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TESTIMONY TO THE SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE
REGARDING SB 1483, VIRTUAL HIGH SCHOOLS

By

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Texas AFT believes the bill should be amended further. First, it would appear that key safeguards that do apply to course offerings through the virtual school network under Chapter 30A of the Education Code would not apply to the virtual high school created under the new Chapter 30B in this bill. It appears that neither teacher certification nor the state accountability system would apply to the virtual high school, unless the bill is amended to include provisions in Chapter 30B like the certification provision and accountability provision in Chapter 30A (see Sections 30A.110 and 30A.111).

A second needed amendment relates to the percentage of coursework that a high-school student should be allowed to complete online. AFT has been deeply involved in policy discussions at the national level about distance education. Our basic contention is that educational quality, not financial gain, should guide where, when, and how distance education is employed.

A recent AFT survey of 200 distance-education practitioners in higher education has an important bearing on the issue of the appropriate proportion of online coursework at the secondary level. When asked what percentage of an undergraduate course of study ought to be taught via distance education, more than 70 percent of these practitioners said half or less of an undergraduate curriculum should be completed by way of distance education.

These responses came from distance-education practitioners who work with college students, not minors in grades K through 12. These instructors know that, even at the higher-education level, a curriculum delivered entirely via distance learning tends to detract from educational quality. Face-to-face interaction with instructors and fellow students is a valuable part of education at any level. It is especially so for students in high school for whom social/emotional learning is a key ingredient in the recipe for college and career readiness.

Hence we are very concerned about the educational costs of having students get all or most of their high-school education online. We urge the committee to add language to the bill limiting the amount of coursework that a student should be allowed to complete through electronic courses. Dollars saved by moving students into online instruction do not outweigh potential educational costs.

It should also give you pause to know that the virtual charter school operated by K12, Inc., which is often held up as a model for this concept, would have been rated academically unacceptable last year based on actual student performance. It was only the use of “projected”

student performance that allowed this virtual school to upgrade to an acceptable rating.

In light of all these considerations, we contend that the delivery of more than half of a high-school curriculum via electronic courses can only be justified in cases where students are in genuinely exceptional situations--for example, unable to attend "live" classes for reasons of ill health or disability, or unable to enroll in a needed course at their local high school.