

Policy Perspective

Texas School Accountability Standards 101

by Brooke Dollens Terry
Education Policy Analyst

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Increase number of students tested on the TAKS or alternative statewide test.
- Decrease number of indicators tracked and reported.
- Include a growth measurement to track improvement at school and district level.
- Raise the rigor by:
 - increasing the minimum acceptable performance level to 70 percent of students passing in each core subject area, and
 - holding schools accountable for the number of students they graduate that require remedial education in college.
- Increase alignment between the federal and state accountability systems.
- Increase transparency so that the system is understandable and useful to parents and the community.

TEXAS ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

Texas uses a complex public school accountability system to rank school districts and schools annually. Created by the Texas Legislature in 1993, the state accountability system has grown to 36 academic measures.¹ Basically, the state accountability system evaluates:

- student performance in reading/language arts, writing, social studies, mathematics, and science;
- graduation rate;* and
- dropout rate for grades 7 and 8.

FEDERAL ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

Individual schools, school districts, and Texas schools as a whole are also evaluated by a federal accountability system under the *No Child Left Behind Act*. The federal system, in place since 2003, uses up to 29 indicators to determine if schools, school districts, and the state are making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).² Basically, the federal accountability system evaluates:

- student performance in reading/language arts and mathematics;
- graduation rate for high schools; and
- attendance rate for elementary and middle schools.

LACK OF ALIGNMENT

While both systems track certain inputs and outputs to measure a school's success, differing definitions for many of the measures make the system complex. For example, in the 2006-2007 school year, 26 schools did not meet federal Adequate Yearly Progress but were rated either *Exemplary* or *Recognized* by Texas' accountability system. This lack of alignment is confusing

to parents and makes it difficult for them to determine the quality of their child's school. The complexity of two systems each with their own set of measures and definitions can be frustrating and time-consuming for schools officials as they try to set goals, track, and report data for over 50 indicators.

Both the state and federal accountability systems aim to provide transparency to the public by requiring performance data be reported separately for various student groups including: white, Hispanic, and African American students; special education students; low-income students; and students who do not speak English. Although it is commendable to track performance by each subgroup of students, it can be punitive when a school or school district that is showing true improvement in many areas misses the entire benchmark standard due to one subgroup of students.

LACK OF RIGOR

The accountability system lacks rigor. Too many students are exempt from taking the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) or equivalent statewide test. In 2006, 88,226 students were not tested including 9.5 percent of special education students and 12.8 percent of students who do not speak English well (Limited English Proficient). In 2007, 68,445 students were not tested including 5.2 percent of special education students and 11.3 percent of Limited English Proficient students.⁴ A district or campus can be ranked *Academically Acceptable* in 2007 with only 40 percent of students passing science and 45 percent of students passing math, as determined by scores on the 2007 TAKS test.⁵

900 Congress Avenue
Suite 400
Austin, TX 78701
(512) 472-2700 Phone
(512) 472-2728 Fax
www.TexasPolicy.com

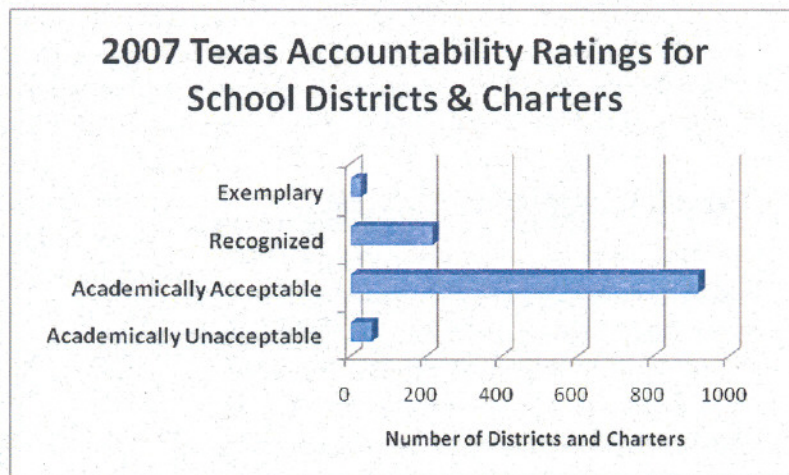
* Graduation rate or completion rate includes students who graduated with their class (or earlier) and students who re-enrolled the following fall.

2007 TAKS Indicator (Percentage of Students Passing the TAKS by Subject Area)

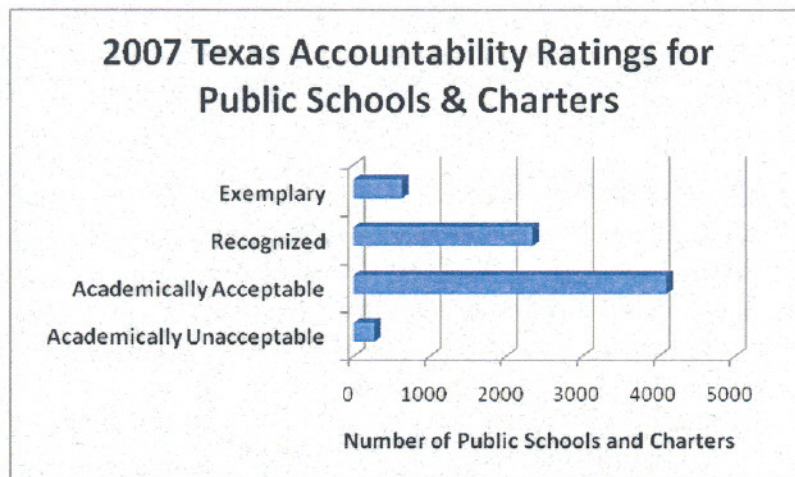
Subject Area	Academically Acceptable	Recognized	Exemplary
Reading/ ELA	65%	75%	90%
Writing	65%	75%	90%
Social Studies	65%	75%	90%
Mathematics	45%	75%	90%
Science	40%	75%	90%

Source: Texas Education Agency 2007 Accountability Manual.

Far too many districts and schools are rated *Academically Acceptable*. According to the Texas Education Agency, 75.3 percent of the 1,222 districts and charters, and 51 percent of the 4,108 campuses were rated *Academically Acceptable* in 2007.⁶



Source: Texas Education Agency 2007 Accountability Manual. Two charters were not rated in 2007.



Source: Texas Education Agency 2007 Accountability Manual. 680 schools and charters were not rated in 2007.

CONSEQUENCES FOR FAILING SCHOOLS

State

Schools that are rated *Academically Unacceptable* for one year may prepare improvement plans, hold a public hearing, or receive a campus intervention team. Schools rated *Academically Unacceptable* for two consecutive years shall be reconstituted and may include the removal of the principal and certain teachers. School districts that are rated *Academically Unacceptable* for two consecutive years are subject to closure, district restructuring, or requirements for lower student-to-counselor ratios, mentoring programs and flexible class scheduling.⁷

Federal

Low-income schools receiving federal Title I funds that fail to meet AYP for two consecutive years will receive technical assistance and must allow students to transfer to another public or charter school within the district. This is called public school choice. If a low-income school does not meet AYP for three consecutive years, students must be allowed to transfer to another public or charter school and low-income students must be provided free tutoring before or after school. After more than three consecutive years of not meeting AYP, a school can be reorganized.⁸

HOW TO IMPROVE ACCOUNTABILITY

In short, the current state accountability system is too complex, lacks rigor, and does not align with the federal accountability system. As policymakers contemplate changes to the state accountability system, they should consider simplifying the system by decreasing the number of inputs (indicators),

giving schools and districts credit for improvement with growth measures, raising the rigor of minimum academic performance to at least 70 percent in all core subjects, and increasing alignment between the federal and state systems by using common definitions and having federal and state campus intervention teams work together and share information. Ultimately, the accountability system should not be focused on inputs. Accountability is about outputs and results. Are students learning and are they adequately prepared for college or the workplace? A well-designed accountability system will provide parents the answer.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

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ENDNOTES

¹ Texas Education Agency, "2007 Accountability Manual" (May 2007) <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/account/2007/manual/index.html>.

² Texas Education Agency, Division of Performance Reporting, Department of Assessment, Accountability, and Data Quality, "2007 Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) Guide for Texas school districts and campuses" (June 2007) <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/ayp/2007/guide.pdf>.

³ Texas School Alliance, "Confronting the Complexities of School Accountability," Research Brief prepared by Moak, Casey and Associates (Oct. 2007) 4, <http://www.moakcasey.com/index.cfm?sector=news&page=read&newsid=332>.

⁴ Texas Education Agency, data on actual number of students not tested in 2006 and 2007, obtained from Division of Performance Reporting by author on 16 Jan. 2008; Texas Education Agency, Division of Performance Reporting, Academic Excellence Indicator System, "2006-2007 State Performance Report," <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/2007/state.html>.

⁵ Texas Education Agency, "2007 Accountability Manual" (May 2007) <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/account/2007/manual/index.html>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Texas Education Code, Chapter 39: 39.131 and 39.1324.

⁸ U.S. Department of Education, No Child Left Behind Q&A, http://answers.ed.gov/cgi-bin/education.cfg/php/enduser/std_alp.php.

About the Author

Brooke Dollens Terry is an education policy analyst within the Texas Public Policy Foundation's Center for Education Policy. Before joining the Foundation, she worked at the Texas Workforce Commission in government relations and as a policy analyst for Commissioner Diane Rath. At the Workforce Commission, Brooke researched and analyzed child care, welfare, foster care, food stamps and a host of other workforce policy issues.

Prior to working in state government, Brooke worked in Washington D.C. for U.S. Senator Phil Gramm for two and a half years analyzing federal legislation and policy in the areas of banking, housing, education, welfare, judiciary and social issues. Upon Senator Gramm's retirement, Brooke worked for U.S. Senators John Cornyn and Richard Lugar as a legislative assistant.

During college, Brooke interned in U.S. Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison's press office in Washington D.C., and in then-Governor George W. Bush's criminal justice division in Austin. Brooke graduated cum laude from Baylor University with a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science. During her time at Baylor University, Brooke was actively involved with Baylor Ambassadors, student government, and Pi Beta Phi.

A fifth generation Texan, Brooke grew up in Houston and now resides in Austin with her husband.

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