

Testimony of David Anderson
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Before the Texas State Board of Education, Committee of the Whole
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Commissioner of Education's Generation 25 Open-Enrollment Charter School Proposals

Chairman Ellis and SBOE Members:

My name is David Anderson, and I am testifying on behalf of Raise Your Hand Texas. We support the letter from twenty education organizations and its recommendations, dated September 3, regarding the impact of eight new charter applications.

I want to emphasize two points at this time — that the increased state budget cost from a student enrolling in a charter school instead of an urban or suburban school district is real, and that existing agency staffing and oversight is insufficient to support further charter expansion and still meet our obligation toward all students.

The Texas Education Agency provides a template on its website for calculating the additional charter-level funding as a financial incentive for school districts to authorize local charters. There are many policy discussions to be had about that funding advantage, but the indisputable math is that an average student who moves from Houston ISD (for example) to a charter school increases the state budget by roughly \$1,700. The agency's own template is the basis for the estimates of additional state cost. As we approach a legislative session in which cuts to all public schools may be considered, the cost can be anticipated and calculated. Charter expansion digs that hole deeper.

Second, the expansion of the charter sector is much more than just granting additional charters or expansion amendments approved by the Commissioner. It is an expansion of the state's obligation to oversee that sector in an environment of reduced agency budgets.

We have all seen newspaper reports of a charter reporting less than 2% special education students in a state that is nearly 10% students with disabilities. That's a huge red flag, yet that charter was authorized to expand and replicate whatever business plan produced that disproportionate result. Who is watching, and can the existing agency staff effectively monitor even more charters to ensure students with disabilities have access to all of our public schools?

A truly surprising number of charters report zero special education-certified teachers and bilingual/ESL-certified teachers, despite state and federal requirements for those staff qualifications. Who is watching that? Can the existing agency staff appropriately monitor compliance with those state and federal program requirements for still more charter holders when we appear to see noncompliance from the existing ones?

We have all seen newspaper reports about expenditures on luxury boxes at sports venues, extravagant air travel, and extraordinarily expensive advertising by a charter. Yet that same charter received the highest financial accountability rating just weeks ago and has what would be the largest expansion amendment in state history currently pending before the agency. Who is minding that store, and do they have the capacity to take on more charter holders, particularly when it may involve tracing complex financial relationships with out-of-state CMOs?

We have been here before. In the late 1990s, Texas followed a "more must be better" philosophy towards charter expansion without adequate provision for oversight. It took twenty years to clean up that mess. If the charter sector is to expand, the agency's staffing and capacity for oversight need to grow even more, which isn't likely to happen in the next legislative session. It's not responsible to create demand for funding that may not be there and staffing that is unlikely in an environment of agency budget cuts. We can't afford this.

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