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Opposition to CSSB 1716

Regarding special education vouchers

May 17, 2021

The **Association of Texas Professional Educators (ATPE)** offers the following input in opposition to the **Committee Substitute for Senate Bill (CSSB) 1716** by Senator Larry Taylor.

ATPE appreciates efforts to ensure students in special education receive the services they need. Unfortunately, CSSB 1716 would create a voucher program that inequitably redirects taxpayer dollars to parents in order for them to pay private vendors for services their children are already entitled to receive free of charge under federal law.

CSSB 1716 would codify Gov. Greg Abbott's voucher program announced in October 2020, the Supplemental Special Education Services (SESS) program. Using the Governor's Emergency Education Relief (GEER) fund at cost of \$30 million, Abbott created a model strikingly similar to "education savings account" vouchers that have been consistently rejected by the Texas Legislature. Parents of students with special needs can apply to the existing SESS program for up to \$1,500 to spend on supplemental educational services and materials for their child. Likewise, CSSB 1716 provides parents with a maximum of \$1,500 and is capped at \$30 million per fiscal year.

The federal Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) requires school districts to provide the services required under each student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) at no charge to the student. It is essential that public schools receive adequate resources, such as money for extra staffing, to fulfill their responsibility under IDEA for all students with disabilities and those needing special education services. By placing the onus for participation on parents, this program furthers inequities between students from different socioeconomic and parental backgrounds.

As heard in the Senate Education Committee, CSSB 1716 was opposed by Disability Rights Texas, the Texas Council of Administrators of Special Education, the Coalition of Texans with Disabilities, as well as a wide swath of the public education community. There were no special education groups who supported the legislation. **ATPE recommends that the legislature ensure special education programs are fully funded through the public school system to afford all students receiving special education services their federal right to a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment, as well as the accompanying federal protections under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.**

By permanently establishing the governor's special education voucher program in statute, CSSB 1716 would create a dangerous and unnecessary detour for taxpayer dollars needed desperately to meet our state's obligation to serve all students with qualifying disabilities through the public school system.

CSSB 1716 would redirect taxpayer dollars to create a voucher program that would be detrimental to our most vulnerable students. Therefore, **we respectfully urge members to OPPOSE CSSB 1716.** For additional information, contact ATPE Governmental Relations at (800) 777-2873 or government@atpe.org.

The Association of Texas Professional Educators (ATPE) has been a strong voice for Texas educators since 1980. It is the leading educators' association in Texas with approximately 100,000 members statewide. With its strong collaborative philosophy, ATPE speaks for classroom teachers, administrators, future, retired and para-educators and works to create better opportunities for 5 million public schoolchildren. ATPE is the ally and the voice of Texas public school educators.