



**Texas AFT**

*A Union of Professionals*

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**Testimony of Eric Hartman  
Regarding Senate Bill 3  
On Behalf of Texas AFT  
Before the Senate Education Committee  
March 17, 2009**

*"One high-stakes test is not as good as the teacher's judgment."*

–Larry Kellner, chief executive officer of Continental Airlines, speaking as a member of the Joint Select Committee on Public School Accountability

*"What we need is accountability that is meant to fix schools, not to fix blame."*

–Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers

Texas AFT for many years has supported quality state assessments that are fair and timely and that help to guide and support instruction. Used appropriately, assessments are a valuable tool in improving education for all children, providing useful information about student learning. When aligned with strong standards and curriculum, these tests can help diagnose student strengths and weaknesses and can identify gaps in the curriculum and standards. Assessment data can trigger important interventions such as extra help for struggling students or professional development for teachers.

### **Some Basic Principles**

–Appropriate, high-quality student testing must support and enhance teaching and learning and must be linked to instruction, which means that teachers should be involved in all stages of the test development process.

–Testing is an integral part, but only one part, of a standards-based educational system.

–Testing practices should be monitored to eliminate overtesting; to check that standards are driving what is tested, not the reverse; and to ensure alignment among assessments and other key aspects of a standards-based educational system (such as standards, curricula, professional development).

–Tests should not be used to determine “winners” and “losers.” They should show where more work is needed. Tests are misused when they are the singular determinant of student promotion, they are misleading if passing scores are arbitrarily set, and they are unfair if not tied closely to curricula. No child’s future should depend on a single test. Other evidence must be included in such decisions.

## **The Need for Reform of our Current Test-Based Accountability System**

Unfortunately, our current test-based accountability system, notwithstanding good intentions, has evolved into exactly the sort of punitive, counterproductive model we should have avoided. Consequently, a grass-roots public revolt has brewed up in reaction to the ill effects of test-driven school accountability. You saw that revolt come to a head last session in a House floor vote for the outright repeal of the current system.

The eventual result was the creation last session of the interim Joint Select Committee on Public School Accountability to draw necessary lessons and rethink current policy. That committee identified many repairs needed in the current, test-obsessed accountability system. In its December 2008 report, the Select Committee listed many defects in the testing status quo, including:

- overemphasizes minimal performance on one test
- students face excessive pressure to pass tests
- disregards students performing above the minimum
- district/campus can fail due to performance of one student on one test in one year
- fails to recognize/reward growth
- narrows scope of curriculum and instruction
- focuses on minimum passing standard
- tests fail to diagnose students on the higher and lower end of academic achievement
- lacks long-term goals linked to state workforce needs
- reports do not provide easily understandable information for parents, educators, or the public
- poor alignment with NCLB requirements.

Now it is time to act on these insights. Texas AFT members believe that to put testing back in its proper place and build a new accountability system we need to:

- replace superficial, fill-in-the-bubble, snapshot tests with multiple assessment tools that gauge student growth and measure a broader, deeper range of knowledge and skills
- offer multiple, rigorous pathways to graduation, including career and technology paths, in place of one-size-fits-all high school curriculum
- repeal the 2006 laws that force arbitrary school shutdowns and arbitrary reassignment of educators and students based on TAKS tests
- provide supportive interventions and resources for struggling schools
- stop inappropriate testing of students with disabilities and English Language Learners
- restore teacher authority over classroom instructional time
- make accountability a two-way street, holding policy-makers accountable for providing the resources needed to educate all our students to a high standard.

### **How Does SB 3 As Introduced Measure Up?**

First of all, Texas AFT sees at least three significant moves in the right direction embodied in SB 3 as introduced. We welcome the increased emphasis on student growth as a gauge of

performance for both students and schools. We also believe you are headed in the right direction on the question of standards for promotion in elementary and middle school, recognizing, as Mr. Kellner put it at one Select Committee hearing, that “one high-stakes test is not as good as the teacher’s judgment,” based on all the evidence available about student performance. And we agree that it is high time to focus intently on preparing our students for post-secondary success in college or in the workforce.

However, a lot of work remains to be done before SB 3 can serve as the template for the thorough overhaul of test-driven accountability. Here are key problem areas we have identified:

- SB 3 does not alter the punitive sanctions triggered by test scores that drive the excessive emphasis on testing at the expense of real learning and instruction. Nor does HB 3 ensure that struggling schools receive supportive interventions.
- SB 3 does not limit the impact of over-testing by restoring authority over the use of classroom time to the classroom teacher regarding practice testing and other test-preparation activities.
- SB 3 assumes that we have firmly established the validity of proposed growth measures, vertical scaling of tests, and the projections of student progress toward post-secondary readiness. In fact, these elements of the proposed accountability system are experimental.
- SB 3, while it rightly relies on multiple measures, including teachers’ qualitative judgment, to the decision on promotion in elementary and middle school, does not apply that model of qualitative, professional judgment to the issue of high-school graduation.
- SB 3 also ignores the need for qualitative as well as quantitative evaluation of school performance for accountability purposes, and it still leaves districts and campuses vulnerable to a rating of “low-performing” based on just one of dozens of indicators of student performance.
- SB 3 does not move the system toward the use of more sophisticated tests that measure critical thinking and problem-solving skills.
- SB 3 does not provide relief from the inappropriate testing of English Language Learners or students with disabilities.
- SB 3 does not provide transition relief for students who, while the new system is under development, will remain stuck for years to come with the current high-school exit-level exam.
- SB 3 does not include an evaluation component. Independent, expert evaluation of the new accountability construct needs to be built into the legislation. We all can recall the high hopes we had for the current version of our test-based accountability system, at each stage of its evolution into a model we now agree has gone profoundly awry over the past 15 years. This time around we should show some due humility about our ability to get this difficult work done right—hence the need for rigorous, independent evaluation.

We offer these observations in a constructive spirit. As SB 3 undergoes revision, we stand ready to supplement this testimony with specific suggestions for amendments to the bill that would build on its strengths and correct its weaknesses. The touchstone for Texas AFT will continue to be the one articulated by AFT President Randi Weingarten: “What we need is accountability that is meant to fix schools, not to fix blame.”