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Testimony on HB 3
Regarding Student Testing, Promotion, Graduation Standards, and School Accountability
Submitted by Eric Hartman, Texas AFT Director of Government Relations
Before the Senate Committee on Education
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As you continue your work in progress on the overhaul of the school accountability system, Texas AFT urges you to address several issues of concern to our members. The way you handle these issues will largely determine the success of this legislation at the practical level of classroom teaching and learning.

Over-testing: Time for real learning and instruction in the classroom has been crowded out by day after day of practice testing, benchmark testing, and test-taking drill. The needed corrective is a firm cap on the number of days that can be swallowed up by such locally mandated testing in preparation for state exams. An amendment added to HB 3 on the House floor is a good start toward addressing this concern. It sets a limit of eight instructional days per school year on such locally mandated testing in preparation for state exams.

Supportive interventions, not punitive sanctions: Both the House and Senate versions of this accountability overhaul would provide more time for reconstituted schools to turn around a pattern of low scores on state tests. The House also via floor amendment would do away with the arbitrary removal of the principal and of a fixed percentage of faculty when a campus is repurposed. These are changes for the better. Right now the looming prospect of a school reconstitution, shutdown, or repurposing has the perverse effect of driving away the very educators who are needed to turn around low-rated schools.

But more action is needed to replace the current over-emphasis on punitive sanctions with an emphasis on appropriate, supportive interventions. We urge you to amend the current law on intervention and improvement of low-rated schools by adding a simple requirement. That requirement would say: The resources identified as necessary by the commissioner's intervention team must be provided, along with sufficient time to put them to use, before the commissioner can order the campus to be reconstituted, closed, or repurposed.

Validation of new methodologies: The whole edifice of testing standards based on "college readiness" under HB 3 depends on new methodologies for defining that exit-level requirement and then calibrating a required trajectory of academic growth toward that goal at each grade level and in each subject tested from grade school through high school.

Implementation of this new system should be tied to impartial, independent corroboration of the validity of the methodologies to be developed by the commissioner of education correlating

student performance on assessment instruments with college readiness. Provisions added to HB 3 on the House floor moved in this direction but still fall short of requiring the scientific peer review that any new high-stakes testing system should undergo.

In this regard, our unhappy experience with the current TAKS-based accountability system should have taught us all a lesson. Ten years ago new accountability measures were adopted by this legislature, and supported by Texas AFT, with high expectations. At that time, we were sold on the idea that scores on standardized state tests should be the default criterion for promotion in elementary and middle school. We also embraced the idea that composite high-school exit-level exams covering the subject matter of multiple courses should take the place of end-of-course exams. Since then we have come to see the resulting accountability system as severely flawed, forcing an excessive focus on the state tests to the detriment of real teaching and learning. A system intended to drive improvement has had unintended consequences.

Now again, as ten years ago, there are high hopes for a new accountability system. The new system will reverse the policy choices made ten years ago that based promotion primarily on state test scores and did away with end-of-course exams as an accountability tool. The new system apparently will be the first in the nation that would build a requirement of “college readiness” into our exit-level expectations for students and accountability ratings for schools. Nobody can quarrel with that goal. But now as then we cannot foresee all the possible ways our good intentions can go awry.

You therefore have made the right decision in the Senate by adding an extra year to the timeline for implementing this appealing but untried standard of “college readiness” as a basis for school accountability ratings. Professor Daniel Koretz has put the matter well: “We should admit that our ideas for a better educational accountability system, however thoughtful, are partly unproven, need evaluation, and may require midcourse corrections.” That’s why we ask you now to take the further step of requiring independent peer review to establish the scientific validity, based on empirical evidence, of the methodologies adopted to gauge college readiness.

We hope and believe that this critical evaluation of the new accountability methodologies will lead us eventually to a “next generation” of testing and school accountability, providing a more multi-dimensional assessment of student achievement than we contemplate now. Your Senate-proposed changes in the standard for promotion in elementary and middle school already reflect this cutting-edge trend toward a broader view of assessment. We also are encouraged by a House floor amendment to HB 3 establishing a pilot program that would move away from fill-in-the-bubble, multiple-choice testing toward more open-ended assessments that test higher-order thinking. You will strike a responsive chord with educators, parents, and the public at large if you seize every opportunity to continue this trend toward a broader vision of accountability and assessment.