



LIFT PERSPECTIVE

June 20, 2006

Will Someone *Other than* the Texas Federation of Teachers Please Think of the Children?

The Texas Federation of Teachers (TFT) recently threw its political weight behind efforts to derail attempts to improve eligibility processing for the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP).

The 78th Legislature affected the most comprehensive reform of health and human services agencies in the nation through the passage of HB 2292. As a result, the state is revamping the process by which parents could enroll their children in CHIP. The enrollment requirements, and particularly the income test, are being made more difficult to meet.

From the very beginning, there were catcalls about the proposal. Hiding behind the "concern for kids" charade, advocacy groups pounced on the plan claiming it would unjustly deny access to the program. TFT, in a May 25th press release, "urged state officials to fix the CHIP eligibility process and stop allowing children from low-income working families to be knocked out of this essential health-care program for no good reason." [Yes, TFT actually wrote "no good reason" to burnish its credentials as a representative of professional educators.]

In the same release, TFT decried the "bureaucratic barriers" to enrollment and "flat-out" errors in the process. TFT maintains "the 2003 eligibility changes added pointless paperwork obstacles that keep children from receiving health care." To justify its foray into the health and human services arena, TFT claims CHIP is "a vital contributor to their [children's] educational readiness."

While there have been undeniable problems with outsourcing, the exaggerated complaints are intended to keep state workers employed and not to increase enrollment and ease eligibility.

Transition from a state-operated system to a state-supervised system will inevitably hit road bumps, but more so because of the opposition of entrenched interests and obstinate

state employees looking for job protection. As the state gains more experience of both managing the transition from state-operated to state-supervised systems, and managing private contractors, the process will become less problematic. If we judge too soon and blame the contractor for enrollment declines, soon enough the Health and Human Services Commission may revert to *status quo ante* as it appears to waiver in face of the criticism by TFT and its partners in the Texas CHIP Coalition.

The reasons behind reductions in enrollment have manifestly more to do with increased vigilance on the part of state because of more stringent asset tests, as well as an increasing lack of interest in the program.

Buried deep in the TFT statement, after the exasperated rhetoric about caring for kids and whimpering about damage to CHIP, one begins to understand the consternation about changes to eligibility processing: job protection for state employees. “The light also may be dawning on state health officials regarding lessons to be learned from this CHIP experiment with handing essential public services over to private contractors.”

At the very end of the TFT release, however, readers are finally given the real motive for TFT’s howling protest: preservation of jobs in public education. “We hope Texas Commissioner of Education Shirley Neeley is paying attention, because HB 1 as passed by the legislature in the recent special session gives her broad new power to privatize public schools.”

TFT’s clear intent is to tarnish and taint outsourcing in health and human services before it is applied to the public education. Yet, building, maintaining and growing the education bureaucracy serves the real interests of the TFT: political power. The more resources it can extract from lawmakers for job protection, the more it strengthens its army of state-paid lobbyists whose purpose is only to protect its power base.

TFT can continue to masquerade as an advocate for children whether through its defense of CHIP or increasing teacher pay. But if it were really concerned about kids, it would devote its energy to putting resources into the programs that benefit children and not growing the ranks of public employees which only benefits itself.