Chairwoman Shapiro and honorable members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony. It is a privilege to be here at the request of Senator Hinojosa and the staff of South Texas College in support of SB975.

Jobs for the Future is a national policy, technical assistance, and research organization working in over 200 communities in 41 states to help the nation compete in a global economy. A particular focus at JFF is on improving the pathways leading from high school to college to family-sustaining careers, including those for youth who are off track to graduation or have dropped out of high school altogether and need what we call Back on Track Pathways to credentials and careers.

Some of the most promising pathways nationally are those that policymakers are facilitating in Texas. Through supportive legislation such as HB1137 that enables recovery of students through age 26, the sweeping dropout recovery work in HB2237 that gave rise to the Texas Dropout Recovery Program, and significant investments in dual credit, Texas has enabled the growth and spread of some of the strongest Back on Track models we’ve identified.

One especially promising model is the College, Career, and Technology Academy in Pharr-San Juan-Alamo, which has recovered hundreds of dropouts since it opened in 2007 and has helped many of them make the transition to South Texas College. We are now helping CCTA to strengthen, document, and spread their model, using a consortium approach with four neighboring districts that have already begun to emulate aspects of it. STC is a pivotal partner in this work,
continuing its tradition of being a national leader through its efforts to boost the college-going rates of its entire region by deep and meaningful partnerships with the K-12 system.

This bill would enable smaller districts—whose need to address their dropout and off-track youth population is no less serious—to join the regional effort already underway. Instead of attending an ISD-based school, youth recovered from these districts would have the opportunity to attend school directly on the South Texas College campus. As the national intermediary for the early college movement, JFF has documented evidence of the positive outcomes when off-track young people experience education in a college-going culture.

This bill and its companion bill SB1261 will enable districts and community colleges to enter into powerful partnerships in which community colleges increase their support of recovery efforts, districts improve their graduation rates, and more communities in Texas to have high-quality Back on Track Pathways that not only graduate former dropouts from high school but help them obtain postsecondary credentials.

To reach its broad reaching and admirable college- and career-readiness goals, Texas must make college and career-readiness a viable option for the nearly 40,000 annual dropouts and thousands more youth who fall off track every year. We at JFF believe that SB975 and SB1261 will continue Texas’s history of strong legislation that supports the recovery of off-track youth and puts them on a path to become fully productive and contributing members of their communities and the state.