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TESTIMONY TO THE SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE
REGARDING SB 30, VIRTUAL SCHOOLS

By

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We appreciate Senator Shapiro's staff working with us to alleviate some of our concerns on SB 1483 about teacher certification, professional development, and accountability. However, Texas AFT believes SB 30 should be amended further to ensure that key safeguards are in place to ensure that students using the virtual school network receive a high quality education.

A recent study conducted by the Stanford Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) demonstrated that students in cyber charter schools scored significantly lower in both reading and mathematics than comparable students in traditional schools and lower in mathematics than students in brick-and-mortar charter schools. The study also found that 100 percent of the eight cyber charter schools studied performed worse than their matched traditional schools. In every subgroup, cyber charter performance was significantly lower than the performance of students attending brick and mortar schools.

A recent AFT survey of 200 distance-education practitioners in higher education has an important bearing on the issue of the appropriate proportion of online coursework at the secondary level. When asked what percentage of an undergraduate course of study ought to be taught via distance education, more than 70 percent of these practitioners said half or less of an undergraduate curriculum should be completed by way of distance education.

These responses came from distance-education practitioners who work with college students, not minors in grades K through 12. These instructors know that, even at the higher-education level, a curriculum delivered entirely via distance learning tends to detract from educational quality. Face-to-face interaction with instructors and fellow students is a valuable part of education at any level. It is especially so for students in high school for whom social/emotional learning is a key ingredient in the recipe for college and career readiness.

Hence we are very concerned about the educational costs of having students get all or most of their high-school education online. We urge the committee to add language to the bill limiting the amount of coursework that a student should be allowed to complete through electronic courses. Dollars saved by moving students into online instruction do not outweigh potential educational costs. Our basic contention is that educational quality, not financial gain, should guide where, when, and how distance education is employed.

It should also give you pause to know that the virtual charter school operated by K12, Inc., which is often held up as a model for this concept, would have been rated academically

unacceptable last year based on actual student performance. It was only the use of “projected” student performance that allowed this virtual school to upgrade to an acceptable rating.

Considering the serious quality concerns surrounding full-time virtual schooling, especially for at-risk students as highlighted in the CREDO study, we urge the committee to amend this bill to cap the percentage of coursework that a high-school student generally should be allowed to complete online.