

Testimony for the Senate Education Committee

March 20, 2007

Senate Bill 1031: COLLEGE PREPARATION ASSESSMENTS

Section 39.0261 (a) (2)

Madam Chair and committee members, thank you for the opportunity to testify on Senate Bill 1031. I am Karen Pennell, Assistant Vice President and Regional Manager, ACT, Inc., Southwest Region. ACT, Inc. is a national independent, non profit educational organization and leader in college readiness issues, research, and assessment.

I would like to address the College Preparation Assessment section of Senate Bill 1031, specifically Section 39.0261 (a) (2) that presently lists PSAT as the only option for the 10th grade. For the past two regular legislative sessions as well as through several special sessions and interim committee work, ACT came forward and continuously provided research, testimony, and support for all Texas college readiness initiatives. As the college preparation assessment discussion has evolved over the last four years, the decision to use vendor-neutral language was reached and was found to be of the greatest benefit to all Texas school districts and students.

Approximately 600 Texas high schools use the Preliminary ACT, known as PLAN[®], for their students to improve college readiness. Over 50,000 10th grade Texas students take PLAN each year and PLAN is taken by over 1.0 million students nationally. As a result of HB 1's vendor-neutral language, many Texas school districts elected to use the Pre-ACT 8th grade diagnostic college preparation assessment, EXPLORE[®], for their 8th grade students and the Pre-ACT, PLAN, for their 10th grade students.

Because EXPLORE and PLAN are both on the same score scale as the ACT[®] college admissions test, students, parents, teachers and counselors can determine longitudinally if students are on target to be college-ready in four subject areas – English, Math, Social Studies, and Science as early as the 8th grade and what interventions are necessary to achieve college readiness. The Pre-ACT, PLAN, has many proven benefits in helping students academically prepare for college.

Senate Bill 1031, College Preparation Assessment Section 39.0261 contains vendor-neutral language for the 8th grade assessment as well as the 11th/12th grade assessment that allows each school district for their 8th graders and each student in the 11th/12th grade to have the choice of what assessment instrument will work best for them. However, in the 10th grade, the present language is not vendor-neutral but names a specific assessment – the PSAT.

The present language will, in fact, penalize those 600 Texas high schools that already have a college preparation program in place using the Pre-ACT, PLAN, that serves their students' academic and college preparation needs. Over 127,000 Texas students take the ACT each year and over 2.0 million students nationally take the ACT.

We have heard the rationale for not being vendor neutral and using only PSAT at the 10th grade is to increase the number of National Merit Scholarships awarded in Texas which would be an admirable goal. However, funding the PSAT only is not a scenario that allows school districts and students the greatest options for preparing the most students for college. Less than 1% of all students nationwide and less than 1% of all Texas students qualify as National Merit Scholarship winners. And, in this case, less would not be more if more Texas students took the PSAT because an allocation of Semifinalists is made for each state, based on the state's percentage of the national total of high school graduating seniors. In other words, the number of Texas National Merit Semifinalists, Finalists, and

Winners will remain about the same each year unless the number of graduating Texas seniors goes significantly up or down. This information is published in the Official Guide to the PSAT/NMSQT every year.

The remaining 99% of Texas students and districts deserve the option of selecting which nationally-normed early college readiness assessment program best fits their needs. To achieve the mandated goal of *Closing the Gaps*, Texas college readiness programs must provide all Texas students at various academic achievement levels with the opportunity to succeed in reaching college readiness through a proven academic college readiness preparation program. The Pre ACT, PLAN, meets that definition and should be an option for Texas students. South Carolina and Florida have chosen to be vendor neutral and allow for a choice of assessments by funding both ACT's PLAN and PSAT.

I respectfully request on behalf of all of our 600 Texas PLAN high schools that Senate Bill 1031, College Preparation Assessments, Section 39.0261 (a) (2) be amended to include the language "or the Preliminary ACT, known as PLAN sponsored by ACT, Inc."

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