

TESTIMONY OF DAVID DUNN
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U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES – COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR
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Thank you Chairman Miller and Mr. McKeon, it is an honor to appear before the committee today. Both at the White House in the Domestic Policy Council and as chief of staff at the Department of Education it was my privilege to work alongside Secretary Spellings with the Congress and this committee in support of education reform. I appear before you as someone who has returned to the front lines of public education innovation as the Executive Director of the newly formed Texas Charter Schools Association (TCSA). We represent more than 56,000 students in 316 public charter schools in Texas.

Texas charter schools fall into three broad groups: schools preparing their students for college, schools serving students who have already dropped out or have not succeeded in traditional settings, and schools created to meet unique academic, social, or community needs.

As different as these schools may be, there is one thing they all have in common: and that is uniform support for President Obama's call to double the funding for the federal charter school program or CSP. The program is critical to the start-up of new public charter schools and I encourage the committee to work with the administration so the growing demand for public charter schools can be met. Some 17,000 Texas students are currently waiting to attend a quality public charter school, and doubling the CSP funding will help new charters to open.

Texas is one of just three states that have the ability to use the CSP funds to open new schools under an existing charter. This means charters like IDEA Public Schools, in your district Congressman Hinojosa, can use CSP funds to open new campuses – but they cannot use them to expand already open and growing

campuses or to align grades. The committee should consider changing the law to provide states greater flexibility in the use of CSP dollars.

Federal flexibility is important, but states have the primary responsibility to improve public charters. The Texas Legislature just completed its work Monday and failed to pass key reforms that would promote growth of quality public charter schools. These reforms were scuttled in the final hours of session after having bipartisan support in both chambers. Our charter law is now 14 years old and in the past twelve months our state hit the statutory cap on the number of charters allowed. A bill that would have allowed the State Board of Education to grant an additional 12 charters a year, enabling managed growth of high quality charter schools, failed to pass.

With strong support during the Bush Administration, and now even more so with President Obama and Secretary Duncan – it's disappointing that some state legislators still don't understand the benefits of public charter schools and remain obstacles toward reforming public education in this country. On Sunday of this week, Texas Representative Lon Burnam from Fort Worth said ON THE RECORD regarding our charter bill, "This is a massive charter school expansion bill. I hate charter schools. I'm going to kill this bill." And he did. As the Executive Director of a state organization -- it's very frustrating that elected officials see us as competition to the public school system, when we're part of it – a very crucial part that reaches kids who need education to transform their lives.

The Texas Legislature also failed to give the Commissioner of Education additional authority to close charter schools that are not meeting academic or financial standards. President Obama and Secretary Duncan have said setting artificial caps on the number of quality charter schools in a state traps thousands of students in schools that don't work. In our state that's 17,000 kids. Our drop-out recovery charter schools are educating a population of students that have already failed in the traditional system and come to public charter schools in

many cases years behind. The progress of these schools should be measured with care. Sometimes we are too quick to label these schools as underperforming.

Equitable funding for our schools and the ability to fairly access the array of state and federal funds that are available to our traditional schools is the most important challenge we face. Amazing work is still being done despite the financial disadvantages. Just recently, TCSA member Tom Torkelson, CEO of IDEA Public Schools serving the predominately Hispanic Rio Grande Valley, was nominated for Time Magazine's 100 most influential people in the world. This is no small achievement; public charter schools in Texas directly impact our country's future.

The association opened its doors less than a year ago with the goal of unifying Texas charter schools and developing a quality framework for effective public charters of all types. Working with the University of Texas System with the support of the Walton Family Foundation, The Michael and Susan Dell Foundation, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, TCSA member schools are building a quality framework that will both define and measure the academic and financial success of public charter schools.

We are building a robust and transparent structure that our school leaders will use in real time to measure how well they are performing across a broad range of indicators. Our members know how important it is to develop a system that works for a multitude of school types. Every TCSA school will complete the quality framework process and sign a quality pledge, giving the public and policy makers greater confidence.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you. I'll be pleased to answer any questions you may have.

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