

Senate Committee on Education

March 17, 2009, E1.028

Senate Bill 3

Testimony of Sarah Winkler, Alief ISD

Chairman Shapiro, members of the committee, my name is Sarah Winkler and I serve as President of the Alief ISD Board of Trustees and President-Elect of the Texas Association of School Boards Board of Directors. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today on behalf of both organizations on Senate Bill 3 (SB 3).

We appreciate the Select Committee's efforts to revamp our current accountability system, which has become complicated, punitive, and unfair.

- SB 3 makes some important improvements. In particular, the flexibility provided for high school course selection is very welcome. Under the current system, many students cannot take 4 years of fine arts, sports, or CTE courses and still graduate on the Recommended High School Program. The number of electives allowed under this proposal should alleviate this problem while still requiring course rigor.
- SB 3 also clarifies how state expectations for postsecondary readiness will be measured.

My testimony also addresses four issues -- student advancement, accreditation and interventions, financial information and graduation plans. TASB is submitting written testimony on these and other points as well.

Student Advancement

- The first issue I would like to address is student advancement. First, we appreciate being able to use multiple factors to determine student promotion. However, we have concerns about convening Grade Placement Committees (GPCs) for students in any grade who fail to pass TAKS. GPCs for all unsuccessful students will be costly since considerable staff time and effort will be required to implement this change. This requirement essentially makes every grade-level test a high stakes test, but retests are only allowed in grades 3, 5, and 8. Any student can have a bad day or not feel well and fail to pass the test. Their promotion would then rest with a GPC.
- If retests are given in grades 3, 5, and 8 we would prefer that students have three (rather than two) opportunities to take the test. Struggling students attend summer school before the 3rd test administration and most are successful. Alternatively, do away with GPCs altogether, test once, and

allow classroom teachers to determine the appropriate placement.

- The 10:1 instruction requirement for those who fail a TAKS test will be very costly for school districts. We do use small group instruction in my district, especially in pull-out groups during the regular school year. But the student/teacher ratio is not always this low, especially in summer school. In other words, we mix instructional delivery methods and related student activities using groups of different sizes.

Accreditation and Sanctions:

- Including NCES dropout rates and completion rates along with NCLB graduation rates may be confusing since each will yield a different number. We had hoped that one set of definitions and calculations would serve as the indicator for school completion.
- Additionally, districts that have implemented an optional flexible school day or other programs to recover dropouts or non-completers are not rewarded for our efforts unless the students are recovered by the end of September.

Completion rates should be adjusted once a student graduates even if he or she re-enrolls later in the school year or completes graduation requirements without re-enrolling.

- The sanctions in the bill have not changed from current law. Districts do not receive additional help before sanctions are imposed or investigations begin.
- Section 39.052 (e) states that a district's accreditation status can be affected by the performance of one campus that is below standard. This jeopardizes the future plans of many high-performing students when all are labeled with the lowest common denominator.
- The threat of reconstitution makes it very difficult to attract experienced teachers to low-performing schools. We believe the legislation gives the commissioner insufficient discretion in implementing the closure sanction.

Financial information:

- Districts are required to project revenues and expenditures not only for the current year, but for the following 5 years. Our business officials will have great difficulty accurately projecting more than 2 or 3 years out. We normally can only be assured of the state funding we will receive for the biennium, since changes are usually made each Session. We now have the additional uncertainty due to TRE requirements. There is no guarantee that our public will approve needed tax increases. Districts do estimate

revenue and expenditures for future years, but the data is speculative. If you believe that it is important to make the five-year projections, the calculations can be completed, but we urge you not to direct the Texas Education Agency to follow up with districts based on projections in years 4 and 5 because these projections are highly speculative.

Graduation Plans

- Changing the names of the three graduation plans may cause unnecessary confusion for parents and students. Is it really necessary to change the names of the diplomas since the number of credits required for each remains constant? The public wants a more understandable, less complicated system. Keeping the current terminology would be helpful.
- Regarding the use of the phrase “standard graduation plan.” The term “standard” implies that this plan is the usual or default program when it is not. Further, students cannot attend many 4 year universities directly out of high school if they graduate on this program of study; therefore, it seems misleading to call it the “standard” program. I would recommend that you maintain the word “minimum” instead of standard.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on this important topic. Alief ISD and the Texas Association of School Boards stand ready to assist you as you work to perfect this legislation.