Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, my name is Ann Smisko, and I serve as Deputy Director of Policy and Programs at Raise Your Hand Texas. I appear before you today on behalf of Raise Your Hand to register our concerns regarding HB 895 and respectfully testify in OPPOSITION to the bill.

Expansion of full-time virtual charter schools unwarranted by dismal record in Texas and nationally

In 2015, the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) released a study on the impact of full-time virtual education in the United States. The Walton Family Foundation, a major funder of the research, reported that the results of the study were “sobering” and provided “stark evidence that most online charters have a negative effect on students’ academic achievement.”

The CREDO report found that students in full-time virtual schools learned

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the equivalent of 180 days fewer in math and 72 fewer days in reading on average compared to peers in traditional charter schools. Regrettably, the negative impacts on student learning in Texas were even greater as can be seen in the charts from the CREDO report contained in the Appendix A to my testimony.

In 2013, the Texas Legislature passed HB 1926 (King), which directed that no further full-time virtual schools be authorized due to concerns regarding persistently low performance of these programs in Texas. Regrettably, the poor performance that prompted the prohibition on the creation of additional full-time virtual schools has persisted as you can see from our most recent Texas Virtual Schools Update attached to my testimony as Exhibit B.

In 2015-2016, 8,500 students in Texas—or 89% of the students enrolled in full-time virtual programs under standard accountability—attended programs that failed to meet state accountability standards. If adopted, HB 895 would allow for creation of additional full-time virtual programs despite continued poor performance and would contravene legislative intent as expressed in HB 1926.

Conclusion
Although technology does and will continue to play an important role in public education, data and research continue to show that full-time virtual education is producing poor results for students and is generally not passing muster under the state accountability system. For these reasons, we do not believe that an the investment of additional taxpayer dollars in the expansion of full-time virtual education is warranted at this time.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.
Appendix A

Figure 5: Online Charter Effect Size by State, Reading

The 0.00 line for this graph represents the average TPS VCR, White, non-poverty, non-ELL, non-SPED student.

* Denotes significant at the .05 level. ** Denotes significant at the .01 level.

Figure 6: Online Charter Effect Size by State, Math

The 0.00 line for this graph represents the average TPS VCR, White, non-poverty, non-ELL, non-SPED student.

* Denotes significant at the .05 level. ** Denotes significant at the .01 level.

Appendix B
Texas Virtual Schools Update: Majority of Texas Virtual Learners Enrolled in Failing Schools

Two Failing Virtual Schools Enroll Nearly Ninety Percent of Students

As of 2015–16, virtual schools in Texas continue to underperform for the majority of students enrolled.

Nearly 8,500 students, or 89% of full-time virtual enrollment, are enrolled in the two largest full-time virtual schools that are evaluated under the state accountability system. Texas Connections Academy and Texas Virtual Academy both failed to meet state standards in 2015-16 and were rated Improvement Required (IR). It is notable that Texas Connections Academy is the largest campus in the state in terms of student enrollment, yet it received an IR rating.

Specific standards violations:
- Houston ISD’s Texas Connections Academy failed to meet state standards on Index 4 – Postsecondary Readiness – for the second year in a row.
- Responsive Education Solutions Charter’s Texas Virtual Academy failed to meet state standards on Index 1 – Student Achievement, Index 2 – Student Progress, and Index 3 – Closing Performance Gaps.

Another development in 2015–16 was the addition of a new full-time virtual high school “campus” by Responsive Ed that is rated under the Alternative Education Accountability (AEA) system. The AEA system is intended only for at-risk students, and for a campus to be eligible to be evaluated by this lower standard, at least 75% of a campus’ students must meet specific at-risk requirements. No other full-time virtual school is rated via AEA. More than 2,000 high school students, most of whom likely were previously enrolled in Responsive Ed’s original full-time virtual school that is evaluated by the more rigorous standard accountability system, are now enrolled in the new campus. The original campus, renamed Responsive Ed Virtual Learning, now only admits students in grades 3-4.

Safeguarding Texas Students

Due to the performance record of virtual schools, the state must prioritize transparency and continued accountability for these programs. In order to ensure Texas students and parents have the opportunity to make informed educational choices, the state should:
- Maintain administration and operation of virtual schools under the auspices of the Texas Virtual School Network, operated by the Texas Education Agency.
- Continue current policy that disallows virtual schools from serving students below grade three, where state assessments are not administered.
- Maintain current reporting and accountability requirements for virtual schools under state statute as required for all other public schools in Texas.
- Prohibit virtual schools from being evaluated under the weaker alternative education accountability.
- Preserve the established funding system, in which all funds flow through the school district or charter and students must successfully complete the online course in order for the provider to receive full funding. Do not permit public funds to be paid directly to private providers.
- Maintain the prohibition against opening new full-time virtual education programs until performance improves.
- Prohibit existing full-time programs from creating additional “campuses” that hide prior low performance.

January 2017

Advancing public education by igniting fiercely innovative leadership and advocacy for millions of students.
Full-Time Virtual School Accountability Ratings by School Year

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<td>TEXAS CONNECTIONS ACADEMY (Houston ISD)</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Improvement Required</td>
<td>No rating assigned by the TEA</td>
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<td>TEXAS VIRTUAL ACADEMY (Southwest Charter)</td>
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<td>CLOSED *</td>
<td>No rating assigned by the TEA</td>
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<td>Met Standard</td>
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<td>IQ ACADEMY/Texas Virtual Academy/Responsive Ed Virtual Learning (Responsive Ed Charter)</td>
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<td>Met Standard</td>
<td>No rating assigned by the TEA</td>
<td>Improvement Required</td>
<td>Improvement Required</td>
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<td>TEXARKANA VIRTUAL ACADEMY (Texarkana ISD)</td>
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<td>No rating assigned by the TEA</td>
<td>Improvement Required</td>
<td>Met Standard</td>
<td>Met Standard</td>
<td>Met Standard</td>
<td>CLOSED *</td>
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<tr>
<td>TX ONLINE PREP EL (Huntsville ISD)</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Met Standard</td>
<td>Met Standard</td>
<td>Met Standard</td>
<td>Met Standard</td>
<td>Met Standard</td>
<td>Enrollment: 118</td>
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<tr>
<td>TX ONLINE PREP MID (Huntsville ISD)</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Improvement Required</td>
<td>Met Standard</td>
<td>Met Standard</td>
<td>Met Standard</td>
<td>Met Standard</td>
<td>Enrollment: 219</td>
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<tr>
<td>TX ONLINE PREP HS (Huntsville ISD)</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Met Standard</td>
<td>Met Standard</td>
<td>Met Standard</td>
<td>Met Standard</td>
<td>Met Standard</td>
<td>Enrollment: 361</td>
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<tr>
<td>SCHOLARS MAGNET ACADEMY (Red Oak ISD)</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Improvement Required</td>
<td>Met Standard</td>
<td>Met Standard</td>
<td>Met Standard</td>
<td>Met Standard</td>
<td>CLOSED *</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Indicates voluntary closure by provider
** Rated under the Alternative Education Accountability (AEA) System

**Blended Learning is a Better Way**

Technology plays an important role in facilitating student learning in the 21st century. Blended learning moves beyond merely providing opportunities for online learning, and, instead, presents a more strategic approach. It combines face-to-face teacher instruction and online technology to achieve student-centered learning. Blended learning takes place when students learn at least in part online, with some element of student control over the time, place, path, and/or pace of their learning, while also enjoying the benefits that come with education at a brick-and-mortar school (Christensen Institute).

Blended learning is both personalized, tailored to an individual student’s particular needs, and competency-based, enabling students to advance after mastering a given subject. Integrating blended learning into schools allows students to benefit from customized learning experiences through the use of adaptive digital content and increased one-on-one time with teachers.

*Blended learning moves beyond merely providing opportunities for online learning, and, instead, presents a more strategic approach.*