

Written Remarks Submitted to the
State of Texas, Select Committee on Public School Accountability

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Public schools in Texas have made a lot of progress over the last fifteen years. Hispanic students in Texas out-perform Hispanic students from every other state in 8th grade mathematics as measured by the national assessment, and Texas' African American students also are near the top compared to other states in 8th grade math. Performance in other grades and subjects is not quite as distinguished, but Texas has made solid gains in the last five and ten years, especially in raising the achievement of low-performing students.

These improvements were made possible through significant efforts of policymakers, business leaders, and most importantly, front-line educators. All along the way, the adoption, acceptance, and refinement of accountability has been an important part of the success. The challenge for Texas is to build on this success given the new challenges confronting all of us. The goal in creating more nuanced accountability determinations ought to be to create a system where there is, in fact, more accountability.

Some potentially good ideas are being proposed regarding accountability for group performance, and these ideas deserve serious consideration. Before I comment on the proposal for proportionality, I want to articulate two broad principles that I hope the Committee will consider:

One is that the devil really is in the details when it comes to school accountability. Right now, there is a perception that accountability catches too many schools. This results in a lack of consensus on whether every school identified under the accountability system really needs to change, which undermines the resolve to aggressively implement school improvements and interventions. Addressing criticisms of the current system might help this, but there is a very fine line between more sophisticated accountability on the one hand and diluting accountability on the other, so the details matter very much.

The second point is that the whole system exists for students. The reason to change accountability should not be to create systems that are more fair to schools, but systems that are more fair to students. It may be that more nuanced determinations can create more buy-in for real change, but the ultimate mission of this work should be to create the schools and systems our young people need and deserve, not create a new set of measures that make people feel better about the status quo.

Proportional Accountability for Groups

One of the great contributions of Texas accountability policy has been the focus on historically under-educated groups. Partly as a result of this innovation, these students are being taught to higher standards than ever before. Black and Hispanic students in Texas have made great strides in the last decade and a half when compared to their achievement in the past and compared to national peers, and accountability focused specifically on their success has undoubtedly helped. Still, some have criticized the current system for not allowing a school to be recognized for performance any higher than its lowest performing group of students.

Proportionality as I understand it to be proposed may not be a bad compromise. My understanding is that group performance would continue to count but would result in a kind of GPA for each academic quality indicator. The performance of each significant subgroup would be evaluated for either absolute levels or gains over time, and each group's performance would count toward the percentage of targets made by the school. This would not place the same priority on equal outcomes as the current system, but it would maintain a focus on equity and would continue to send the message that all groups are full partners in a school's success.

One concern with the proportionality proposal is that groups could be allowed to languish at very low levels of performance for a long time without the need for the school to respond. There may be a need to have some measure of formal accountability for schools that are not extremely low performing overall, for instance. There also are other ways you could envision structuring the accountability determinations to aim for higher growth from low-performing groups. Again, the devil is in the details, but the proportionality proposals have some appeal in concept.

The best reason to consider proportionality in my opinion is as part of a broader set of improvements to the system of standards and accountability. New accountability metrics should only be considered if they are accompanied by more help and support for struggling schools – and more certain consequences for schools that still do not meet goals for several years running. The lack of capacity and resources focused on turning around low-performing schools is a serious problem, and one for which the state is responsible. The best way to confront criticism that accountability is too punitive is to create systems where schools actually get access to expertise and material resources that can help them improve teaching and learning. I encourage this Committee to draw on lessons learned in business and organizational change research to map out an updated state role in this area.

If the Committee does go down the path of considering proportional accountability, I encourage you also to think about how to blend this system with the Adequate Yearly Progress requirements of Title I in the federal law. Texas may want to propose changes to the federal law – I think that everyone does – but pitting state and federal accountability against one another will undermine public confidence in both systems. Many states have found ways to mesh state and federal accountability systems in ways that complement one another. For example, Ohio has its own grading

system, but schools cannot receive an A or a B under Ohio's rules unless the school also has made AYP.

The truth is that other states' systems often put less emphasis on the success of low-income students and students of color. Texas' record of prioritizing equity puts you in a unique position to propose a new way forward. But the signals you send and the transition rules you propose will be critical to public understanding and acceptance. In particular, national civil rights groups have come to appreciate standards and accountability as important promises to their communities and their participation should be included in these deliberations.

Texas Standards Should Be Aligned to Real-World Expectations

We cannot look at equity only by measuring whether all groups of students have made it over a low bar; we have to be asking whether students who are proficient are in fact prepared to pursue their aspirations and fulfill their responsibilities in a strong democracy and a competitive economy.

While there is a lot of work going on in Texas to align high school assessments with the courses students take and the standards they will be expected to meet after high school, the work cannot stop there. Texas needs to extend this alignment work to lower grades. The point of standards and tests in elementary and middle school should be to gauge whether students are progressing in a way that sets them up for success in later grades.

Right now, however, the standards in lower grades are not pegged at this readiness level. Texas has set a high bar for schools in making sure all groups count, but a low bar for the actual learning expectations at the core of the system. This means that schools can meet all of their goals, even though the students remain woefully unprepared for the demands of the real world. Texas is among the leading states in setting up a system to inform individual students of their performance against college- and career-ready standards and is planning to hold individual students accountable for performance against these standards. I would submit that systems and adults should be subject to as much or more accountability as we impose on students.

As Texas develops end-of-course exams tied to career- and college-ready standards, it should map these standards back through elementary and middle school. This will allow the system to understand whether students are on-track to complete high school and take advantage of a broad range of opportunities. Raising these standards will mean that fewer schools will meet goals under the current system, which may be another reason to re-think the metrics.

Schools Need More Help to Meet the Goals

Providing more clarity and support around standards *before* schools struggle should be another important priority for the state. There should be a complete set of sample units, lessons plans, student assignments and examples of student work that

meets standards, doesn't meet, and exceeds standards so that teachers have concrete images of what the state expects.

These materials should be on-line and accessible to every teacher at every grade level; indeed, there isn't any reason these resources should not be available to parents and students so they can understand how they're work stacks up against the state's expectations. The state also should ensure that every district and school has access to a high-quality set of interim or benchmark assessments; we do not know of a good high-poverty school that is not making good use of these resources.

This is NOT a recommendation to mandate or require the use of the same teaching materials or diagnostic tests in every classroom or school. But it is important for Texas to acknowledge that not every one of the 1,500 school districts in Texas can be expected to align curriculum and grading scales to the state's standards, especially given the constant change in personnel and the thousands of new teachers in front of classrooms every year.

Many exemplary schools and districts, as well as other groups like Teach for America and KIPP, already are laying the foundation for this work at a smaller scale. Part of a strong system of accountability ought to involve the state being accountable for materials and support.

Conclusion

I want to close where I began – recognizing Texas' leadership and talking about the new challenges we all are facing.

Texas' great contribution was to recognize that schools cannot be considered successful while many of its students are not. This meant getting away from averages and looking at the performance of groups.

The greatest challenge now is to recognize that the demands on young people, and therefore the demands on schools, are greater than in the past. This means that we need higher standards not just for students but for schools, too. And it means the state must step-up with more curriculum and instructional support materials, and more technical assistance, resources, and leadership when schools don't meet their goals.

If you choose to move in the direction of accountability that is less punitive, as some propose, I hope you combine this with a greater commitment to change conditions in schools that still do not meet goals. It's worth remembering that accountability systems in and of themselves do not do anything to improve schools or raise student achievement.

It would truly be punitive to think of new ways for schools to meet their goals while students still are not meeting theirs.