

**TESTIMONY OF LAURA WHEAT
MAYOR TOWN OF WESTLAKE, and
PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF WESTLAKE ACADEMY
BEFORE THE SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE
AUGUST 27, 2008**

My name is Laura Wheat. I am the mayor of the Town of Westlake, and the President of the Board of Trustees of Westlake Academy, the only municipally-owned charter school in Texas. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about facilities funding for charter schools.

The development of public charter schools over ten years ago was one of the strategies the State adopted to allow more choices, more flexibility, and more creativity in addressing education issues. . Forty states now authorize charter schools, and there are currently over 113,000 students attending Texas charters. It is important to remember that charter schools are public schools, and are thus held accountable for academic achievement just like all other public schools. And it is important to recognize that charter schools are working --and working well. By way of example, Westlake Academy was recently awarded Exemplary Status by TEA. It is my concern, however, that Westlake Academy and other Texas charters will be limited in their ability to thrive without help from you.

Westlake Academy opened its doors in 2003 and offers an International Baccalaureate degree program. This past year it received accreditation to offer the IB Organization's IB diploma to our first group of high school graduates that will graduate in 2010. The school operates as a separate

division of the town of Westlake and was built with Town of Westlake funds and private donations. Each year, the Academy, faces operating deficits due to shortfalls in state funding. Because charter schools cannot charge tuition, the community established the Westlake Academy Foundation to help cover these deficits. The Foundation requests a donation from each family that attends the school, and it is a testament to the quality of education we provide that 86% of our families donate at some level. In addition, because we are a charter school and NOT an ISD, we are not allowed to impose school property taxes. Thus, we must dip into our operating funds for facilities needs. And hence... our dilemma. We must raise both our operating funds and our facilities funds through donations and municipal funding. The Academy has the benefit of a municipality to back it up, but of course that drains municipal coffers, and it is NOT a solution for any other charter school in the State.

For the past 20 months, our Foundation has been working to raise the private money necessary to construct a much needed Arts and Sciences building . Although there are several other facility needs that have already been identified in our young life, we are well aware that without access to the State facilities funding that independent public school districts receive, it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to fund future projects.

Forcing public schools to rely upon private donations, contributions from families of students, and philanthropic organizations is not the right way to fund quality public education. And I know in my heart that the great state of Texas can do better.

I am here to urge you to continue to grant flexibility ---and funding----to public charter schools, most of which are doing a spectacular job of educating Texas children, on a fraction of what traditional ISDs receive.

Thank you for YOUR service to the State, and for helping all schools, including charter schools, with much needed facilities funding.