



Testimony Against HB 429

Regarding Virtual Schools

April 16, 2019

The **Association of Texas Professional Educators (ATPE)** appreciates this opportunity to express our opposition to House Bill (HB) 429 as filed.

HB 429 by Rep. Matt Shaheen includes provisions that expand virtual school programs, which a growing body of evidence indicates are a poor substitute for traditional, brick-and-mortar classrooms.

HB 429 negatively impacts instructional efficiency by allowing students to take virtual courses that are already physically offered by their district or campus, as well as those that aren't part of their graduation plan, requirements for college admission, or requirements for industry certification. HB 429 also repeals the three-course limit, which would increase costs to districts by requiring them to pay for excess courses. Not only do these changes increase the cost and inefficiency of the public education system by allowing for expanded and duplicative virtual instruction, but they also breach the historically established line of being a virtual voucher by requiring districts to pay a virtual education vendor for unlimited courses. Furthermore, the data show that full-time virtual school students underperform their peers enrolled in traditional classroom settings. Therefore, ATPE opposes any further expansion of virtual schools as contemplated by this bill.

Virtual school programs in Texas have been plagued by performance issues. About 88% of the state's total full-time virtual enrollment, roughly 8,400 students, are served by two providers: Texas Connections Academy, which has been labeled "improvement required" (IR) for three of the last six years, and Texas Virtual Academy, whose campuses have either not been rated or listed as meeting "alternative" standards. The table below illustrates a rate of poor performance far above that seen in brick-and-mortar schools. By comparison, just 5.1% of campuses statewide were rated IR in 2016, while the rate among virtual schools was 28.6%.

	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013
iUniversity Prep Campus ID 220906007	Met Standard (87/100)	Met Standard	Met Standard	Met Standard	Met Standard	No Data
Responsive Education Virtual Learning Campus ID 221801022	IR (55/100)	IR	IR	Met Standard	IR	IR
Texas Connections Academy at Houston Campus ID 101912100	Met Standard (68/100)	IR	IR	IR	Met Standard	Met Standard
Texas Online Preparatory School Elementary Campus ID 236902108	IR (59/100)	Met Standard	Met Standard	Met Standard	Met Standard	No Data
Texas Online Preparatory School Middle School Campus ID 236902048	Met Standard (75/100)	Met Standard	Met Standard	Met Standard	IR	No Data

Texas Online Preparatory School High School Campus ID 236902008	Met Standard (76/100)	Met Standard	Met Standard	Met Standard	Met Standard	No Data
Texas Virtual Academy Campus ID 072801145	Met Alternative Standard (85/100)	Met Alternative Standard	Met Alternative Standard	No Data	No Data	No Data
Texas Virtual Academy at Hallsville ID 102904010	No Data	No Data	Not Rated	Not Rated	No Data	No Data

University research and government audits of programs in other states and nationally tell similar stories of substandard performance by virtual schools. For example: In Wisconsin: “Virtual charter school pupils’ **median scores on the mathematics** section of the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination were **almost always lower than statewide medians** during the 2005-06 and 2006-07 school years.” ([2015, Legislative Audit Bureau](#)); in Colorado, “**Half** of the online students **wind up leaving within a year**. When they do, they’re **often further behind academically** then when they started.” ([2015 I-News Network](#)); in Pennsylvania: “**100% of these online charter schools** performed **significantly worse** than feeder schools in both reading and math.” ([2011, Stanford Center for Research on Education Outcomes](#)); nationally, “Across all tested students in online charters, the typical academic gains for math are -0.25 standard deviations (**equivalent to 180 fewer days of learning**) and -0.10 (**equivalent to 72 fewer days**) for reading.” ([2015, Stanford CREDO](#)); and nationally, “Students at K12 Inc., the nation’s largest virtual school company, are **falling further behind** in reading and math scores than students in brick-and-mortar schools.” ([2012, National Education Policy Center at the University of Colorado Boulder](#)).

Many of the concerns regarding virtual schools involve lack of vendor accountability. Until vendors that provide and manage full-time virtual programs can be held to account for substandard performance, limiting the number of potential district and charter school hosts is the only way to effectively track or control performance under the current system.

This testimony applies to the bill as filed, and ATPE understands that a committee substitute is under consideration. We look forward to working with Rep. Shaheen to consider substitute or amendment language that would make positive changes to the current virtual school system without expanding it. In particular, the study provision of the bill could be a good first step as a stand-alone provision, provided that it incorporates educator input and eliminates subsection (c) under Section 5 of the bill, which would require the commissioner to increase virtual network participation. This provision threatens to bias the otherwise neutral aim of the study.

We also would support tracking student performance at the vendor level and blocking vendors who fail to provide an acceptable level of education under the state’s accountability system from continued access to Texas students. Such a provision would be a welcome addition to the state’s virtual education frame work. The elimination of bad actors might lead to a scenario where any remaining programs could be identified as high quality and potentially expanded.

For the above reasons, we respectfully ask you to **oppose HB 429 as filed**. 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 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.