



Testimony Before the Texas House Educational Opportunity & Enrichment, Select Committee

By Michael Barba, K-12 Education Policy Director

Mr. Chairman and Members:

My name is Michael Barba and I'm testifying on behalf of the Texas Public Policy Foundation regarding:

1. Parent empowerment,
2. Current education options, and
3. ESAs.

We support parent empowerment because we believe—in line with United States law—that parents are the first and primary educators of their children. Parents have a direct and personal responsibility for their children's good. Examples on [slide 3](#) of their educational responsibilities include:

1. Surrounding their children with good influences, including friends and teachers;
2. Supporting their children's teachers & school to improve their learning;
3. Forming their children's judgment with regard to what is true, good, and beautiful; and
4. Removing their children from an environment if it is detrimental or inadequate.

The state's role is to support parents, not replace them, in fulfilling these responsibilities.

These responsibilities give rise to rights shown on [slide 4](#). Specifically, parents have a right to:

1. **Transparency:** know what their children are taught and why;
2. **Quality:** an education that prepares their children for success;
3. **Respect:** when concerns arise; and
4. **Choice:** in what and where their children are taught.

To empower Texas parents, and led by Gov. Abbott, our campaign director—Mandy Drogin—has met hundreds of parents across Texas. We often hear from opponents of parent empowerment: “Parents already have choice.” Mandy would be happy to share many stories with you showing that this is not true.

And the fact of the matter is that the data confirm what parents have been saying.

[Slide 5](#) shows magnet school applications and acceptances. Rep. Hinojosa, you shared a story in a committee hearing early this year about how you applied to a magnet school for your son, and you were denied. The vast majority—over 75%—of students who apply to magnet schools are denied; at that rate, ISD magnet schools have a lower acceptance rate than every university in Texas except Rice. In addition, ISD policies ensure that students are vetted based on academics, discipline, and attendance. We recommend that you and your staff especially review the policy FDA(LOCAL). By this policy, the students who are often most in need of an option are denied one.

In contrast, Texas charter schools are open enrollment. Unlike ISDs, they don't filter children's applications based on academics, discipline, or attendance. But as [slide 6](#) shows, there are far more applications than available seats: over 66,000 children are on waitlists to attend a charter school; this is a 20% increase compared to 2 years ago.

Regarding accredited private schools: the number of these schools has declined by 10% over the last 8 years. [Slide 7](#) shows the number of schools in the top 5 metro areas and in non-metro areas. [Slide 13](#) shows these data for all 25 Texas metro areas. We have talked to many parents, and they want these options, but they simply cannot afford them. For example, Rep. King, in your district Plainview Christian Academy had 59 students and could no longer operate, but the moment it converted into a tuition-free charter school, Plainview Christian received 360 applications. Moreover, declarations that “private schools won’t come to rural Texas” are false. Rather, choice programs increase options in rural communities.

Turning now to ESAs, [slide 8](#) shows the estimated take up rates for an ESA program in the first five years of operation. We estimate a range of 2% to 6.6%; with a universal ESA for all 6.4 million school-age children in Texas, about 57,000 to 288,000 students would participate in year one.

Such a program would substantially benefit students, as [slide 9](#) summarizes. Benefits found by studies of choice programs in the 31 other states include:

1. Higher reading and math proficiency, especially for low-income children;
2. Accelerated learning;
3. Decreased absences, suspensions, and convictions;
4. Increased graduation rates; and
5. Increased college attainment.

In particular, I want to underscore the first point: 20 years ago, Florida’s low-income elementary school students ranked 33rd in reading and 27th in math on NAEP. Today they rank number one in both reading and math.

Finally, choice looks different in different communities. As [slide 10](#) summarizes, we expect that rural families will make more customized purchases, spending less on tuition and more on instructional materials. At the same time, we expect the number of private schools to increase substantially. In Florida, the number of private options has doubled over the last 20 years. In the one pager included on the right side of your packet, there are links to videos of public-school teachers who were born and raised in the country, moved to the city to teach, and saw the Florida ESA as an opportunity to open schools in their hometowns. Rural Texas has a lot to offer, but workforce readiness and educational opportunities are a struggle. As a result, 157 of our counties have a declining school-age population. But we can save the heartland of Texas through parent empowerment.

Thank you very much for your time and for your efforts to improve Texas education for all 6.4 million Texas children.

Michael Barba is the Policy Director of K-12 Education at the Texas Public Policy Foundation. His work is focused upon education because it provides our children with economic, civic, and moral benefits: a good education offers students a path to prosperous work, teaches students why and how they must care for their neighbor, and gives students practice in the virtues that allow them to attain lifelong freedom and happiness.

Previously, Michael served as a specialist on the System of Great Schools (SGS) team at the Texas Education Agency where he helped visionary school district leaders understand and deliver the schools that their families want, need, and deserve. Nineteen districts enrolling 525,000 students currently participate in the SGS Network. Michael has also served as the Associate Policy Director for the Catholic bishops of Texas, whom he represented before the state legislature and administrative agencies. Born and raised in El Paso, he completed his undergraduate and graduate education in political philosophy at the University of Dallas.

