

**Select Committee on Public School Accountability
Dr. Richard Middleton Testimony, North East ISD
February 18, 2008**

Good morning. I am Richard Middleton, superintendent of North East Independent School District in San Antonio. I am here representing the Texas School Alliance (TSA), which is composed of 33 of Texas' largest school districts. We are a large and diverse group, with a mix of Chapter 41 and 42 school districts. Of the 4.5 million Texas school children, Texas School Alliance districts represent 1.5 million of these children. Together, these 33 districts serve 36 percent of the state's public school students, 42 percent of the state's economically disadvantaged students, and nearly half of the state's English Language Learners (ELL).

Taking a broader look at public education in Texas, there are more than 1,000 public school districts that employ 615,000 staff to educate more than 4.5 million students each year, and the student body is growing by 70,000 to 80,000 per year. School districts range in size from fewer than 20 to more than 200,000 students, and property wealth varies from \$18,000 to \$2.8 million per student.

TSA districts recognize the important contribution that our accountability system has made on the overall effectiveness of Texas schools. Educators, parents and the public have access to timely and accurate information regarding student performance as well as school and district effectiveness. The disaggregation of performance data have helped shine a spot-light on students most in need of additional educational intervention.

However, although the structure of the state accountability system has remained unchanged in over a decade, Texas has changed testing programs and added additional assessments. We are now poised to implement a new system of assessments at the high school level. It is time to reexamine the accountability system and identify needed improvements.

RATINGS

- TSA districts would like to see the state's rating system modified to provide information to parents, community members and stakeholders that is informative, comprehensible, and accurate.
 - We want a rating system that is transparent, and one that a parent or business partner can easily understand.
 - The system sends mixed messages to our community. For example: a high school of 3,000 students can be judged by a small group of 50 students. So while 98% of the students are performing at recognized or exemplary levels, the performance of only 50 students – or in the case of our high school, 50 special education students – can cause an entire school to be unacceptable.
 - There is a disconnect for our businesses since there isn't a clear connection between accountability ratings and workforce preparedness or dropout rates.
 - I recently explained to a businessman that the accountability system is like measuring a business' performance based on its lowest performing salesperson. The businessman could not comprehend that the state accountability system is based solely on the lowest performing group ... from 36 different cells ... taking several different versions of TAKS ... on a single day.
- To improve the state ratings system, TSA recommends the following:
- Recommendation 1: Reduce, to the extent possible, the conflicts between the state, federal, and Performance-Based Monitoring Analysis System (PBMAS) accountability systems.
 - Each of these three systems provide different ratings at different times that can conflict with one another.
- Recommendation 2: Create a rating that allows differentiation for those schools and districts that are currently rated academically acceptable.
 - Out of 33 TSA districts, 32 were rated Acceptable for 2007. Take Ysleta school district for instance. With 79% of their students being low income, Ysleta had 91% of the measures at the exemplary or recognized level, yet they were still only Acceptable.

- Recommendation 3: Provide schools and districts with a warning year if performance slips before they are considered academically unacceptable.
- Recommendation 4: Account for student growth in performance in the ratings system while not penalizing those schools and districts with already high levels of performance.
 - We need a better picture of how schools are performing as a whole. One student group, on one test, on one day can cause an entire school or district to look bad undeservingly. Schools that are steadily improving should receive a rating that is reflective of that student progress.
- Recommendation 5: Allow for an appeal process to correct for data errors before initial ratings are awarded.
 - The media reports the initial results, and seldom reports on the appeals. Once an appeal is granted, the damage has already been done to a school's reputation.
- Recommendation 6: Discontinue the state PEG program as a separate rating and include it within the state accountability system.

INDICATORS

Large, diverse schools and districts are less likely than their counterparts to achieve high ratings, even given comparable levels of performance, due to the larger number of indicators.

- The system is discriminatory based on the lowest performing cell, or student group. Large, diverse schools and districts have more opportunities to fail than more homogeneous schools. Texas is a diverse state? Why are we punishing diverse schools?
- Recommendation 7: Consider size, ethnicity and Social Economic Status (SES) driven comparison groups for ratings purposes.
 - In other words, districts should be rated against other like districts instead of against the entire state.
 - If you asked yourself, “What makes an exemplary district?” here is what you would find. The most diverse, Exemplary district in the state had 19 cells for which tests were administered compared to a possible 26 cells. And if you reviewed all the Exemplary districts, you would find on average that they only had 9 cells used for accountability versus 26 cells –the number that NEISD was measured by. Looking even further, you would find that all the exemplary districts combined have a total population of 21,694 students compared with NEISD which had 61,225 students during the same period.
- Recommendation 8: Require that students be enrolled prior to September 30 to be included in accountability calculations.

REWARDS AND INCENTIVES

TSA recognizes the place of incentives and rewards in the context of accountability. The structure of those programs is critical to their longevity and overall success.

- Recommendation 9: Provide access to state level rewards to all districts and campuses that demonstrate either substantial gains in academic performance or sustained high levels of achievement.
- Recommendation 10: Structure incentive programs so as to maintain a collaborative educational environment within districts and campuses.
- Recommendation 11: Base incentive programs on a set of clear and concise standards that are comprehensible to the public.
- Recommendation 12: Clarify the state commitment to incentive programs so districts know whether they can count on continued financial state support if they elect to participate.

SANCTIONS

- TSA believes that the use of sanctions should be based on the best available research regarding what it takes to turn around low-performing districts and campuses.
- Recommendation 13: Give low performing districts and campuses sufficient time to turn around before considering closure or reconstitution.
 - Ed Fuller, associate director of the University Council for Educational Administration at UT, was quoted last week saying,

“We know that school reform takes time – much more than one year’s time. If a principal leaves within three to five years, the principal’s vision for reform is left incomplete. Over time, teachers become jaded and simply ignore the reform effort ... Teachers believe the principal will leave and all of their efforts will be wasted.”
- Recommendation 14: Consider growth in student performance when determining appropriate sanctions.
- Recommendation 15: State and federal sanctions should be examined together to eliminate unnecessary paperwork and minimize the amount of time that staff on campuses needing improvement must spend away from the school, particularly during the instructional day.
- Recommendation 16: Schools in danger of closure should get ratings information by early to mid-June to allow for appropriate planning and communication with parents and community members.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

- Schools will reach any target that you give us. However, don’t give us a moving target. Standards change on a yearly basis and the rules are often published only weeks before testing begins.
- We need stability. Our students and parents need stability. Our business partners need stability. Our community needs stability.
- Can we create a system that fairly accounts for diversity, size and student performance growth? I think we can. THANK YOU.