

Texas School Alliance Testimony on SB 183

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The Texas School Alliance (TSA) comprises 31 of the state's largest districts, serving over one-third of the state's total pupil enrollment and nearly half of all English language learners in Texas. TSA is opposed to Senate Bill 183. The bill allows special education students to enroll in another public school in the district, a public school outside the district (subject to the limitations of the PEG program), or a private school at the option of the student's parent. The state would provide a scholarship to the student in the amount that the student would generate under §42.151 in the child's resident district.

To participate, qualifying schools must be accredited or have filed an application for accreditation and not advocate for or foster unlawful behavior. Qualifying schools may not discriminate and must accept students by lottery if they receive more applicants than they have the capacity to serve. Qualifying schools are required to administer a state assessment or an alternative norm-referenced assessment and provide the results to the student's parents and the aggregated results to the public. The commissioner, TEA, the State Board of Education, and other state agencies are prohibited from any further regulation of the qualifying schools.

The Texas School Alliance believes that the bill lacks sufficient accountability and oversight to protect the interests of participating students and taxpayers. Public schools are subject to 524 pages of laws in the public education section of the education code alone. These laws provide for everything from minimum teaching qualifications to immunization requirements to academic and financial accountability. Private providers operating under the provisions of this bill would not be subject to these same provisions. This means that, although the institutions would receive tax dollars, they are would not be required to:

- Employ teachers who have a college degree or any other particular form of training;
- Demonstrate any particular level of success in serving students;
- Comply with the state's student discipline and school safety requirements;
- Comply with open records rules; or
- Offer the state foundation curriculum covering the basics of reading, writing, mathematics and science.

The Texas School Alliance believes that the state should not abdicate its responsibility in overseeing the education of its neediest students. While we believe that contracting for private services for students enrolled in special education programs is part of a sound educational program, we think that continued public accountability for the use of funds and the academic needs of students remains necessary.

* Members of TSA Board of Directors