Testimony Opposing Voucher Legislation  
Presented by Velma Ybarra, before the Texas Senate Education Committee, September 14, 2016

My name is Velma Ybarra. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you on behalf of TLEC, the Texas Latino Education Coalition, which is comprised of 16 service organizations, some with representatives from all over the state of Texas. We speak as one voice to urge Texas lawmakers not to support any voucher proposals that would further deplete money from our public schools.

Whether they are called vouchers, tax credits, education scholarship accounts – they are all proposals advocated and supported by million- and billion-dollar corporations. There are few, if any, major corporate or Wall Street groups that do not contribute to efforts to dilute public money from our schools through vouchers, all in the alleged interest of improved schools for those most in need.

However, the data and studies show otherwise: low-income minority children benefit the least. I will briefly cite some examples that have led us in TLEC to conclude that vouchers in whatever shape or form, are not in our communities’ best interests, and we will oppose any legislation that so promotes them.

1. Several states’ voucher systems are held up in court for alleged violation of constitutional provisions. In Nevada, which approved universal access to an education savings account, the program was on hold pending a state supreme court decision on its constitutionality, primarily because of evidence that the tax credit funds for ESAs (education savings accounts) were deemed by corporations and schools as private funds, not subject to accountability and fiscal oversight. In addition, the data showed that the donor tax credit funds, which could have been going to state schools, were being utilized primarily to fund tuition to private and religious schools that were not inclusive of poor or minority families. In Georgia, similar legislation on tax credit education scholarship vouchers was withdrawn before its passage. And in Virginia, the ESA bill, which was to allow any student to participate, was amended to limit participation to special needs groups only.

2. Several states have had voucher and education savings account programs (including Arizona) that have circumvented accountability on the use of tax money that otherwise would have gone to state governments to support public schools. Some voucher programs have not met the test of transparency. The school tuition organizations (STOs) that administer millions in ESA tax credit funds do not go through regular annual audits in some states because they contend that the funds for tax credits are not public but are private donations. In Arizona, there has been suspected
widespread fraud where the donations reported are not matching the actual dollars issued for vouchers, education scholarships, etc.

3. Some states that receive millions of dollars for voucher or ESAs do not test students with mandated state exams, again citing that these students are now in private schools and not subject to any mandated testing provisions of the state or nation.

4. The rhetoric that these voucher programs and ESAs will improve education for the poor is misleading, as there are multiple studies in D.C., Milwaukee, and Cleveland schools that students who used vouchers do not perform better in reading and math. In Louisiana, students with vouchers performed worse.

5. It is really simple: as the Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) has stated, “The best way to improve public schools, is to invest in public schools!” The research shows that schools in some of the most impoverished districts in some of these voucher states benefit the least from the tax credit or voucher systems.

The single most important item that I would ask the members of this committee to consider is that the voucher and education tax credits movement has not in the past 10 years led to equitable participation by low-income students and minorities in choice schools. Low-income families cannot afford to fork out their money up front to attend private high cost schools. So the tax credit scholarships are going to higher income families who can pay up front and then get reimbursed for their tuition costs. In some states, 89 percent of those who benefit from tax credit scholarship accounts are parents who already had their children in private, primarily religious schools.

- Low-income neighborhood public schools need more support in order to continue the American dream of a quality education for all. We do not need corporations to be dedicating their millions to further reduce funds for those most in need of good schooling.

- Texas should mandate faster effective reforms, yes, but it should not take public money from public schools and divert it into a segregationist funding method that will create further divides in our communities.

- Our citizens have spoken: Voters have opposed and will continue to oppose use of public money for private and religious schools and the courts are for the most part in line with this same principle.

- The most successful school systems in other countries, like Finland, do not have voucher systems. Funding is much more equitable.

- Vouchers support families who already have their kids in private or religious schools, as per salient research.

- It is not about choice because it is the private schools and the STOs that decide who gets in and who gets the voucher money.

The Texas Latino Education Coalition (TLEC) is a collaborative of organizations and individuals who advocate for the rights of Latino students at the local, state and national levels. The coalition was organized to focus specifically on critical educational issues in Texas and to improve the state of education for Latino students in public schools.