

Good morning,

My name is Bobby Ott, and I am the proud superintendent of Temple ISD. Temple ISD is a 6A urban district, with around 9,000 students. Our student demographics are 42% Hispanic, 30% African-American, 25% White and 77% economically disadvantaged. Specifically related to SB8, we also serve 1,694 special education students, which is around 18% of our total student population.

I am grateful to be back in front of this committee and thank each of you for your service.

I have also had the chance to work with Chairman Buckley on local issues and prior legislation. I have come to know his heart for children. I say this based on seeing him interact with my own students and teachers in Temple ISD. I want to be clear about that with the public.

With that being said, I am here to respectfully oppose the committee substitute to SB8.

In my research of ESAs, vouchers and tax credits, I have noticed three reoccurring questions, so I have prepared this testimony to address each question.

Question number one.

1. Should parents be the ones to decide their child's education?

In regards to SB8, parents have the same choice today that they would if this bill were to pass. Currently, parents can relocate their child to another public school campus within their district, but would have to provide their own transportation, and space would need to be available. This is no different than attending a non-public school in SB8, because a majority do not provide transportation and require space. Further, most private schools are more expensive than the ESA provided in this bill. Therefore, this structure would inevitably leave children of less-income families behind.

Secondly, the best way to empower a parent is to inform them. An accountability system is used to inform the public and families. How does anyone know a non-public school is a good school if without public accountability. Although I commend the idea of receiving schools taking the STAAR, I do not see the purpose if results are not informing the public or families. Parents are the ultimate judge, but when it comes to spending taxpayer money there must be transparency and accountability for all taxpayers, not just parents of school children. There are many citizens that pay taxes and do not have children in school; and they still want to know how their money is spent.

Lastly, government provides services to the masses. Two of the most important services provided by government are safety and education. If the local police force is not meeting my safety needs, I am not allowed to use my paid city taxes to subsidize my home security cameras or private measures. Then why would I allow it in public education? Safety is just as important as education. Why is it not being applied to paying for club memberships when parents are dissatisfied with public parks or tennis courts? The precedent for financing personal choices beyond government services are paid for by our own dollars.

Question number two.

2. Should students remain in low-performing schools?

The answer is “no.” I have served in districts with failing schools, and it is heartbreaking and should be taken personally. Even though this bill looks like an opportunity for every student to parachute, the reality is not the case. Transferring to another school requires transportation access, guaranteed admissions and resources beyond those provided in this bill. The way to address a failing school is not through a provisional parachute for some, but by investing in all. Selective admissions eliminates equitable parent choice because the real choice resides in the selective admissions process. I have turned around failing schools; and it takes technical assistance, replacing incompetent staff and leadership, and a targeted plan for every child.

Something else to be mindful of are the lagging indicators in our current accountability system, which are rated based on students who have already left the building. In other words, you could have a false negative rating driving these ESAs. And as far as cut scores, the Commissioner of Education has the sole authority to change cut scores. When they are increased, student scores dip. This causes an adjustment where campuses receive lower ratings because the bar has been raised for students. In my experiences, whether working at TEA or for a school district, being on both ends - -I have often asked myself, “Is it fair to assume the campus is doing poorly when the state has increased the cut scores?”

There is also an inconsistency between SB8 and the current accountability requirements. SB8 allows a voucher after one year of a campus “F” rating. But the state gives school districts two consecutive years to identify its areas of improvement before even submitting a turnaround plan to TEA. <https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/acct-campusinterventionsmatrix-23.pdf>.

Nobody should be in a failing school, but SB8 is not the solution. ESAs would leave many children behind. Investing in the failing campus as a whole, would support every child.

The final question.

3. Are school districts meeting the needs of special-education students?

There are no higher service requirements for special-needs children than those in public schools. You will also find no program more underfunded in public schools than special education. The *Texas Commission on Special Education Funding* shows that local school districts and taxpayers are subsidizing special education by almost 1.9 billion dollars statewide. (slide 13) <https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/sped-funding-weights-2021-2022.pdf>. An alternative would be to appropriately fund special education in our public schools. This would impact more students than SB8.

In closing, I want to thank Chairman Buckley and each of you as committee members for all you do for your districts and Texas children. I am happy to respond to any questions.

Regarding the assessment piece in the committee substitute.

While the bill may end the testing program known as STAAR it does not remove state required testing, which is understandable since we must comply with federal testing requirements. I have provided you with a table that has a side-by-side of what is currently required under state law in Texas and what is proposed in the committee substitute. The substitute requires more tests be administered to students.

As you can see, in grades 3-8 testing is still required but the substitute requires these exams be administered 3 times throughout the year. The one exception is that no test will be required for 8th grade social studies. In addition, there's a provision in the bill that may require some districts to continue with all current tests PLUS administer field tests for TEA as they develop the new tests. The number of tests districts must administer even without the field tests, increases throughout the proposed testing system in the committee substitute.

The committee substitute adds an extra math test in grade 11, bringing the total number of tests up to 6. Current law only requires 5 End of Course Exams (EOCs). In the upper grades, you could consider keeping the current EOCs and removing the high-stakes graduation requirements in current law. This would save the state money and time needed to develop new tests and allow students to take these exams while they are completing the courses.

I understand the desire to end STAAR but the way I interpret the substitute, we will still have a very similar testing regime that increases in the number of exams to students. I don't believe increasing the number of exams will be welcomed by educators, students or parents.