

Senate Education Committee Testimony on Interim Charge # 8

Feb. 22, 2010

Presented by the Texas Medical Association, Texas Pediatric Society, Texas Academy of Family Physicians, and the Healthy Futures Alliance

Madame Chair and Members of the Committee, My name is Janet Realini, MD, MPH, and I am a family physician and volunteer representing the Healthy Futures Alliance (HFA), a community coalition dedicated to reducing teen and unplanned pregnancy in San Antonio and Texas. I'm here also today on behalf of the Texas Medical Association, the Texas Pediatric Society, and the Texas Academy of Family Physicians, representing more than 48,000 physicians in Texas.

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the implementation of House Bill 3. We recognize the importance of providing a solid academic experience for Texas students, and commend the committee's commitment to strengthening the curriculum for high school graduation. However, HB 3 removed graduation requirements we feel are critical to the future health of Texans.

The over 275 members of HFA are distressed by the loss of the state requirement for health. HFA has members who consider themselves "pro-life" and others who identify themselves as "pro-choice"; all are dedicated to helping our youth achieve their potential by preventing teen pregnancy. HFA considers basic health information to be essential for healthy adolescent development and decision-making. We are concerned that school districts in low-income areas, because their resources are so limited, will not continue the health requirement at the district level. These are the districts with the highest teen pregnancy rates, and thus some of the greatest need for health education.

The physician community has long advocated for quality, daily physical activity for students in kindergarten through 12th grade as well as exposure to evidence-based health education. Physical education and health education courses are a core component of public education. Daily physical activity not only contributes to the overall health status of our students, but also improves their academic successes. Research suggests that physical activity may result in students' performing better on academic achievement tests as well as increase students' ability to pay attention.

Adolescence is a critical time as youth are developing physically, mentally, socially, and emotionally all while trying to keep up with academics, school sports, etc. This is an essential time to provide health education. Health courses provide a safe environment for young people to learn about healthy eating and exercising habits, prevent substance abuse, and make healthy decisions about sex.

The habits young people develop as they grow into adults will influence their future health habits. We know that educating students on the importance of proper diet,

nutrition, and physical activity is a critical tool in preventing and managing obesity. Health education empowers young people with the tools to live a healthy lifestyle, and reduce the incidence of chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes. Children spend the majority of their week within the school setting so it's key that they have routine access to physical activity and education. It is especially important as children grow and are unable to devote much time outside of school for play and exercise. The opportunity to prevent and or decrease the burden of obesity and promote good health in Texas is an investment in our children and the future of Texas.

As you are aware, school districts have the authority to add requirements above and beyond what is laid out in state law. Since the passage of the legislation and its implementation by the State Board of Education we have been working at the local level, advocating for the retention of health and physical education within the high school setting. Some have chosen not to implement this change while others are deferring to the language included in House Bill 3. We ask that you prioritize health and PE so all students have equal access moving forward.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you on this important issue.