



Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) Subsidize Discrimination Against Students

TLEEC Testimony Against HB 4340, submitted by Diana Long to the Texas House Public Education Committee, April 11, 2023

Dear Chair Buckley and Honorable Members of the House Public Education Committee:

My name is Diana Long, and I am testifying against HB 4340 on behalf of the Texas Legislative Education Equity Coalition (TLEEC), a collaborative of 30 organizations and individuals with the mission to improve the quality of public education for all children and a focus on racial equity. We advocate at the local, state and national levels for high-quality teaching, curriculum and instructional practices and bilingual education for emergent bilingual students, as well as fair funding and enhanced college access and success.

Our testimony today focuses on deep concerns regarding the establishment of an education savings account (ESA) program that redirects public funds from public schools and gives corporate tax breaks for private educational purposes.

Funding Education Savings Accounts Means Funding Discrimination Against Students

TLEEC does not support any mechanism that inherently takes public money away from public schools under the false guise of “parental choice.” Under a voucher plan, Texas families will be left with fewer choices, poorly-funded public schools, and a diminished public education system dedicated to serving all, including those with the greatest needs. Public schools stand to lose significant money comprised of state and local funding. But the cost of running those schools remains. The lights have to stay on. It is imperative that the legislature recognizes that they are constitutionally held responsible for “establishing the support and maintenance of an efficient system of public free schools” (Texas Const. Article VII, §1).

Public funds should go to the schools that educate all Texas students. Any plan to divert public money to private schools would compromise the services public schools can provide and make it harder to keep teachers we need employed. At the same time, children will be subject to more discrimination from private schools because they are not required to serve all students equally. Students with disabilities, in special education, bilingual education, or of diverse religious and gender identities could be denied admission and educational services (Abrams & Koutslavis, 2023). In this case, it is not the “parent’s” choice, it is the “school’s” choice. Public school money should not be used to fund discrimination against students.

Education savings accounts and other similar voucher programs lead to serious accountability issues, considering that they use *public* money. Private schools and providers would not be required to disclose to parents and the public how they operate or how they manage their finances. Private schools and providers also are not required to administer the STAAR test or be rated under the state’s A-F accountability system.

Education Savings Accounts Limit Parent Choice and Educational Access for Students Who Need It Most

It is inaccurate to assume that the students who would reap the benefits from an ESA program will be students from disadvantaged backgrounds. HB 4340 prioritizes applicants who meet the income guidelines necessary to qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, students with a disability, or students covered under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, yet private schools can refuse to admit or provide adequate services to this target group. Private schools that participate in voucher programs may “counsel out” or expel students they deem to be “high cost” (Almazan & Marshall, 2016). In these cases, parents return their children to public schools once they realize they are not receiving the necessary services and support or are not entitled to the same legal protections as in public schools (PFPS, 2022).

In addition, ESAs transfer much of the costs of education to parents, such as additional tuition and fees, educational services and therapies, and transportation costs that are either not covered by the program or exceed its amount. This does not result in parental choice; this results in parental costs.

Recommendations

We urge the legislature to strengthen our public schools by investing heavily in the basic allotment and weighted funding for public schools. School funding is just one piece of the education puzzle, but research has shown it is the most important when it comes to providing children with a high-quality education (Latham Sikes, 2022).

TLEEC stands firmly against any attempts to pilfer money from our state’s 5.4 million public school children. Support of any voucher or education savings account plan takes public money and accountability out of the hands of Texas students, parents, educators and communities.

For questions, please contact TLEEC either through Dr. Chloe Latham Sikes at IDRA (chloe.sikes@idra.org), Jaime Puente at Every Texan (puente@everytexan.org), or Fatima Menéndez at MALDEF (fmenendez@maldef.org).

The Texas Legislative Education Equity Coalition (TLEEC) is a collaborative of organizations and individuals with the mission to improve the quality of public education for all children, with a focus on racial equity. The coalition convenes organizations and individuals who advocate in the interest of public school students at the local, state and national levels.

TLEEC Member Organizations

ARISE Adelante	Mexican American School Boards Association (MASBA)
Austin Justice Coalition	National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies (NACCS)
Breakthrough Central Texas	– Tejas Foco
Coalition of Texans with Disabilities (CTD)	San Antonio Hispanic Chamber of Commerce
Children at Risk	Texas American Federation of Teachers
Dr. Hector P. García G.I. Forum	Texas Association for Bilingual Education (TABE)
Easterseals Central Texas	Texas Association for Chicanos in Higher Education (TACHE)
Educators in Solidarity	Texas Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education
Ethnic Studies Network of Texas (ESNTX)	(TADOHE)
Every Texan	Texas Association of Mexican American Chambers of
Houston Community Voices for Public Education	Commerce (TAMACC)
IDRA (Intercultural Development Research Association)	Texas Center for Education Policy, University of Texas – Austin
Measure	Texas Hispanics Organized for Political Education (HOPE)
McNeil Educational Foundation for Ecumenical Leadership	Texas League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC)
Mexican American Civil Rights Institute (MACRI)	Texas NAACP
Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund	Texas State Teachers Association (TSTA)
(MALDEF)	The Arc of Texas
	UnidosUS (formerly known as NCLR)

Resources

- Abrams, S.E., & Koutsavlis, S.J. (March 2023). The Fiscal Consequences of Private School Vouchers. Southern Poverty Law Center, Education Law Center, Public Funds Public Schools.
https://pfps.org/assets/uploads/SPLC_ELC_PFPS_2023Report_Final.pdf
- Almazan, S., & Marshall Stile, D. (June 2016). School Vouchers and Students with Disabilities: Examining Impact in the Name of Choice.
https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.copaa.org/resource/resmgr/docs/Policy_Docs/COPAA_Voucher_paper_final_R6.pdf
- Latham Sikes, C. (August 2022). How Texas Schools Are Funded – And Why that Matters to Collective Success, IDRA Issue Brief. IDRA. <https://idra.news/IBTxScIFunding>
- PFPS. (2022). The Myth of Cost Savings from Private School Vouchers Fact Sheet. Public Funds for Public Schools.
https://pfps.org/assets/uploads/CR_PFPS_Fact_Sheet_Cost_Myths_DEC_2020-2_003_.pdf