

HB 3/SB 3
Austin Chamber Education/Talent Testimony
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Texas Education Accountability Bill: The Good, the Not-so-Good and the Suggestions

House Bill 3 and Senate Bill 3, identically drafted by Senate Education Chair Florence Shapiro and House Education Chair Rob Eissler, are likely to be the primary education accountability bills and should be on the radar of every Austin business leader.

Texas' current school accountability system focuses on whether students can avoid failing a TAKS test and avoid dropping out of school, not whether they are prepared for the high-performance workplace or ACC without needing remedial help in applying statistics, speaking a second language, understanding and utilizing a technical manual.

Texas students have made great strides in the last 25 years, primarily due to the focus and rigor of accountability, outstanding managerial advances by our educators, far more competitive educator compensation and a state commitment to a reasonably equitable distribution of funds.

What is Good?

HB 3 and SB 3 have the potential to help Austin employers, parents and students. These bills:

- **Align Texas' accountability system with a meaningful goal:** college/workforce readiness.
- **Defend a meaningful default high school course of study**, which require four 'real' math, science, English and social studies courses as well as two years of 'foreign' languages.
- **Establish a meaningful "college/workplace readiness" standard** in math, English and writing which students must demonstrate to be exempt from remedial coursework.
- **Vertically align math, English and writing skills and assessments** in earlier grades, to ensure students can begin and remain on track to graduate college/workforce ready.
- **Defend accountability and campus closure processes** for districts which allow persistently low academic performance against the meaningful standard.
- **Reduce state operational mandates.**

These expectations – if defended – will put Texas public schools on par with expectations in technical and university programs, as well as in Texas' selective private schools, as well as with schools in Dublin, Frankfurt, and Boston suburbs, and with technical tracks in Singapore, Seoul, Tamil and Shenzhen.

What is Troubling that Must Be Fixed?

Three major loopholes undermine the bills:

- Reduces the knowledge students must demonstrate to earn high school graduation.
- Creates three unequal labels for students who complete the default high school course of study
 - 'college/workplace readiness' for sufficient performance on algebra II
 - 'postsecondary readiness' for sufficient performance on algebra I, despite high likelihood a student is not actually ready for community college.
 - 'skilled workforce and technical readiness' for passing any certification or licensure exam, despite high likelihood a student is not actually ready for community college.
- Uses an accountability scheme which reduces expectations for under-performing students.

All three loopholes need closing to support these bills.

How do you Fix the Problems?

Do Not Weaken High School Graduation and Get Into (Further) Accounting Games:

Under the current TAKS system, to graduate, high school students need to demonstrate their knowledge through passing “summative” assessments in the four core academic areas (math, science, English, social studies). In science, students must demonstrate content knowledge in biology, chemistry and physics; in math, content knowledge in algebra and geometry.

We know we have a dropout problem. Currently, one-third to one-quarter of Texas students who enter high school does not graduate. This is not, as some have suggested, because of the summative assessments, but due to social promotion common throughout elementary and middle school. Many who drop out in 9th grade algebra I do so having not passed a math TAKS test for several years or having been exposed to more hands-on approaches. These approaches, though, are within the purview of local operational control.

The solution is not to allow students to demonstrate even less knowledge. Under the proposed system in HB3/SB3, students do not need to demonstrate any knowledge of science and social studies and need only to demonstrate knowledge of algebra 1. This represents a weakening of an already weak Minimum High School Plan. This proposal creates a cynical accounting game which makes the state’s completion numbers look better but only hurts kids.

Do Not Create a Two-Track, “Workforce Ready” Loophole Which Leads Nowhere

Practical employer experience and volumes of research reinforces that only one standard exists to be prepared for high-performance training or academic programs, whether for ACC’s electronics curriculum, ACC’s applied arts or Texas State’s liberal arts pathway. Contrary to clear research and practice, HB3/SB3 creates three unequal designation: an appropriate college/workforce ready and inappropriate ‘postsecondary ready’ and ‘skilled workforce and technical ready’ standards.

Texas’ current unified “college/workforce ready” standard is already too low. Five years ago, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board defined “college/workforce” ready standards in math, English and writing. However, at the time, the THECB believed too few graduates would actually meet these meaningful standards. Hence, THECB lowered the standard to its current level, with the intent to increase that standard until it reached its actual “college/workforce ready” standard. Only 42% of the Class of 2008 met the College Readiness Standard, including only 13% of Minimum High School Plan graduates and 37% of Recommended Program graduates, according to the Texas Education Agency.

HB3/SB3 would create a still-lower and wholly inappropriate “postsecondary ready” standard – which requires passing only Algebra I and English III tests – insufficient for nearly all technical training programs. Students with only a firm grasp of Algebra I are not prepared for nursing, electronics, graphic design, diesel mechanics, biotech manufacturing, CNC, and other technical programs.

Then there is the ‘skilled workforce and technical ready’ designation

If a student can’t meet that lower proposed bar, HB3/SB3 would still allow students to garner the ‘skilled workforce and technical ready’ label by passing one of thousands of potential technical certificates. This legal fiction may make us feel better temporarily. But such actions will not prepare additional students

for precision welding, nursing, programming or other technical professions. Our students will be puzzled because they will think they are ready when, in fact, they are not.

The lesser tiers within the primary graduation plan in HB3/SB3 should be eliminated. ‘Workforce readiness’ is, if not higher, at least the same as ‘college readiness.’ If a suitable certification which requires a well-rounded applied education – such as FAA-Avionics or full ASE certification – cannot be earned as a surrogate for college/workplace readiness, this provision should be opposed.

Do Not Co-Mingle Possibility of Future Learning with Actual Learning in Accountability

Currently, schools are rated acceptable if 50%+ of each student subpopulation passes TAKS in targeted subjects. While the standards are very low to earn an acceptable rating, the public can at least understand them and policymakers can raise them gradually over time.

Under the current system, 97% of Texas schools meet this very low standard. Those that do not meet these standards can receive exemptions from poor accountability ratings by the TEA Commissioner, even if 25%+ of their students fail to graduate within 4 years. Yet the current system is still greeted with calls that the accountability system is “punitive” to schools and those students who attend those schools. These exemptions confuse the public and undermine its public support. For example, two Austin middle schools with nearly identical student demographics have only 30% of their students passing all sections of the TAKS test. Yet, one is rated unacceptable, one rate acceptable, due to a variety of exemptions.

The proposed HB3/SB3 system complicates and confuses this system still further. The proposal allows that, in lieu of half the students passing a math test, school systems can instead show enough learning growth such that, one day, enough students may potentially demonstrate sufficient knowledge one day soon to pass the math test. Under the proposed system, that would count the same as actually knowing something.

SB3/HB3 sets out three ratings: accredited, accredited-warned and accredited-probation. Different sanctions happen, based upon the rating. Schools that have not yet demonstrated actual learning at sufficient levels should be rated differently from schools that have.

Schools which are making sufficient growth, but not absolute performance, should be grouped in the accredited-warned category. This will simplify the accrediting system and ensure that the state accrediting body does not allow schools to have lower expectations and standards for more academically-challenged students. The economy and higher education treats students, by and large, based upon what they know, not based upon their background.

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