



Texas Institute for Education Reform

"Every child a high school graduate ready for college, the workplace and citizenship."

May 5, 2009

Members of the Senate Education Committee
Texas Senate
P.O. Box 12068 – Capitol Station
Austin, Texas 78711

Dear Madam Chair and Members,

On Thursday, May 7, the Senate Education Committee is scheduled to hear HB 3 by Rep. Eissler. HB 3 and its companion, SB 3 by Sen. Shapiro, both include some excellent provisions that would improve the public education system. However, our Coalition feels that SB 3 is superior in that it requires students to demonstrate mastery of all core subjects—not just Algebra II and English III, holds schools accountable for social promotion, ties school and district distinctions to college and career readiness, and promotes a relevant and rigorous career and technology education program.

Because HB 3 is not as strong in these areas, our Coalition cannot support the bill in its present form. We do support SB 3 and ask that the committee substitute the language from the engrossed version of SB 3 for HB 3.

In addition to the differences noted above, the House added several floor amendments to HB 3. While some of them improved the bill, the following amendments detract from the accountability system and the goal of college and career readiness.

Floor Amendment #16 (Hochberg)

This amendment clarifies the transition between the current accountability system and the new system. During the transition period, the amendment appears to give districts and schools a one-year “holiday” from accountability. During this year, the TEA will still collect data, but the Commissioner is not required to assign accreditation or performance ratings. In addition, schools in the intervention or sanction phase are held in limbo for that year. While we do agree that a transition period is necessary, we suggest that schools be held accountable under the existing system until the new system takes effect—including the continuation of ongoing interventions and sanctions.

Floor Amendment #36 (Dutton)

This amendment appears to remove students who drop out after their 18th birthday from the state’s dropout calculations. As many in the junior and senior class turn 18 years of age prior to graduation, we feel this amendment removes the incentive for schools to encourage juniors and seniors to complete their studies and graduate.

Floor Amendment #37 (Patrick)

This amendment appears to delay the use of the new student achievement indicators by an additional two years. While we support a transition period, we do not support delays in adopting the new indicators and the new accountability system.

Floor Amendment #51 (Coleman)

This amendment prohibits the Commissioner from allowing a for-profit organization from taking over a failing school. Regardless of whether an organization is non-profit or for-profit, the Commissioner needs the freedom to select the best possible organization to improve failing schools. We oppose placing unnecessary limits on the Commissioner in this regard.

Floor Amendment #80 (Olivo)

This amendment gives the Commissioner discretion in evaluating campuses that fail to meet 85% of the minimum performance indicators. HB 3 already allows campuses to fail on 15% of the indicators. This removes the “tripwires” about which schools complained. Granting additional exceptions is unnecessary, is excessive, and greatly reduces accountability.

Floor Amendment #84 (Dukes)

This amendment removes the requirement that 75% of teachers at a failing campus be reassigned. It also gives the principal—not the Commissioner—the authority to make teacher retention decisions. Finally, it requires the principal to give priority to teachers certified in the subjects they teach when making retention decisions. There are several problems with this amendment. First, schools must fail for 5 consecutive years to reach this point. Significant staff turnover is necessary to ensure that students get the instruction they need to succeed. Second, the principals may not be as objective as the Commissioner in retention decisions. Finally, basing retention decisions on certification ignores the most important element in student success—the effectiveness of the teacher.

In closing, the engrossed version of SB 3 contains an amendment by Sen. West (Floor Amendment #9) that appears to delay the implementation of the bill by one year. While we understand the need for a smooth transition, we respectfully request that the committee reevaluate the need for this delay. The sooner we adopt college-ready standards and the corresponding accountability, the more students we will prepare for success after high school.

Thank you for your consideration, and we urge you to support the provisions in Senate Bill 3.

Sincerely,



Andrew Erben
President



TEXAS COALITION FOR A COMPETITIVE WORKFORCE

Senate Bill 3 Puts Student Achievement First

Much of the commentary about Senate Bill 3, by Sen. Florence Shapiro, and House Bill 3, by Rep. Rob Eissler, has focused on the sanctions for failing schools. While no one wants a school to fail, concentrating on the fate of a few schools takes our attention away from where it needs to be—on preparing every student for college or a good job. Every child that drops out or graduates unprepared for success represents a failure of the system. If we put students first, we will not have to worry as much about closing schools.

SB 3 and HB 3 both contain excellent provisions to address this issue. They recognize college and career readiness as the goal of our education system and attempt to align the curriculum and assessments with this goal. They also enhance financial accountability which should result in a much more efficient and effective school system.

However, SB 3 does more to ensure student success. It sets expectations at a meaningful level—proven readiness for college and the high-performance workplace. Students must master courses through English III and Algebra II—*at a college-ready level*. Unlike HB 3, where a student can fail 10 of the 12 required end-of-course exams and still graduate under the recommended high school plan, SB 3 provides students with a solid background in math, science, social studies, and English and requires them to demonstrate proficiency in each subject by passing at least 8 of the 12 end-of-course exams.

Next, the bills address social promotion. While both require students who fail an assessment to receive accelerated instruction in order to move to the next grade, SB 3 holds schools accountable for promotion decisions. If a school repeatedly promotes failing students—and those students continue to fail in later grades—SB 3 allows the school's rating to be lowered. When educators promote a failing student, they are asserting that the student is ready for more advanced work. SB 3 will cause educators to consider this decision more carefully, shine a light on schools that socially-promote unprepared students, and prevent schools from becoming “dropout factories”.

Third, while both bills allow schools to receive distinctions for program excellence, SB 3 reestablishes the “recognized” and “exemplary” distinctions. It promotes student achievement by tying these coveted distinctions to meeting career and college-readiness goals and excellence in teaching the core subjects.

Finally, SB 3 provides the flexibility needed for students who wish to pursue coherent sequences of career and technology education courses. Even with its strong core curriculum, the bill allows students to take up to 8 elective courses while ensuring that these courses will be relevant and rigorous. Students may even substitute advanced applied courses for fourth-year math and

science courses. Such courses may provide students with college credit or help them earn an industry certificate or a state license in a high-paying, high-demand career field.

Sen. Shapiro, Rep. Eissler, and the rest of the legislature deserve our thanks for recognizing the importance of preparing our high school students for college and the workplace. While HB 3 made some notable improvements, it is vital that the final version include SB 3's provisions that require students to master core subjects, hold schools accountable for social promotion, tie school and district distinctions to college and career readiness, and promote a relevant and rigorous career and technology education program. These measures are necessary to ensure that every child—regardless of his or her background—will be prepared for academic and career success.

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