Public education a moral duty, Baptist minister tells House committee

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AUSTIN—Texas has a moral obligation to educate all its children and a constitutional duty to direct tax funds to public education, not divert public money to private alternatives, a Baptist minister told the House Committee on Public Education.

 Charles Foster Johnson Charles Foster Johnson, pastor of Bread Fellowship in Fort Worth and executive director of Pastors for Texas Children, presented invited testimony to the committee during an Oct. 17 public hearing.

"We have a public trust before God to educate all our children, and that means all—not just children who can afford it, not just children whose parents are engaged, but all children," Johnson said.

Public education is a moral, democratic, societal and spiritual duty, he asserted.

"Public education is not a commodity, and we are not clients. We are not customers. We are citizens," he insisted. "We are engaged in a common good—God's common good."

Public school teachers are fulfilling a divine calling, instilling the principles of good citizenship and moral character in students, Johnson said.

"A spiritual enterprise is not given to free-market dynamics or cost-benefit analysis or competition," he insisted, adding in the printed remarks he

submitted to the committee: "A classroom is a holy place of learning, not a marketplace of financial gain. To make commodities of our kids and markets of our classrooms is to misunderstand—and profane—the spirituality of education."

Furthermore, Johnson insisted, Texas has a constitutional responsibility to support a free system of public education and no authority to redirect state funds to private religious education.

"There is no proper authority that the state has to divert public funds toward the establishment of any religious cause. ... Since when has God needed Caesar's money to do the Lord's work? Never," he asserted.

In a sharp exchange with Johnson, Rep. Dwayne Bohac, R-Houston, asserted, "No one has the moral authority to tell parents they have to send their children to a failing school."

"You have the right to home-school your children," Johnson responded. "You have the right to private school your children. You don't have the right to ask the people of Texas to pay for it."

 Rep. Dwayne Bohac School choice initiatives—such as vouchers, tax-credit scholarships or state-subsidized educational savings accounts—empower parents to find the best educational alternatives for their children, Bohac insisted.

"We have to let the parents that do care escape" from struggling schools, he said.

Johnson took exception to the way some proponents of school choice initiatives—particularly Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick—have framed the school voucher debate as a civil rights issue and claimed their proposals will benefit poor children.

"That mother—a single mom, loving those babies, holding down two jobs, is not going to get up and transport that kid across town to north Fort Worth where the private schools are," Johnson said.

Instead of giving up on struggling schools and labeling them as "failed" or "failing," Texas should invest in the future and honor the public trust by adequately funding high-needs schools, he added.

Asking parents to continue to send their children to struggling schools until those schools turn around and become successful essentially means harming those children in the short term, said Bohac, a member of Second Baptist Church in Houston.

"Turn-around strategies take a long time," he said.

If churches and other concerned citizens "double down with love on neighborhood schools," transformation can occur in a remarkably short time, Johnson said.

"I bet your congregation alone could choose a high-needs school and turn it around within a year," he said. "Wrap your congregational arms of love and care around the highest needs school in your neighborhood."

The Committee on Public Education will submit a report to House Speaker Joe Straus, R-San Antonio, before the 2017 legislative session convenes in January.