



**REACHING STATE GOALS FOR STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT  
SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE**

**MARCH 31, 2005**

**Testimony by Chris Patterson, Director of Research**

**OVERVIEW**

Creation of a new school finance system offers the Texas Legislature a unique opportunity to address the challenge of raising student achievement. Education reforms introduced by House Bill 2 merit serious consideration by the Texas Senate because they provide the means for students to achieve post-secondary readiness. Many represent recommendations forwarded by the Texas Governor's Business Council and the Koret Task Force on K-12 Education:

- Administering national assessments of post-secondary readiness;
- Restoring end of course exams for high school;
- Establishing a minimum standard for rating "Acceptable" schools;
- Re-organizing the lowest performing 10 percent of schools;
- Scheduling school board elections in November;
- Linking financial incentives for teachers and schools to student performance;
- Broadening certification requirements for principals and superintendents; and
- Increasing financial accountability and transparency of school spending.

The first four reforms are necessary to improve student achievement. These reforms confront fundamental, long-standing weaknesses of Texas public schools – the disappointing performance of Texas' students when compared with students in other states and the failure of students to achieve post-secondary readiness by graduation.

Reforms in House Bill 2 establish a concrete standard for school accountability, introduce rigorous assessments as a vehicle to enrich and standardize high school curriculum, and create real consequences for intractable, low-performing schools that will drive continuous academic improvement.

We ask the Texas Senate to include reforms from House Bill 2 in the Senate's school finance legislation. Additionally, we ask the Senate to address a critical challenge neglected by House Bill 2: literacy. From kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, a deplorable

number of public school students, particularly the economically disadvantaged, lack the ability to read proficiently. Poor reading skills push students to drop out of school and undermine the success of all other education reforms.

**Recommendations for Education Reform:**

- Administer a national criterion-referenced test of post-secondary readiness in middle school and high school that is closely aligned with the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills – This will establish the instructional standards required to prepare all high school graduates for skilled employment, vocational training or college;
- Restore end-of-course exams for required high school courses – This will standardize a rigorous core curriculum for all students, raise academic achievement, and close the achievement gap between student groups;
- Establish 60 percent as the minimum passing standard required to accredit schools and rate schools as “Acceptable” – This will ensure the majority of students in schools are adequately served by schools;
- Re-organize the persistently lowest performing 10 percent of schools – This will establish continuous improvement of the most intractable of schools and provide an opportunity for all children in Texas public schools to have the education they need to be successful in life; and
- Create new curriculum, instruction, assessments, and school accountability to prioritize literacy.

**STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT**

Despite decades of intensive, expensive reform, there is no evidence that Texas public schools have made any substantive progress toward meeting the real goal of public education: preparing students to be successful after they leave public schools. Graduates of Texas public schools remain largely unready for skilled employment, vocational training, or college. As other states improve public schools more rapidly than Texas and the economy demands increasingly higher workforce skills, the Texas education deficit grows. Immediate, comprehensive education reform is required; standards, assessments, and accountability must be redesigned to produce post-secondary readiness.

**Early Schooling:**

Although elementary and middle school students demonstrate strong gains on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a close look at the NAEP suggests that the education deficit takes root early in Texas public schools. When Texas’ NAEP gains are compared with gains posted by students in other states, it is clear student achievement in Texas public schools is not improving at a sufficient pace.

<b>Education Watch-Texas</b>		<b>Grade 4 Reading</b>		
<b>Is the NAEP performance improving?</b>				
	<b>NAEP Scale Score</b>		<b>Change from 1998-2003</b>	
	<b>1998</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>State Change</b>	<b>Biggest Gainers</b>
African American	191	202	12	22(DE)
Asian	N/A	229	N/A	19(MA)
Latino	200	205	5	33(DE)
Native American	N/A	N/A	N/A	8(AZ)
White	230	227	-3	15(DE)
All	214	215	1	17(DE)

**Education Trust, Inc., Edwatch Online 2004 State Summary Reports**

On the 2003 Reading and Mathematics NAEP, students in most other states surpassed the achievement of Texas students:

- 4<sup>th</sup> Grade Reading - 73 percent of states outscored Texas
- 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Reading – 73 percent of states outscored Texas
- 4<sup>th</sup> Grade Mathematics – 43 percent of states outscored Texas
- 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Mathematics – 65 percent of states outscored Texas

**High School Performance:**

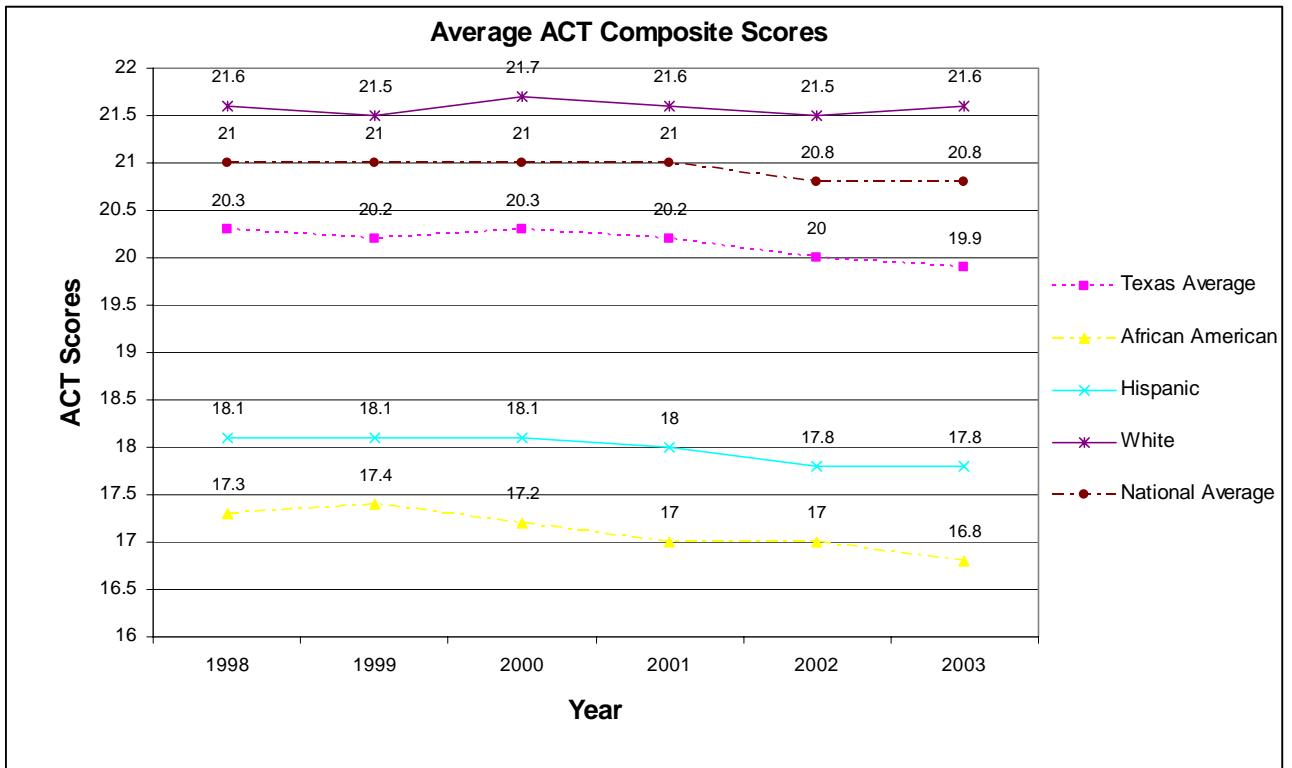
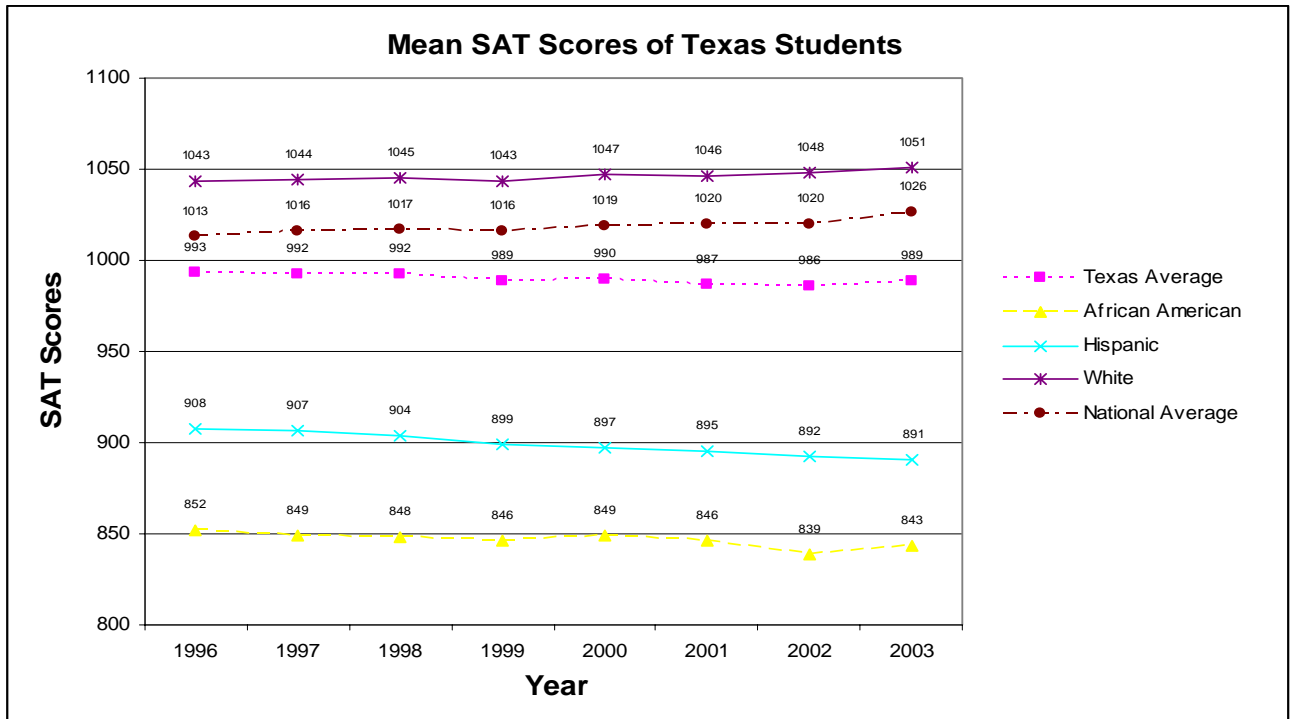
More severe education deficits are evident in Texas public high schools. Texas’ scores have declined on national tests of post-secondary readiness, while average scores of students in most states are steadily rising. In 2004, Texas’ average SAT score was the third lowest in the nation (only Georgia and S. Carolina posted lower scores) and average ACT score was the fourth lowest in the nation (only Mississippi, New Jersey, and S. Carolina posted lower scores). Scores fell for Texas despite an increased percentage of students taking the Recommended High School Program and a decreased percentage of students taking the ACT and SAT.

**Percent of Texas Public School Students Taking SAT or ACT Tests**

	<u>1993</u>	<u>2003</u>
African-American	58 %	59.5 %
Hispanic	49.5 %	45.7 %
White	69.4 %	66.4 %
Total Texas	64.2 %	62.4 %

**Percent Graduates of Recommended H.S. Program or Distinguished Achievement Program**

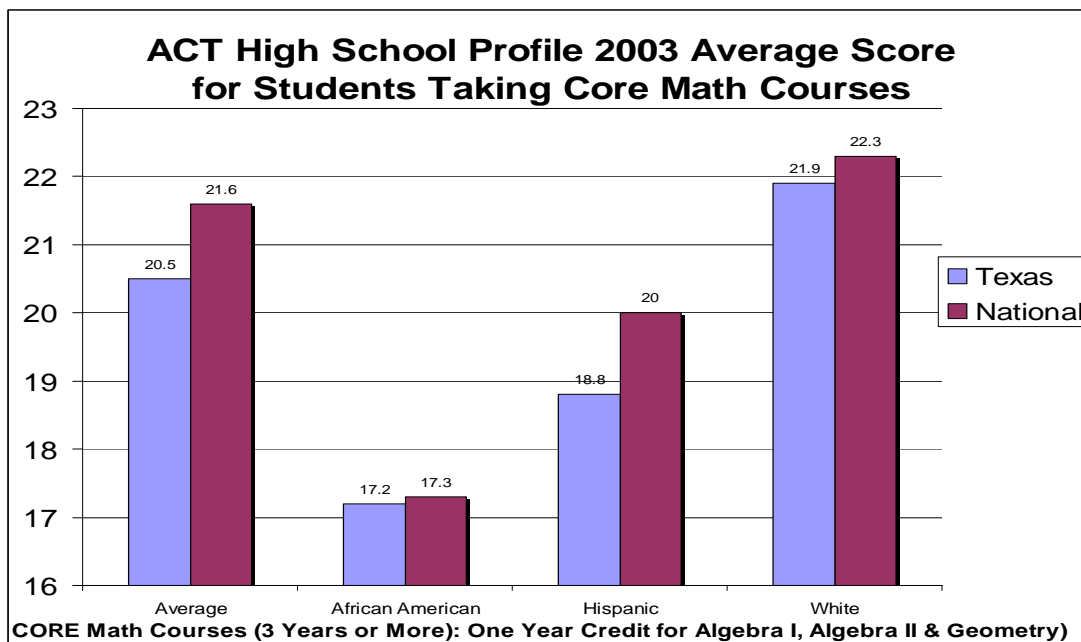
<u>Year</u>	<u>Percent</u>
2003	63.7 %
2002	58.2 %
2001	51.1 %
2000	38.6 %
1999	15.0 %



## ACADEMIC STANDARDS

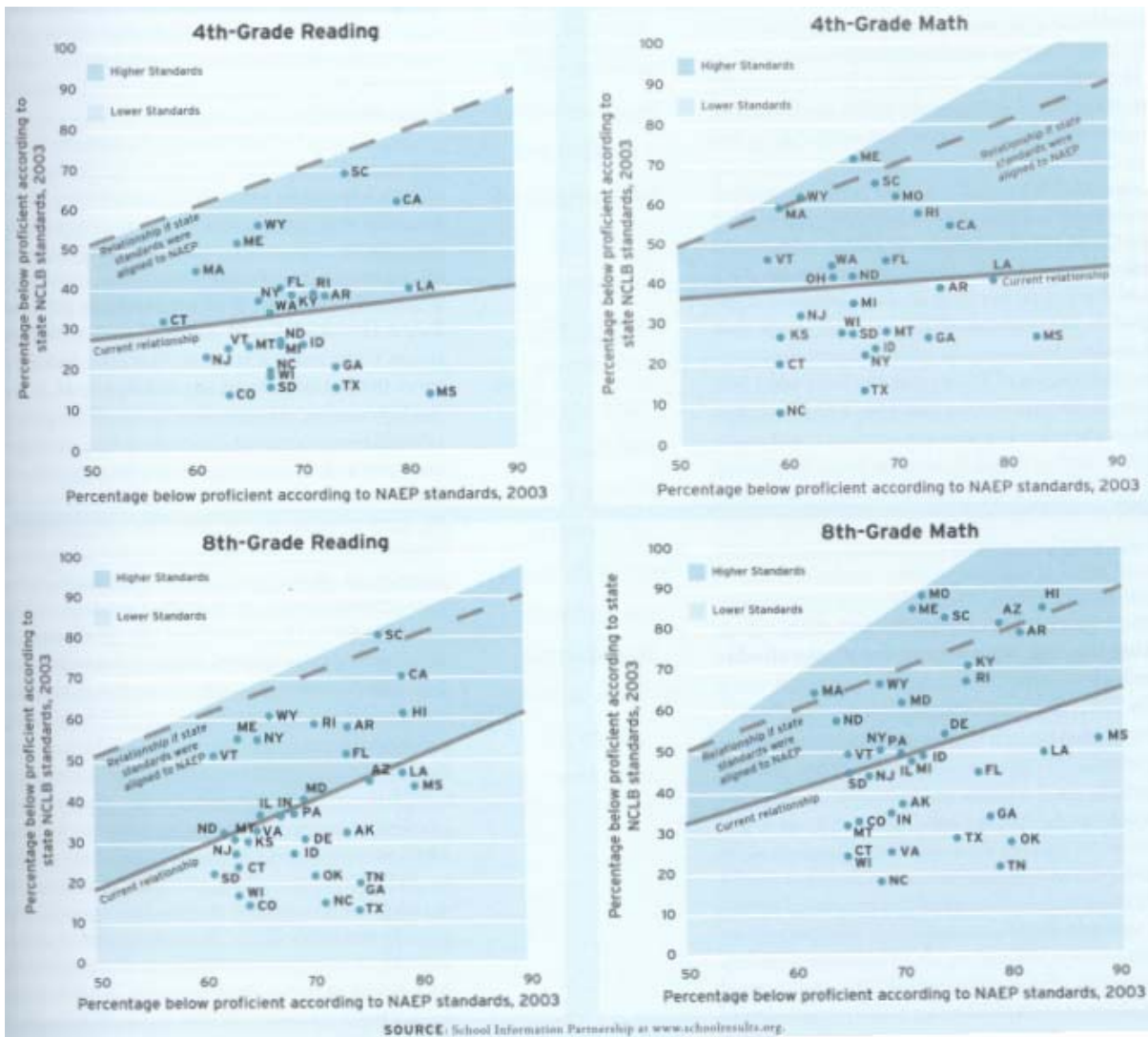
Why is student achievement flagging in Texas public schools? The link between standards and achievement makes this question easily answered; Texas has set very low standards for academic proficiency. Texas' standards for proficiency – established by state curriculum and assessments – are far lower than standards set by most other states.

The low standards established by Texas' curriculum are evident when ACT scores of Texas students are compared with scores of students in other states. When Texas students take the same core courses as taken by high school students in other states, Texas students consistently post lower scores on ACT tests.



In a recent analysis of the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, the ACT reports that state curriculum standards are not designed to provide post-secondary readiness. TEKS do not “articulate a clear sense of increasing complexity and sophistication across courses and grade levels. The lack of specificity, course differentiation, coverage interpretation and qualifying achievement language in TEKS could very likely promote mastering lower-level skills. The acquisition of such skills doesn’t necessarily prepare students for the kind of academic work they will be expected to produce at college level.”

Low standards are also evident in state assessments. This is shown in graphics reproduced from the Spring 2005 edition of *Education Next* (“Do We Repair the Monument? Debating the Future of No Child Left Behind). States that are closest to the dashed line have standards for proficiency that are most similar to NAEP and states closest to the solid line have proficiency standards that are closest to the national average.



In each of these graphs, Texas is among the cluster of states with the least rigorous standards for reading and mathematics proficiency in both 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades.

### Post-secondary Readiness:

Texas scores on both the SAT and ACT show that most graduates lack post-secondary readiness even though the statutory goal of Texas public schools is post-secondary readiness. The Education Code states the purpose of the state curriculum is post-secondary readiness: “The essential knowledge and skills shall also prepare and enable *all* [italics in text] students to continue to learn in post-secondary education, training or employment settings” (Section 28.001).

Post-secondary readiness is commonly understood as the academic foundation that high school graduates need to succeed in skilled employment, vocational training, or college. All high school graduates require post-secondary readiness, whether or not they are college bound. Over half of jobs held by workers 30-59 require some post-secondary education or training and this number is expected to double; it is unlikely that individuals who lack post-secondary education or vocational training can earn sufficient income to support their families. Post-secondary readiness is an economic necessity.

In 2004, Texas' average SAT score for 2004 was 34 points below the national average (992 combined mathematics and verbal). On the ACT in 2004, Texas average composite score was also below the national average (Texas 20.2 vs. National 20.9); only 18 percent of test-takers in Texas met ACT benchmarks for post-secondary readiness (compared to the national average of 22 percent).

Lack of post-secondary readiness is noted by Texas businesses who employ a significant number of public school graduates lacking basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics skills (*The Education Deficit in the Lone Star State* by Christopher Hammons, Texas Public Policy Foundation, 2005, <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2005-03-remedial-ed.pdf>).

### **Achievement Gap:**

Some student groups lack post-secondary readiness more than others in Texas public schools. Scores on all independent national assessments – NAEP, SAT, and the ACT – continue to show a significant achievement gap between student groups. As shown on the graphics in this report, none of these assessments show a substantive narrowing of the achievement gap between student groups over the past decade.

## **REFORM WITHOUT REAL RESULTS**

Why have reforms produced academic improvements without impacting the most important student outcome – academic proficiency of high school graduates? There are several reasons.

- Reforms are not designed to achieve specific, objective, measurable student outcomes but instead are intended to improve achievement;
- Baseline standards are not established for expectations; and
- Reforms are not aligned with state goals for student and school performance.

Consequently, reforms have only provided schools with a pathway to results without getting students to the desired destination.

One of the most critical barriers to post-secondary readiness is literacy. All too many students, particularly economically disadvantaged students lack the skills to read



proficiently. Research shows that many students in Texas public schools lack the ability to even read their textbooks (*Where Do We Go From Here* by Jim Windham, Texas Public Policy Foundation, <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2005-03-txmiracle.pdf>).

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:**

### **1. Implement reforms in House Bill 2 to give students and schools the tools to achieve post-secondary readiness.**

#### **A. Administer National Criterion-referenced Assessments of Post-secondary Readiness:**

There is solid evidence that national criterion-referenced assessments of post-secondary readiness offers important benefits. Research shows that states administering the ACT, an assessment that is closely aligned with Texas' curriculum can:

- Increase student achievement and post-secondary readiness;
- Close the achievement gap between student groups;
- Bridge more students into post-secondary education/training; and
- Reduce college remediation.

#### **B. Restore End-of-Course Exams for Core High School Subjects:**

National and international research provides evidence that end-of-course exams for high school subjects can produce:

- Standardized, more rigorous classroom instruction;
- Higher academic achievement and post-secondary readiness;
- Closure of the achievement gap between student groups; and
- Multiple tools for assessing student and school performance.

#### **C. Establish Minimum Standard for “Acceptable” School Ratings:**

Although the Texas Legislature has set minimum standards for important educational policies, such as baseline pay for teachers, it has abrogated authority to the commissioner of education for setting the minimum standard for accrediting schools and rating schools as “Acceptable.”

Over the past decade, the minimum standard has never exceeded 55 percent (of students passing state assessments for schools to be rated as “Acceptable”), although the standard was significantly lower than 55 percent for many years. A number of schools that have never gotten close to the 55 percent standard are rated as “Acceptable” because waivers have been dispensed by the Texas Education Agency.

Today, the minimum standard for “Acceptable” schools is 25 percent for science, 35 percent for mathematics, and 50 percent for reading, writing, social studies, and English Language Arts.

To ensure that an “Acceptable” school is doing an acceptable job of educating students, the Texas Legislature should establish a minimum standard of at least 60 percent passing on all state assessments as the basis for school accreditation and an “Acceptable” school rating.

#### **D. Re-organize the Lowest Performing Schools:**

Although the school accountability system allows the commissioner of education to reconstitute persistently low-performing schools, less than a handful of public schools have ever been required to undergo reconstitution – other than charter schools – since the system was established over 10 years ago. Yet there are scores of schools that are rated as “Unacceptable” (2004 - 92 schools; 2003 - 17 schools; and 2003 – 150 schools).

To ensure that there are real consequences for “Unacceptable” schools and that all children have an opportunity for an acceptable education, the Texas Legislature should establish a standard for re-organizing persistently low-performing schools and provide a process by which these schools can be reformed by a qualified management entity – such as a university, charter school corporation, or an educational management company – that can provide evidence of educational success.

#### **2. Strengthen reading instruction, assessment, and accountability**

Expert recommendations for reading reform are included in the Koret Task Force recommendations provided to the Texas Legislature, as well as the Foundation’s report *Where Do We Go From Here?* These recommendations include new assessments, research-proven instructional programs, and teacher training.

### **CONCLUSION**

Public schools must rapidly change to prepare our youth to be successful and provide the means for Texas to remain a beacon of opportunity and prosperity. Over the past decade, the school accountability system has proven an effective vehicle for reforming public schools. Recalibrated with higher standards and new assessments, the system can focus public schools on post-secondary readiness and produce the educational outcomes that Texans require.