do believe, would have given up by now! But I believe in due process and in the integrity of every Member of the Senate Education Committee. Regardless of whether any of my elementary ideas come to fruition through "Eissler's House Bill" or SB 2035, **transparency proves crucial!** Please do your part to mandate that Texas school districts put milestones (e.g. Staff Action Plan or timetable) in the public domain via Internet, newspaper, media or the like to afford constituents a viable means to hold districts accountable for dropout prevention efforts in Grades 3–12 or grades specified by the bill! ~I thank you for your time.

Very respectfully,


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Print - Close Window

To: "Michael Lofton" <mrloftontalkshow@sbcglobal.net>
CC: "EHowie@austinisd.org"
Subject: Re: Agenda and Flyer For The 7th African American Men and Boys Conference On Dec 16th at Dobie
From: "WAlvarez@austinisd.org"
Date: Fri, 8 Dec 2006 13:47:21 -0600

Mr. Lofton,

My parent support specialist, Mr. Harold Howie, just gave me the wonderful news that you would be offering a breakout session at the December 16th African American Men and Boys' Conference just for our young African American men at Winn Elementary. I cannot express in words how much this means to me as the principal of Winn Elementary School.

I wanted to give you some additional information regarding the boys that would be attending the conference. I would ask that you share this information with the presenter for our Winn session so that he will know more about the audience to whom he is presenting.

We will be bringing a bus of approximately 15 - 25 African American male students from Winn that range from ages 8 to 11 (3rd to 5th grade). Most of the boys do not have a father that is actively involved in their lives, if at all. The majority of the boys have received numerous discipline referrals to the principal's (or assistant principal's) office this year for the following infractions:

- * insubordination (not following the teacher's directions)
- * disrespectful behavior to other students and adults
- * disruption of the educational process (for self and others)
- * physical aggression toward other students and/or fighting
- * serious pattern of repeated misbehavior

If I had to identify the infraction from the above list that is presenting the greatest challenge for us at Winn, it would be the physical aggression toward other students and/or fighting. All too often, these boys resort to physical aggression and fighting as their first and only means to resolve conflict.

Several of the boys are part of a small group that receives counseling each week (on topics such as self-esteem and conflict resolution) from our campus counselor, Ms. Julie Meacham. They have also received typical consequences given by classroom teachers and principals (i.e., loss of recess, lunch detention, phone calls home to parents, parent-student-administrator conferences, time-out in the office, at-home suspensions, and even trips to ACES [Alternative Center for Elementary Students]). Whenever consequences are imposed, it is always accompanied by a dose of counseling in which the administrator visits with the child about alternative and better choices. Some of the boys have a LBJ High School pal. Unfortunately, regardless of the counseling, interventions, and consequences imposed, the students typically continue their same behavior.

To that end, we are looking for other ways to assist our boys - to communicate to them that we care - to build relationships. We appreciate any and all help and suggestions you can give us. There have been times when I find myself wishing that we had taken a group of our students to the last conference, in which the topic was "The Angry African American Male."

Thank you again for your care, concern, and involvement. Please feel free to contact me (or to have the presenter of the session for Winn) contact me at 414-3950 if additional is needed or wanted.

We are looking forward to the conference.

Mary Alvarez
 Winn Elementary School Principal
 (512) 414-3951

* 5/14/07

Greetings

I just turned 60 ^{April 25th} ~~this month~~ & realized

I'm no longer the younger generation & I'm more aware of my mortality. So before I croak I wanted to pass on some of my favorite photos. If you like feel free to make copies & pass on to other family members.

These are photos Grampa Castulo & Dad.

I have fond memories of spending time with each of you. You probably don't realize it, but as a young person you gave me very special memories of you as my aunts & uncles. I feel honored to have had you pass through my life & give me wonderful childhood memories. I love all of you.

Thanks for the memories you have given me

Love,

Gene