



**Texas AFT**

*A Union of Professionals*

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## **Testimony to the Senate Education Committee Regarding Interim Charge #8**

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Texas AFT and our more than 63,000 education employee members are committed to establishing sound policy and making available necessary resources to provide every student in our public schools the opportunity to succeed in the classroom and beyond. To guide resource allocation and judge the effectiveness of education policies, we have long supported rigorous standards and meaningful measurement of achievement. Where it serves those ends, Texas' public school accountability system is useful. Nevertheless, the system needs major reform. We will work with the members of this committee for improvement and reform that benefits Texas public schoolchildren.

### **POSITIVE STEPS STILL LEAVE MORE TO BE DONE**

In House Bill 3, the 81st Texas Legislature made several beneficial changes to our current accountability system. Revised policy on promotion from third grade reduces emphasis on the state achievement test and instead relies more on the professional judgment of a student's teacher and on other locally determined criteria. A stricter cap on locally required testing in preparation for state exams gives teachers and parents more control over proliferating benchmark and practice exams. Continuation of the 79<sup>th</sup> Legislature's move to high school end-of-course exams conforms with the way in which subjects are taught, leading potentially to a fairer and more appropriate test of student learning. Multi-year phase-in of new "college readiness" standards is an appropriate acknowledgment that this novel scheme is unproven and largely undefined. Finally, providing the Commissioner of Education discretion on implementing the most severe sanctions provides an opportunity to avoid counter-productive measures that would punish improving schools and their students. Texas AFT applauds those positive steps.

Yet much more work remains, even within the context of our current accountability system. HB 3 failed to require that low-performing schools be provided resources and time to implement changes identified by intervention teams. The legislation offers no avenue to experiment with alternative accountability systems—work that is needed to develop more robust systems for the future. The legislation failed to address key issues identified in charges made to the Select Committee on Public School Accountability, including measures of "the effectiveness of the campus teaching and learning environment, including the effect of student discipline on that environment," and measures of "the performance of districts and campuses on important indicators and aspects of the educational process, other than student scores on standardized assessment instruments." Texas AFT stands ready to work with you to address these and other issues.

### **STUDENT-FOCUSED REFORM**

The basis of our current system is a narrow focus on standardized test scores, regardless of whether the test is named "State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness" or "Texas

Assessment of Knowledge and Skills.” Coming “college readiness” standards that primarily reflect a cut score on state achievement tests will only further narrow that focus.

Current test-driven education policy fails to acknowledge the severe limitations of standardized testing to measure academic achievement and to evaluate educational practice. Texas AFT supports and is developing an agenda for student-focused reform that moves beyond our current accountability system and puts into place broader measures of school and student success and proven policies to encourage that success.

Indicators based on students’ standardized test scores are deceptively convenient and relatively inexpensive to implement. However they provide no basis for useful evaluation of individual educators and tell us very little about effective campus practices and programs. As a lagging indicator of student learning, these test scores reveal little more than a student's ability to perform a limited task in a narrow span of time, and they fail as measures of the likelihood of long-term academic and life success.

Texas AFT asks your support for a student-focused reform of testing and accountability that will evaluate schools and educators more broadly and deeply—to inform instruction and identify success and failure so that the former may be promoted and the latter corrected and to guide resources to students, teachers, and schools that need them. A sound alternative to the current system should include properly limited standardized testing, but must take into account all factors known to affect student achievement and the full spectrum of what we want our students to learn, including not just the basic skills that can be measured by multiple-choice tests but also critical thinking and social and emotional skills needed for a productive, satisfying life.

A model proposed by the United Federation of Teachers, AFT’s local affiliate in New York City, employs a multi-factor approach that grades schools in four dimensions: academic achievement (with state assessments serving only as one of several measures of achievement); safe learning environment; teamwork to promote achievement; and resources provided by state and district to meet students’ needs. The point of this alternative approach is not to fix blame but to fix schools. This approach demands extensive, detailed, and independent qualitative as well as quantitative evaluation of school and system-wide effectiveness. It entails a big investment in independent expertise as well as in improved standards and tests based on those standards that measure higher-order achievement.

The short horizons of current education policies and programs reflect the test-driven accountability system. Fearing punitive sanctions mandated by federal or state law, educators, particularly school supervisors and administrators, often feel compelled to narrow instructional practice to the pursuit of higher standardized test scores in targeted student populations. Texas AFT’s proposed alternative of student-focused reform would employ sound educational practices based on experience and research—practices that promote students’ long-term success

evaluating seven community organizing campaigns for school reform around the nation, including Austin's Alliance Schools. This effort by Austin Interfaith, in which our Education Austin affiliate is an active participant, engages parents, teachers, and administrators in schools serving high-poverty communities through collaborative efforts to improve student learning. The Alliance Schools campaign has brought new resources to historically underserved schools, fostered greater trust and collaboration among parents, teachers, and administrators—and yes, it has raised student performance on standardized tests.

Texas AFT looks forward to working with members of the Senate Education Committee to improve our state's current public school accountability System and move to bolder and broader student-focused reform.