



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS®  
OF TEXAS

## TESTIMONY

**Texas Legislature Select Committee on Public School Accountability**

**University of North Texas Dallas Campus**

**June 16, 2008**

Senator Shapiro, Representative Eissler, and Committee Members:

The League of Women Voters of Texas appreciates this opportunity to provide input on the state's accountability system. The League also appreciates the work you are doing to evaluate the current Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) and, hopefully, to recommend changes to the Legislature that will create a more just system, free of punitive ratings and sanctions.

The time for change is now. The state recently closed two urban high schools, one in Austin and one in Houston. The decisions are made without recognition of notable academic gains that still fail to meet the established passing standards. Like so many other schools that are in academic trouble, the students are predominantly poor and nonwhite. English language learners often present an additional challenge. For these schools, the needed changes in the system are too late.

To ensure a healthy future for our public schools, the League of Women Voters supports a Texas accountability system that:

- diagnoses the strengths and weaknesses of schools and school districts by identifying academic achievement and gaps in performance among subgroups of students;
- does NOT establish school or school district ratings;
- does NOT sanction, reconstitute, or close schools;
- measures a school's growth in academic achievement from one year to the next, rather than as a single-year assessment; and
- directs resources to improve performance.

It is critical to take these steps, as more schools are accumulating Unacceptable ratings. The more stringent sanctions of SB 1, passed in the spring of 2006, are beginning to take a toll. When these sanctions are layered upon sanctions levied under the No Child Left Behind Act, the results can be devastating.

The low-performing labels stigmatize the schools, the districts, educators, and neighborhoods. Area real estate values fall. Public opinion of the schools or districts is shaped by the lowest performing group in the lowest subject area—perhaps because one or two students fell short in one of 36 indicators. The bad label sticks, even if a school climbs back to an Acceptable or better rating.

The League's recommendations to retool the accountability system represent the consensus of 25 member organizations from across the state. Their position followed a two-year study and report on testing and accountability in the public schools of Texas. That August 2007 report included an analysis of the demographics of academic ratings for districts and charters by the Texas Association of School Business Officials (TASBO), based on 2006 data from the Texas Education Agency.

The data revealed a bias in the accountability system. Small districts and charters were disproportionately represented in the highest Exemplary rating. Districts and charters that earned the highest two ratings, Exemplary and Recognized, had relatively low numbers of economically disadvantaged students and high numbers of white students. Districts and charters that were rated as Acceptable and Unacceptable had relatively high populations of economically disadvantaged students.

It is time to create a level playing field. It is time to change the focus of our accountability system from one that labels and punishes to one that diagnoses and strengthens.





# LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF TEXAS

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## Education Position on Testing and Accountability (2008)

*The League of Women Voters of Texas supports state-mandated **STANDARDIZED ACHIEVEMENT TESTS** that are used with a state-mandated curriculum as a method to measure individual mastery and proficiency in a subject, and as a diagnostic tool to measure student growth in progress from one year to the next. In addition, the League supports state mandated tests that are:*

- Developed and reviewed by a broad spectrum of Texas educators who are acknowledged experts in their fields.
- Written with sensitivity to the diversity of the state's population.
- NOT used as the sole determination for grade-level advancement or graduation from high school.
- Used to measure end-of-course proficiency for graduation from high school.
- Developed to measure higher-level thinking skills.
- Limited in frequency of test administration, which would also apply to benchmark tests, practice tests, and field tests.

*The League of Women Voters of Texas supports a state-mandated, **STANDARDIZED CURRICULUM** that is developed with broad input from Texas educators, the public, business groups, and elected and appointed officials. In addition, the League supports a state-mandated curriculum that:*

- Reflects the diversity of the state's population.
- Covers subjects that are included on the standardized tests, as well as those that are not included, to ensure richness and variety.
- Provides the academic rigor necessary for success in postsecondary education and careers.

*The League of Women Voters of Texas supports a state-mandated **ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM** to ensure that districts are teaching the standardized curriculum. In addition, the League supports an accountability system that:*

- Aligns with any federal accountability system to avoid conflicting results.
- Identifies academic achievement and gaps in performance among subgroups of students, based on standardized tests and other indicators (for example, dropout, attendance, and high school completion rates).
- Is used as a diagnostic method to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of schools and school districts, but NOT to establish school or school district ratings; NOT to sanction, reconstitute, or close schools; and NOT as a primary factor to appraise and terminate educators.
- Measures a school's growth in academic achievement from one year to the next, rather than as a single-year assessment.
- Places less emphasis on the standardized test and includes additional measurements, such as other types of tests, performance in coursework, and portfolios.
- Directs resources to *improve* performance, but not to reward schools.

*The League of Women Voters of Texas supports **EQUITABLE OPPORTUNITY** for academic achievement for all students. Specifically, the League supports:*

- Universal but not mandatory prekindergarten programs.
- Universal but not mandatory full-day kindergarten programs.



- Early intervention for academically at-risk students.
- Research-based instruction for English learners and other targeted subgroups of students.
- Tutoring and/or remedial classes for students who fail a section or sections of the standardized test.
- Availability of extended school day, Saturday classes, summer school, extended school year, and night courses at various school levels.

***The League of Women Voters of Texas endorses SUPPORT FOR TEACHERS in the mandated testing environment. Specifically, the League supports:***

- Adequate planning time or class-release time for improving student performance.
- Professional development that is relevant and is supported by research demonstrating improvement in student achievement.
- Reduction in class size, especially for low-performing students, at all grade levels.
- Qualified teacher aides for low-performing campuses.
- Incentives to attract experienced and qualified teachers to low-performing campuses and to subject areas where shortages exist, but NOT to reward teachers or campuses for improvement in the performance of their students on the standardized test.
- Mentoring for new teachers, with compensation for mentors.