Testimony of Dr. David Anthony
CEO, Raise Your Hand Texas

Before the Senate Committee on Education
Senator Leticia Van de Putte, Chair
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Hearing on Virtual Education

raise your hand
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Executive Summary
Key Points:

- Virtual classes, when used to supplement the curriculum at a brick-and-mortar school, have produced student achievement on par with traditional classes.

- Full-time virtual education has expanded rapidly in Texas, despite poor results in student achievement and under the state accountability system.

    o Only one full-time virtual school has maintained even an *Academically Acceptable* ranking for two consecutive years (and it was later rated *Academically Unacceptable*).

    o No full-time virtual school has ever achieved a rating of *Exemplary* or *Recognized*.

- Full-time virtual schools have been touted as producing cost savings for the state, yet there is little or no public data available to substantiate this claim despite the use of taxpayer dollars.

Summary of Key RYHT Recommendations[*]:

- Maintain administrative and fiscal control of all virtual classes and schools by the Texas Virtual Schools Network (TxVSN) at the Texas Education Agency (TEA).

- Maintain requirements that virtual schools comply with the same reporting and accountability requirements as traditional public schools, and do not permit expansion of virtual schools until these standards are met.

- Close the loophole that allows for-profit private providers to evade consequences by moving to another "host" district or charter school one step ahead of the Commissioner of Education.

- Require fiscal transparency for virtual schools, including requiring that contracts between private providers of virtual education and host districts or charters be public information that is available online.

- Prevent further expansion of full-time virtual schools until an objective evaluation of the student performance and cost-effectiveness of full-time virtual schools is performed.

Good afternoon, Senator Van de Putte and committee members. I am David Anthony, CEO of

Raise Your Hand Texas. Raise Your Hand Texas is a non-profit, non-partisan grassroots

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[*] For a full listing of Raise Your Hand Texas' policy recommendations regarding virtual schools, please refer to page 7 of our policy paper.

advocacy organization united behind a single goal: to create the opportunity for every student to achieve success in our Texas public schools. While our membership is diverse, consisting of parents, business and community leaders, educators and concerned citizens, we represent only one constituency—Texas students and their families. As an organization, we strive to improve Texas public schools by investing in educational leaders and engaging the public to influence public policy that strengthens our schools and the economy of our state.

Raise Your Hand Texas is proud to be releasing our first-ever, comprehensive policy paper, and because we believe it is such an important topic for the future of Texas public education, the subject of this first paper is virtual schools. A copy of the policy paper has previously been provided to the committee.

The first several pages of the policy paper describe the basics and the history of virtual schools in Texas. I hope that this background will prove to be a useful reference for you and your staffs, but I will not cover it in my testimony before you today.

Instead, I will focus on what Raise Your Hand Texas believes to be the core issues surrounding virtual education, and our recommendations for improving it.

Supplementary Virtual Classes: A Solid Model

Research shows that when virtual classes are supplementary to the traditional curriculum at a brick-and-mortal school, student performance is on par with traditional classes. It's also encouraging that these supplementary courses are offered through TEA's own Texas Virtual Schools Network (TxVSN) Course Catalog, so the curriculum is regulated, verified and developed under the direction and authority of TEA, which we believe is crucially important. Because these important safeguards are in place, we support virtual education when courses are used to supplement in-class instruction, and we would encourage school districts to continue to promote them to students who would benefit from this type of instruction or broadened course selection.

Full-Time Virtual Schools: Rapid Expansion, Poor Performance

We are concerned, however, with the rapid expansion of full-time virtual schools. If you turn to page four of our policy paper, you will see that:

- Between the 2006-2007 academic year and the 2010-2011 academic year, virtual school enrollment has **rapidly expanded from 171 students to 6,209 students enrolled, and from serving grades 3-6 to serving grades 3-11**.
- TAKS results for students in the three most established virtual schools showed **lower performance than students statewide across all five TAKS subjects in 2010-2011.**
- Full-time virtual schools have failed to measure up to accountability standards:
    - Only one full-time virtual school has maintained even an *Academically Acceptable* rating for two consecutive years (and it was later rated *Academically Unacceptable*); and
    - No full-time virtual school has **ever** achieved a rating of *Recognized* or *Exemplary*.

In short, we have seen the rapid expansion of full-time virtual schools in Texas even though the quality of the schools is not following suit. While we should encourage innovation that serves students well, full-time virtual education has not yet met that standard.

Due to concerns about the performance of full-time virtual schools under the accountability system, Raise Your Hand Texas recommends that the legislature limit the expansion of full-time virtual schools until consistent compliance with accountability standards has been demonstrated.

Virtual Schools: No Taxpayer Accountability or Transparency

Not only are full-time virtual schools failing to meet accountability standards, but data on their fiscal performance is sorely lacking despite the use of taxpayer dollars to fund their operations.

Information on how virtual schools are funded and on the terms of their agreements with school districts and charter schools is difficult or impossible to access. Many tout virtual schools as a way to save the state money and spend less per pupil on the same level of education, yet we could find no evidence of this cost-savings in our research. We have yet to see numbers from TEA or private providers demonstrating that the state is saving money by utilizing virtual schools.

RYHT Policy Recommendations: Accountability and Transparency Must be the Goals

Our recommendations, which you can read in detail on page seven of our paper, focus on accountability and transparency. Although TEA can still improve how they administer the virtual schools program, we believe it is crucial that all operations related to virtual schools remain under the authority of TEA and the TxVSN. It would be a huge mistake to allow virtual schools to contract directly with students and parents or school districts without the safeguards and accountability provided under the TxVSN.

Due to concerns about the academic performance and transparency of public schools, Raise Your Hand Texas recommends that the legislature limit the further expansion of full-time virtual schools until an objective evaluation of their academic value and cost-effectiveness can be performed. As we all admittedly learned the hard way with charter schools, we must set standards high from the beginning and implement safeguards for expansion, or we will face the inevitable challenge of closing schools that are underperforming – a seemingly impossible task. Let's set the standards high now, before more students enroll and spend state funds on a program that has yet to prove itself.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we believe that there is a place for virtual education in Texas public schools, but it must be a system that reflects the same values and high standards that we all agree are essential to the entire public education system. We can't make an exception for virtual schools. They must follow the same rules and prove their value as part of the Texas public education system. Our taxpayers and children deserve nothing less.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on this important issue.