

Research Report

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Where Do We Go From Here? *Reviving & Advancing The Texas Education Miracle*

By

Jim Windham

Texas Public Policy Foundation



www.TexasPolicy.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jim Windham, a Houston-based investment advisor and publisher, has been involved with education policy issues for over fifteen years as the chairman of the Texas Association of Business; vice chairman, Texas Public Policy Foundation; member of the Board of Regents, Stephen F. Austin State University; Director, Children’s Educational Opportunity Foundation; chairman, Rodeo Institute for Teacher Excellence; director, Texas Education Reform Caucus; chairman, Texas Business Leaders for Educational Choice; member, Texas State Board for Educator Certification; and member of the Public Education Policy Task Force of the Governor’s Business Council. He can be contacted at txpilgrim@houston.rr.com.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is very little doubt that Texas has led the nation in public education reform over the past decade or so and that Texas has served as a model for other states and the nation in the advancement of standards and accountability. This has been accomplished by the dedication of a statewide coalition of educators, administrators, and legislative and business leaders in a consistent effort over a period of twenty years.

However, there is mounting evidence that the easier phases of reform are behind us in Texas, that some of the more intractable problems with student achievement have not been reached by reforms while serious backsliding is underway in others. It is evident that more of the same accountability and standards will not produce the results we want, and that a much more difficult phase of reform lies ahead.

When the education priorities of the state's political leadership are examined – priorities identified by the policy initiatives of the 79th session of the Texas Legislature – policy is dominated by three priorities: providing property tax relief, fixing the broken “Robin Hood” system of school finance, and increasing funding for public education. As for additional reform, in fairness, there are a number of well-intentioned and well-crafted proposals designed to incrementally improve the current reform model. With few exceptions, however, there is little introspection or candid appraisal of the current status of reforms that have produced what is described as “The Texas Miracle.”

The current reform model, as it has evolved over the past twenty years, is based on the curriculum standards embodied in the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS, adopted in 1997). The entire edifice of reform is built on the TEKS: curriculum, assessments, teacher preparation, and the school accountability system.

The assessment vehicle, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), is a criterion-referenced assessment subject to all of the possible pitfalls of such an examination, particularly when used as the sole determinant of all aspects of accountability for student achievement.

Since the adoption of the TEKS and the implementation of state assessments that have evolved into the TAKS, the improvement in the performance of Texas schools, as determined by the state assessments, has been remarkable. However, upon close analysis, one can begin to detect deficiencies in the standards- and accountability-based model and problems for the future as the primary determinant of progress in student achievement.

In research-based analyses of college readiness, reading ability, the rigor of curriculum, and the credibility of assessment, there is mounting evidence of the need to revisit the Texas reform model and the foundations on which it is based. It is increasingly evident that Texans need to exercise the objectivity and courage necessary for making course corrections.

This process can only begin with complete candor about the current status of public education in Texas, the progress of our reform efforts to date, the prognosis for achieving the essential universal educational proficiency of our children, and the daunting challenges that we face in doing so. This will involve confronting the enormous vested interests that sustain, not only the “one best system” that has been in business for almost a century but, the model that has been chosen as the Texas reform vehicle. Total honesty and transparency is a must – difficult goals to achieve when even the most well-intentioned are often intimidated by the inertia of the current structure of education and the natural reluctance to be introspective.

Armed with an objective analysis of where we have been and where we are – keeping in mind that everything that is or is not done should be evaluated in terms of its impact on Texas student achievement – there are specific actions that can be taken in key areas that would immediately begin to revive and advance the “The Texas Miracle” in public education.

- *Academic Standards* – Return to the premises of TEKS, refine, and strengthen it to identify explicit, objective grade level expectations for all core subject areas, and revisit and reject the foundational “constructivist” philosophy of education;
- *Assessment* – Replace or supplement criterion-referenced testing with national norm-referenced testing and add end-of-course exams in high school as well as value-added assessment throughout K-12;
- *Academic Accountability* – Significantly increase the state standards for K-12 district and campus performance, add college readiness as a standard, measure it with the SAT or ACT exam for high school exit, and install urgent and serious consequences for underperforming campuses;
- *The Reading Crisis* – Because everything about student achievement follows from the ability to read, we should declare the moral equivalent of war on the illiteracy of our children, beginning immediately in our urban areas;
- *Empowerment Through School Choice* – The centerpiece of reform must be comprehensive, child-centered school choice in all of its manifestations, including vouchers, charters, online, home schooling, etc. It must begin with aggressive expansion of open enrollment charter authority and provide vouchers for students in special education programs and in failing schools;
- *Educator Quality* – Aggressively expand alternatives to educator preparation and certification, lead the movement to adopt national standardized certification, significantly expand new teacher mentoring, aggressively recruit non-traditional leadership to school administration, and introduce performance-based compensation for all educators based on value-added evaluation;
- *Financial Accountability* – Develop a more robust reporting and management system that will bring improved transparency and productivity to education finance down to the classroom level; and
- *Structural Deregulation* – Dump the age old “one best system” and allow wide-ranging authority for deregulation of human resource management, as well as innovations in scheduling and delivery that will certainly involve significantly more “time on task” and use of technology.

The current situation in Texas is analogous to the beginning of the furious debate over tort reform in the early 1990's, when business leaders were energized and organized to take on and win a protracted battle against a threat that seriously jeopardized the State's economic viability. This necessary opinion leadership is not yet sufficiently energized for this next phase of education reform, even though the current state of and prognosis for our public education system represents a threat even more onerous to our economic and cultural future. It is one that is worthy of a similar long-term commitment to overcome; and more importantly, it represents the civil rights revolution of the 21st century.

INTRODUCTION

As the education priorities of the state's political leadership emerges in the 79th session of the Texas Legislature, it is time to take stock of where we are in public education in Texas and think seriously and strategically about where we go from here. For it is clear that there is a policy mix dominated by three concerns that have occupied the "high ground" of education policy deliberations during the entire 2004-05 biennium. These are: property tax relief, fixing the broken "Robin Hood" finance system, and providing more funding for public education. As for additional structural reform, in fairness, there are a number of well-intentioned and well-crafted proposals directed toward incremental improvement of the current reform model. However, there seems little sentiment among informed mainstream opinion leaders for serious consideration of candidly appraising the current status of the education reforms introduced over the past decade that have produced what has been popularly described as "The Texas Education Miracle."

There is very little doubt that Texas has led the nation in public education reform over the past decade or so and that it has served as a model for other states in the advancement of standards and accountability. In addition, it is clearly evident that the centerpiece of President Bush's education initiative, the *No Child Left Behind Act*, is almost a carbon copy of the Texas model. Likewise, the Houston Independent School District (Houston ISD), under the former superintendence of immediate past Secretary of Education Rod Paige and an enlightened board of trustees, has been a beacon for urban school reform; Houston ISD achieved well-deserved recognition as the best urban school district in America in 2002. All of this has been accomplished by the dedication of a statewide coalition of educators, administrators, and legislative and business leaders in a consistent effort over a period of twenty years.

However, there is mounting evidence that the easier phases of reform are behind us in Texas, that some of the more intractable student achievement problem areas have not been reached by the reforms, while serious backsliding is underway in others. There is evidence that more of the same accountability and standards will not produce the results we want, and that a much more difficult phase of reform lies ahead. More ominously, the recent revelations of alleged widespread cheating in the administration and scoring of the student achievement assessment exams have, at best, been a huge embarrassment to Texas' reform model; at worst, these incidents challenge the credibility of "The Texas Miracle" in education reform and call into question the very model on which it was constructed.

This report will summarize where we have been in education reform in Texas, where we are now, and provide some recommendations as to where we need to go in order to reach the excellence we all want for our children's educational future.

WHERE WE HAVE BEEN

The Wake Up Call

With the 1983 publication by the U. S. Department of Education of the watershed document, “A Nation at Risk”, a wake-up call was sounded across the nation about the deterioration in the quality of public education and its negative portents for America’s economic competitiveness – not to mention the future viability of its foundational republican ideals. In the ensuing twenty years, enormous effort and financial resources have been expended in addressing the problems identified in public schools; Texas was among the leading states in this effort, aggressively tackling the challenge of educational mediocrity.

Since that time, under five governors, public education has been at the top of the list of public policy priorities in Texas – beginning with the implementation of the reforms drafted by the Perot Commission appointed by Governor Mark White in 1984 (introduced by House Bill 72), through the most sweeping transformation of the Texas Education Code in fifty years in 1995 that resulted in the installation and continuing enhancement of performance standards and accountability for results. Then, upon George W. Bush’s election as President, these initiatives were taken to the Federal level with the adoption of the *No Child Left Behind Act*, which imposed additional performance timetables and federal sanctions for noncompliance.

Texas Takes the Lead

As a result of these efforts, Texas made significant strides in Texas student achievement – as was evident in measures of overall growth in average performance on the criterion-referenced testing model (that was developed and implemented to assess mastery of the essential knowledge and skills standards, designed for each grade level). For example, as reported by the Texas Education Agency, statewide passing rates on the 10th grade Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) test increased from 61 percent in 1996 to 86 percent in 2002. These results were even better in Houston ISD, which achieved an increase from 46 percent to 80 percent over the same period.

From 1994 to 1999, the percentage of statewide fifth graders meeting the state TAAS standard for minimal acceptable performance increased from 60 percent to 90 percent – with the fastest rate of increase achieved by African-American and Hispanic students. In addition, the percentage of Texas school districts achieving the exemplary or recognized designation increased from 14 percent in 1995 to 48 percent in 1999, while the number of districts considered not acceptable decreased from 3 percent to less than 1 percent over the same period.

Texas has also made progress in the enhancement of standards for the preparation and licensure of educators, as well as the assessment of teacher preparation programs. Restructuring of certification requirements and testing and the adoption of the Accountability System for Educator Preparation (ASEP) in 1998 provides more stringent

quality controls for preparation programs (at least in terms of the performance of their graduates on certification exams).

Curriculum Standards

The current model for curriculum standards in Texas is the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills; TEKS was adopted under the direction of the Texas Education Agency in 1997 and ostensibly developed to establish benchmarks for what a student should know in each subject matter area at each grade level in order to advance to the next level. This document is the basis on which the entire state system of public education is built – the curriculum, the assessments, the teacher preparation, and the incentive system. In short, TEKS is the foundation of the Texas model.

The development of TEKS, as with most education policy in Texas, was the product of the efforts of a large number of education “stakeholders” – those members of the education establishment and other experts who were selected as having the experience and training to know such things as what a student should know and when he or she should know it. These stakeholders were believed to be the individuals who, by and large, would be responsible for the implementation and success of the product.

TEKS was a consensus document and, not surprisingly, reflects a number of competing approaches – most particularly in the reading and language arts disciplines. More than a few minority views on learning expectations were not reflected in the final product; as a result, much of the opposition and criticism of TEKS center on its vagueness, subjectivity, lack of specificity about the objective knowledge required, and dearth of academic rigor.

It is important to note, however, that the foundational ideas embedded in the TEKS predate the document itself; in fact, the foundation can be traced to a document adopted by the State Board of Education in 1994 and named *Learner-Centered Schools for Texas: A Vision of Texas Educators*, which was intended to govern the standards for the education profession in Texas. As implied by name, the 1994 document is steeped in constructivist ideology and associated ideas that elevate the concept of learning to learn above the learning of any specific subject area or academic discipline (there will be more about this later in this report).

Performance Assessment

The state’s current performance assessment model began in 1980 with the Texas Assessment of Basic Skills test (TABS). This was succeeded by the TEAMS (Texas Educational Assessment of Minimum Skills) in 1985, and then by the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), a criterion-referenced test administered in grades 3-8 and 10. Criterion-referenced tests measure student mastery of specific grade level curriculum in various subject areas and are scored on the number or percentage of correct answers.

In 2003, TAAS was replaced by the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), a test acclaimed to be more academically rigorous test which is administered in grades 3-8 with an “exit” exam in grade 11. TAKS is considered a “high stakes” exam,” with consequences for advancement and graduation; it is aligned with the TEKS curriculum at each grade level and passing scores are set by the State Board of Education.

WHERE WE ARE

Notable Progress and Lingering Concerns

Those experienced with criterion-referenced exams will tell you that there are three variables to consider when evaluating their credibility as an assessment tool: (1) the curriculum standards on which the tested material is based; (2) the rigor of the assessment; and (3) the number or percentage of correct answers, or “cut score”, established by the relevant authority to demonstrate acceptable mastery of the tested material.

This might seem quite obvious, but it is amazing how many otherwise observant people miss these important points, which can represent major deficiencies in using criterion-referenced assessment as the sole determinant of achievement. For a variety of well-founded reasons, all three of these aspects of TAKS have come under scrutiny and intense criticism from various quarters, as have the standards for performance on the assessments set by the Texas Education Agency for individual school districts and campuses.

Notwithstanding the criticisms and conflicts over the curriculum standards and the assessment model during the period since the adoption of the TEKS and the implementation of the TAAS/TAKS exams, the improvement in the performance of Texas schools has been remarkable, as determined almost exclusively by the state assessments. However, upon closer analysis, one can begin to detect deficiencies in this standards- and accountability-based model and problems for its future as the primary determinant of progress in student achievement.

These deficiencies can be best understood by examining Houston ISD. For the purposes of this report, Houston ISD will be used as a proxy for the state because data from this system is readily available, and, by almost any measure, Houston ISD has set performance standards for urban school districts, not just in Texas, but throughout the nation.

An analysis of the state system of public education must be based on what public schools are expected to do – this goal is established by the state curriculum standards. Of the TEKS, the Texas Education Code states: “The essential knowledge and skills shall also prepare and enable all students to continue to learn in post-secondary education, training or employment settings” (Section 28.001). In other words, college and workplace

readiness is the ultimate standard for successful outcomes of public elementary and secondary education.

College Readiness

To determine how well we are performing on this standard, look at Exhibit 1, which summarizes the college readiness performance of HISD's high schools in 2004. Pay particular attention to two comparisons in the data listed under the column headings:

- First, note the comparison between the percentage meeting the college readiness standard on the 11th grade exit TAKS tests for both reading and math, as established by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB), and the percentage meeting the TAKS exit standard for graduation in both subject areas; and
- Second, note the comparison between the percentage of 11th graders meeting the HECB college readiness standard and the percentage of 12th graders at the same school who actually met the underlying norm-referenced SAT and ACT benchmark test scores (1000 and 21, respectively), indicating college readiness.

Exhibit 1.

HISD COLLEGE READINESS DATA 2004									
High School	% Meeting College Readiness Standard*	% Meeting TAKS Exit Standard	% Meeting College Readiness Standard**	% Meeting TAKS Exit Standard	% at or above 1000 on SAT	% of students taking SAT	% at or above 21 on ACT	% of students taking ACT	Class Size
	READING: Grade 11	READING: Grade 11	MATH: Grade 11	MATH: Grade 11	CLASS OF 2004	CLASS OF 2004	CLASS OF 2004	CLASS OF 2004	CLASS OF 2004
Austin High School	52.4	95.0	47.6	94.0	10.5	64.9	18.2	8.3	265
Barbara Jordan High School	38.6	83.0	24.8	85.0	10.4	52.3	15.6	14.5	220
Bellaire High School	73.2	92.0	66.8	95.0	76.6	85.9	74.7	23.3	731
Booker T. Washington High School	37.5	75.0	27.7	76.0	45.2	52.9	19.2	20.2	257
Chavez High School	36.2	75.0	29.6	79.0	8.3	41.8	14.3	10.7	261
Davis High School	22.4	68.0	16.5	57.0	12.2	38.2	22.2	2.5	364
DeBakey High School	98.6	100.0	96.5	100.0	91.5	94.9	96.2	39.0	136
Furr High School	32.1	77.0	20.5	67.0	25.0	23.8	23.1	7.0	185
Jones High School	24.6	64.0	7.7	64.0	6.3	51.8	5.0	10.7	187
Kashmere High School	22.0	70.0	6.8	52.0	0.0	21.6	4.5	52.8	125
Lamar High School	54.1	87.0	45.5	90.0	62.6	71.2	59.9	24.7	676
Law Enforcement & Criminal Justice	62.7	96.0	33.3	94.0	30.5	70.5	28.2	26.2	149
Lee High School	29.1	70.0	14.2	81.0	9.0	113.3	8.0	11.1	226
Madison High School	37.1	82.0	21.1	82.0	6.3	49.7	1.5	18.6	350
Milby High School	32.9	80.0	25.9	88.0	18.3	47.8	12.8	11.8	400
Reagan High School	29.3	71.0	14.4	64.0	21.3	38.9	9.5	6.7	314
Sam Houston High School	29.3	69.0	21.9	75.0	4.8	29.9	16.7	1.1	552
Scarborough High School	38.8	76.0	32.2	70.0	17.0	40.8	19.4	23.8	130
Sharpstown High School	32.8	73.0	18.3	68.0	20.3	56.5	14.8	25.8	209
Sterling High School	28.9	76.0	17.1	69.0	9.8	30.5	5.9	17.0	200
Visual and Performing Arts	88.7	99.0	66.9	99.0	79.3	89.0	65.2	16.9	136
Waltrip High School	39.3	79.0	23.2	81.0	32.5	49.6	28.6	16.7	335
Westbury High School	20.5	68.0	16.5	61.0	16.9	51.9	17.5	20.5	308
Westside High School	55.6	86.0	53.4	93.0	54.0	91.8	60.0	26.4	512
Wheatley High School	18.1	67.0	12.6	73.0	2.3	36.1	0.0	12.6	119
Worthing High School	27.5	81.0	19.8	79.0	9.0	46.7	13.3	17.2	261
Yates High School	22.4	75.0	9.1	69.0	16.2	40.4	10.0	19.2	260

*Scale Score 2200 & above on TAKS English Language Arts Test, Spring 2004 All Students

**Scale Score 2200 & above on TAKS Mathematics Test, Spring 2004 All Students

Source data for the TAKS College Readiness come from Texas Education Agency, Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills Scale Score Frequencies for Grade 11, All Students, Spring of Spring, 2004.

Source data for the TAKS Exit Standard comes from the HISD website, HISD Connect, Research and Accountability, TAKS Performance Reports for 2004, High Schools (11th Grade).

Source data for the SAT and ACT Results comes from HISD RESEARCH, College-Bound Assessment Report, 2003-2004, published by the Houston ISD Department of Research and Accountability, Spring of 2004. Data reports on Class of 2004 (12th graders in 2004).

Very quickly, it can be seen there are significant differences for the performance in each case – an average of an astounding 47 percentage points in the first comparison and about 10 percentage points in the second, excluding the three Vanguard Program, or choice, schools. This gap is still significant even considering that the second comparison is not of the same cohort of students.

Exhibit 1 shows that there are material disconnects: either the TAKS exit exam passing scores have been set too low; or the TAKS college readiness scale score established by the HECB is too high; or the TEKS curriculum standards are inadequate and are in need of revision. Most likely a combination of these factors is in play.

If students make their way into post-secondary education, it is likely that a large percentage of them will find themselves in remedial courses to compensate for the inadequate preparation provided by public schools. The following statistics were reported by in September 2004 by the Houston Chronicle: Sixteen Houston-area school districts sent 6,552 newly graduated students to Harris County community colleges last fall. Of those, 64 percent are required to take high school level remedial courses for a substantial portion of their first year or more in college.

Of course, these college readiness results can be disaggregated by the demographic factors of race and ethnicity, but before generalizing on such implications for the majority/minority achievement gap, consider the following. Based on data compiled by the leading state-supported universities on the potential college applicant pool of African Americans and Hispanics of typical college entrance age in Texas in 1997, the following picture emerges.

- Of the total of approximately 135,000 minority 18-year olds, roughly 55 percent were high school graduates.
- 16 percent took a college entrance exam.
- 3 percent scored the equivalent of 900 on the SAT exam and ranked in the top 40% of their high school class.¹

The fact that these data are several years old doesn't alter the case that, considered collectively with the Houston results, these numbers provide little rationale for the state policy granting automatic college admission to students in the top 10% of their high school graduating class.

Dr. Christopher Hammons of Houston Baptist University² surveys the devastating personal, economic, and social costs of what he calls the Texas "education deficit" in a recent study published by the Texas Public Policy Foundation. The deficit results from a much higher than reported dropout rates that is combined with the growing problem of the increasing number of high school graduates who still lack basic reading, writing, and math skills. In purely economic terms, excluding the human factor, Dr. Hammons estimates the education deficit poses a cost of approximately \$13.6 billion annually for the state economy. And he notes the impact of the state's demographic trends means that this deficit will only grow larger because Latino Texans – the faster growing segment of our population who historically have by far the highest dropout and lowest college completion rates of all ethnic groups – are projected to represent almost 60 percent of the State's population by 2040 (as compared to 32 percent today).

Among other social problems, the facts presented here point to a serious deficiency in the college and workplace preparation of Texas high school graduates – not to mention a daunting challenge in reversing the high school non-completion/dropout trends, particularly among minority students. But the facts also point to a serious *high school* readiness problem – a problem that leads directly to the dropout problem; researchers have long linked the likelihood of dropping out with the inability of students to read at

grade level by at least the third grade. There is some evidence that reading deficiencies represent the most serious public education crisis of all, and offer a major key to the solving the challenge of moving to the next level of student achievement.

The Reading Crisis

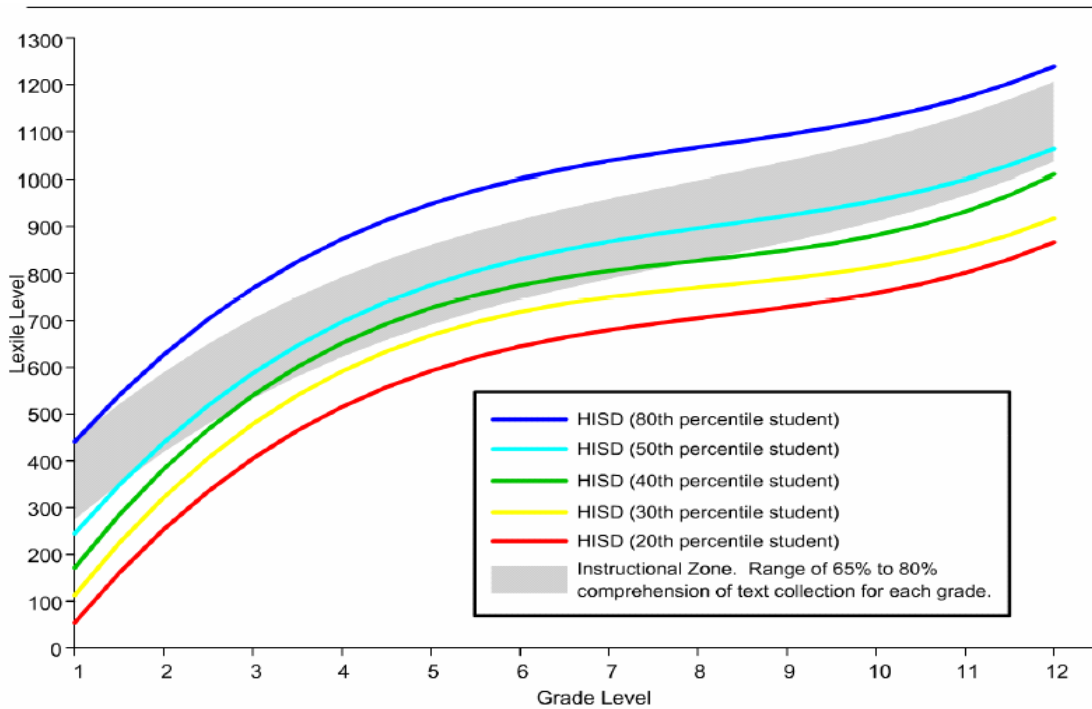
The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is considered the “nation’s report card.” On the 2003 NAEP test of reading achievement, 27 percent of Texas fourth graders and 26 percent of eighth graders scored at or above the proficient level – percentages which are below the national average of 30 percent in both cases. It is worth noting that the average fourth grade proficient score on the TAKS reading test in the same year was 85 percent; this represents a 58 point difference between state scores and the NAEP. For Houston ISD, 52 percent of fourth graders and 41 percent of eighth graders scored below basic level, while only 18 percent and 17 percent, respectively, read at or above the proficient level on the 2002 NAEP test.

At this late date, twenty years after publication of *A Nation at Risk*, Texas NAEP scores represent a tragedy. The fact that Houston’s NAEP results for 2002 were better than other major U. S. urban districts – remember this is the best urban school district in America – should offer little consolation when one considers that, ultimately, the dropout odds are stacked heavily against any child who cannot read at grade level by the end of third grade.

The goal of achieving secondary and post-secondary readiness appears even farther from reach when the results of MetaMetric studies are considered. MetaMetrics, developer of the widely used Lexile Framework for Reading, provides a common metric for reading competency and reading materials. This metric allows a correlation to be drawn between the two, and permits a comparison of reading competency at each grade level to the “instructional zone” which, for the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT) used by Houston ISD and many other districts, equates to a minimum national percentile ranking (NPR) of approximately 40. All of this means that a NPR of less than 40 means that students are unable to read and comprehend the instructional materials used at that grade level.

As shown in Exhibit 2, Houston ISD’s average SAT-9 exam reading scores for 2003 peaked in the first grade at the 58th NPR, and consistently declined by grade, falling to the 27th NPR for ninth grade students. This means that ninth grade students have almost no comprehension of the assigned reading materials. A key finding of a December 2003 readability study is that a large majority of 7th to 12th grade students in Houston ISD cannot read their textbooks.³ It is impossible to imagine a more appalling finding, or a finding more indicative of the crisis we face.

Exhibit 2. Reading Materials Targeting Analysis



This targeting analysis shows the instructional zone (a range representing the understanding of instructional materials, such as basal textbooks), contained in the Houston ISD curriculum from grades 1 to 12. This is illustrated by the gray band on the above chart. A student whose Lexile is below the instructional zone will in all probability not be able to read instructional materials for that grade; conversely, a student whose Lexile is above the instructional zone would benefit from more challenging materials than those provided in the curriculum.

The above chart shows that a student who has a SAT-9 National Percentile Ranking (NPR) of 50 generally falls within the instructional zone. However, a student in any given grade with an NPR of 30 or less falls below the zone. It can be predicted that a student with an NPR of 40 could understand textbooks with minimum comprehension from grades 3 to 8, but could not read them after the 8th grade or before the 3rd grade.

**Average SAT-9 Reading NPR – Houston ISD Students
Spring 2004**

<i>Grade</i>	<i>NPR</i>
1	58
2	49
3	47
4	44
5	39
6	38
7	39
8	36
9	27
10	31
11	38

State assessments have failed to reveal the crisis in reading (a failure that is repeated with post-secondary readiness). For example, in the 2003 TAKS results for HISD, 172 out of 188 elementary schools (91 percent) showed third grade reading pass rates of over 70 percent of students tested, while 115 schools (61 percent) had an average NPR on the SAT-9 reading test of less than 50.

One reason for the disparity between state assessments and independent tests is that the passing score set for the third grade TAKS reading test was set low. To pass the test, students had to only correctly answer 19 of 36 questions (only 53 percent); in 2004, this passing standard remained but will be increased to 24 correct answers in 2005, a standard recommended by the reading advisory panel.

Low standards on student assessments are matched with state standards for rating schools. At least through 2006, schools must only have 50 percent of students passing the state reading test to achieve an “Acceptable” rating by the Texas Education Agency. For mathematics and science, standards are lower; to be rated “Acceptable,” schools must only have 35 percent passing mathematics and 25 percent passing science.

Remember the three variables in establishing the credibility of an assessment? This disconnect demonstrates the hazards of one of those variables. The passing scores set for minimal mastery of material must be set sufficiently high for an assessment to have any value in measuring academic proficiency, setting goals for student achievement, and driving up higher levels of performance.

Many knowledgeable observers will say that the comparison of the results of a criterion-referenced with a norm-referenced exam is like comparing apples with oranges. This true enough in that they measure different things; however, to the extent that we want our assessments to be indicative of grade level competence, state assessments should at least

track the norm-referenced results – unless there is a problem with the underlying standards. The vast difference between norm-referenced tests and the state’s criterion-referenced tests indicate that state standards should be strengthened.

Assessment Rigor

The second variable that determines the quality of assessments is the difficulty or rigor of the assessment. On this point, Achieve, Inc., a national consortium of Governors and prominent business leaders, offers guidance; this organization has been active in the evaluation of assessment tools used by the states in their accountability models. After a recent detailed analysis of the mathematics and English language arts exams in Florida, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Ohio, and Texas (in this case, the TAKS), Achieve reached the following conclusions about assessments of all six states:

- (1) tests are not overly demanding;
- (2) tests should be strengthened to better measure the knowledge and skills high school graduates will need to succeed in the real world; and
- (3) states should not rely exclusively on these tests to measure everything that matters in a student’s education.⁴

Achieve found that the level of math content knowledge students need to pass high school exit exams falls, on average, at the seventh or eighth grade level internationally, while passing scores for the English language exams were at the eighth and ninth grade level. In other words, the material on the 11th grade TAKS exit exam was comparable to middle school material in most other countries. And while the Texas exams were typically in the higher range of difficulty among the six states, none of Texas subject area exams were the most rigorous in the subject under analysis.

Curriculum Rigor

The third variable that determines the quality of assessment – curriculum standards – was recently evaluated by ACT. In determine how well the TEKS prepare students for college, ACT compared the content areas of English language arts and reading, mathematics, and science with ACT curriculum standards. The 2004 report provides a detailed critique of the standards for each subject area, and concludes with the following summary comment:

“The lack of specificity, course differentiation, coverage interpretation, and qualifying achievement language in the TEKS document could very likely promote mastering lower-level skills. The acquisition of such skills doesn’t necessarily prepare students for the kind of academic work that they will be expected to produce at the college level.”⁵

This statement echoes much of the criticism of the TEKS document at the time of its adoption, that it is replete with relatively weak standards that are too numerous, repetitious, and inexplicit. These weaknesses should be expected because state curriculum standards had been founded on the document described earlier – *Learner-*

Centered Schools for Texas. This document provided a constructivist framework for curricular goals, performance standards, and teacher preparation.

Allegations of Manipulation

Fundamental challenges to the fundamental components of the state system of public education are complicated by widespread allegations of cheating in the implementation and scoring of the TAKS tests, particularly in a number of Houston and Dallas schools. Although the investigations are pending, these allegations, at best, lend credence to the conspiracy theories about accountability manipulation that have abounded over the past several years. Worse, they further undermine the credibility of the Texas standards and accountability based model.

No one doubts the dedication and integrity of the large majority of Texas educators. However, as the enormous pressure of ever-increasing transparency and accountability continues to wear on educators, it is not too soon to speculate that the perverse incentives and the culture they have nurtured combine to produce a system with too many people at all levels of responsibility with neither the competence nor the temperament to function successfully. Because standards appear arbitrary and there are no norm-referenced benchmarks for external objectivity, human nature often responds by “gaming” the system.

So Where Are We?

What does this analysis tell us about where we are? What preliminary conclusions can be drawn about the current status of public education reform in Texas?

While acknowledging remarkable progress, any honest analysis of the data must admit to the clear evidence that the easier reforms are behind us in Texas, that we are at a critical juncture, and that the most difficult phase of improving public schools is ahead.

The good news is that we currently have government policy and legislative leadership with the most aggressive reform orientation in history, and there are in fact some good reform initiatives in motion. In addition, we boast a wide range of well-intentioned reform organizations and intervention initiatives of business and education leaders. But the bad news is that we are mired in reform “incrementalism,” we continue to suffer from the inertia of the structure of public education and the resistance to true reform from well-entrenched vested interests, and even the most well-intentioned of us seem to be reluctant to be introspective about the serious deficiencies of the current Texas reform model.

In their book, *Fixing Urban Schools*, Dr. Paul Hill and Mary Beth Celio of the University of Washington describe two types of education reform – intrinsic and extrinsic.⁶ Intrinsic reform is driven by those who believe that good intentions and the inherent attractiveness of good ideas will make schools more effective; proponents of intrinsic reform are primarily those who are dedicated to the education profession and confident of the morality of education as a public enterprise free of commercial or economic motivation

and incentives. Extrinsic reform, on the other hand, is driven by those who believe that external motivation and competition have a primary role to play in more effective schools; proponents of extrinsic reform are typically not professional educators.

Essentially, in layman’s language, intrinsic reform is the “heal thyself” variety. It is becoming very clear that we have taken intrinsic reform about as far as it can take us, with top-down standards and accountability. Why is this so? Because, for all the progress we have made, we have still not fully addressed the perverse incentives embedded in the structure of public education, which remains primarily driven by inputs and compliance when it should be driven by outputs and performance. That is why the easy part of reform is behind us – because the next phase involves major changes in adult behavior and will, no doubt, require much more extrinsic reform.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The Necessity of Absolute Candor

The path to the next level begins with a principle that should be self-evident, but has somehow escaped many. We should be prepared to tell the truth, based on the:

- readily available data about the current status of public education in Texas;
- the progress of our accountability and standards-based reform efforts to date;
- the prognosis for achieving the essential universal educational proficiency of the children of Texas; and
- the daunting challenges that we face in doing so.

Does this admonition imply allegations of lying, misrepresentation, or deceit on the part of the education leadership establishment? No, but it is necessary to be candid. There are enormous stakes and vested interests involved in the survival and success of the current “one best system.” This system has been in business for almost a century and is the model that has been chosen as the Texas reform vehicle. There is very little incentive to shout, “The emperor has no clothes!”

To be brutally honest and introspective is to become unwelcome in many leadership circles and, in the current media climate, to risk high visibility criticism of those whose reputations depend on holding to the party line of “The Texas Miracle.” But total honesty and transparency is a must, because there are much larger risks to our future at stake than loyalty to any particular regime or policy paradigm.

To use just one example, when we look at the evidence on college readiness data, described previously in this report, we are doing a great disservice to parents, children, and taxpayers, not to mention our institutional credibility, when we make any attempt to sustain the fiction that a Texas high school diploma or a passing score on the TAKS exit exam represents a ticket to the real world of either post-secondary education or the workplace.

Recommended Action

Keeping in mind that every action taken or untaken should be evaluated in terms of its anticipated direct or indirect impact on Texas student achievement, the following policy steps are recommended for (1) academic standards; (2) assessment; (3) accountability; (4) reading; (5) educator quality; (6) school choice; (7) financial accountability; and (8) structural deregulation.

Recommendation 1: Academic Standards

The first step should be a complete re-examination of the premises of the Texas model of standards and accountability, and this is where the admonition to introspection should be considered. Currently, there a number of sound policy recommendations under legislative consideration, carefully crafted by knowledgeable people. The sponsors of these policy recommendations include the Governor’s Business Council, the Texas Education Reform Caucus, and the Texas Business Education Coalition, among other prominent groups. All of the recommendations include elements that will be helpful in advancing additional reform, but all of them also essentially presume the continuation, without alteration or serious review, of the established Texas model of standards and accountability – without recognizing the evidence of deficiencies that dictate some course correction.

To align curriculum standards with the goals established by the Texas Education Code, we should do the following;

- Begin with the foundational document, *Learner-Centered Schools for Texas: A Vision of Texas Educators* and reject its philosophical grounding in constructivism, a concept which envisions educators merely as guides, coaches, facilitators, and counselors to their students, who are participants in “discovery learning.” Instead, educators should be recognized as instructors of an established body of knowledge and skills that is based on objective standards; we should revise the state document of policy to reflect a teacher-centered or teacher-directed vision for student learning;
- The state should fully define “highly qualified teacher,” not just as a regulatory term in compliance with the HOUSSE (“highly objective uniform state standard of evaluation”) provisions of the *No Child Left Behind Act*, but in terms of the qualities, performance, expectations, and body of knowledge befitting the professional standards to which educators aspire;
- TEKS should be refined and strengthened to identify explicit, objective, singular grade level expectations for mathematics, English language arts, science, and social studies. The core academic standards should define the constitutional term of and meet the requirements for a “diffusion of knowledge;”
- Curriculum standards should be benchmarked to grade level proficiency from kindergarten through grade 12. Standards should culminate at grade 12 with academic proficiency that is commensurate with post-secondary readiness – a level that is based on standards established by the NAEP, national norm-referenced tests, and/or ACT. State assessments should use these standards as the basis for passing scores that reflect full grade level proficiency; and

- The Recommended High School Program, which is now the “default” curriculum allowing students to opt out, should be established as the mandatory universal curriculum for all high school students. The required high school program should incorporate a requirement for four years of core academic subjects (mathematics, science, social studies, and English language arts).

Recommendation 2: Assessment

The credibility of state assessments should be improved by removing the opportunities for possible manipulation through the discretionary adjustment of variables, and assessments should be aligned with strengthened educational standards. We should:

- Replace or at least supplement the criterion-referenced TAKS with a national norm-referenced test for grades 1-8, and develop a value-added assessment for K-12 that will facilitate the measurement of district, campus, and classroom performance, as well as measure alternative delivery systems (charters, vouchers, home schools, online schools, etc.);
- Redesign the TAKS assessments, if maintained, to measure (1) all elements of the required curriculum; (2) specific grade level proficiency; (3) proficiency that is equivalent to grade level, as benchmarked by national norm-referenced tests; (4) value-added growth in achievement; and (5) high levels of achievement (“stretch”);
- Replace high school assessments with end-of-course exams, developed by the Commissioner of Education for core academic courses in grades 9-12 that are benchmarked with ACT standards; and
- Administer the ACT test at grade 11 to assess post-secondary readiness.

Recommendation 3: Academic Accountability

Minimum standards for what is rated as “Acceptable” for school accountability should be increased and made universally applicable, and their transparency should be enhanced. To accomplish this, we must introduce the following reforms:

- A passing rate of 80 percent should be established for all subject areas as the standard for an “Acceptable” school rating, and phased in from the current threshold at a 5 percent annual increase, with the “Recognized” rating increased to 90 percent and the “exemplary” rating increased to 95 percent;
- Eliminate the Alternative Accountability System and offer new charter schools and alternative education campuses a two-year transitional period before entering the accountability system; establish performance standards for students in alternative education programs that are identical to expectations for students in the regular education program. Ultimately and as soon as possible, the primary assessment of all alternative campuses and charter schools should be based on value-added methodology;
- Include end-of-course scores as part of the high school accountability for rating the schools, using composite scores for the first five years. Require students to pass each end-of-course exam for credit toward graduation;

- Establish grade level specific assessments of reading and mathematics for grades 1 and 2, and require students to pass assessments and incorporate assessments as performance measures in the school rating system;
- Use SAT and ACT scores and participation rates as part of the school accountability rating system;
- Develop a method of calculating high school completion that does not recognize General Educational Development tests (GED) as a substitute for a high school diploma, and use high school completion rates as a standard in the school accountability rating system;
- Identify the percentage of high school graduates accepted in state universities and colleges and the percentage of students who require remedial education for each district and campus;
- Identify the number and percentage of students in English as a Second Language programs, bilingual education programs, and alternative education programs by district and campus; and
- Districts should be required to provide coupons for community college remedial instruction for 12th grade students who have completed four years of high school in the district.

Recommendation 4: Reading

It is a travesty of enormous proportions when 70-80 percent of our urban school children cannot read proficiently by the fourth grade and over 60 percent of urban 6th through 12th graders cannot comprehend their textbooks. This is particularly egregious in light of the comparison between TAKS reading test results (even after a significant standard deviation adjustment) and national norm-referenced test scores, and the wide gap between scores of white and minority children.

This literacy deficiency is the root of almost every other deficiency in student achievement, from dropout and non-completion rates to the void in high school, college, and workplace readiness. This was carefully articulated by the Koret Task Force in their recommendations on Texas education reform.

“Reading ability is an indicator of the ability to learn and to function economically and as a citizen. Reading is the key to all other academic abilities....it is also the single most important attainment of K-12 education.....Failure to improve reading will hamper the success of other policy reforms.”⁷

The reading deficiency is even more tragic when one considers that it could easily have been avoided and easily fixed. The education establishment knows how to equip teachers with the skills to instruct at-risk children to read at a very early age. We are well informed about the current weaknesses in teacher preparation and how to fix them; Secretary of Education Rod Paige provided ample description of the problem and solutions in the first of his two reports to Congress on meeting the highly qualified teacher challenge.⁸ However, the will to fix the problem is missing. The question must be asked:

When will Texans realize that the illiteracy of our young children deserves nothing less than the moral equivalent of a declaration of war by urban school districts and political and business leaders? To combat the reading deficit, we should:

- Administer national norm-referenced reading tests throughout K-12 as a supplement to, or replacement for, state assessments. If the TAKS is maintained, it should be redesigned to measure reading skills that are (1) connected with curriculum standards for the grade in all required subjects, (2) equivalent to specific grade level standards established by national norm-referenced tests, and (3) linked to vocabulary;
- For at-risk student populations, only reading curriculum that has scientifically demonstrated effectiveness for non-readers should be used, i.e., heavy phonics-based direct instruction, and its use should be standardized throughout the urban districts so that children are not penalized by the inconsistencies caused by high student and teacher mobility;
- Task forces of highly qualified teacher trainers should be employed to conduct summer training seminars in urban settings to bring teachers of at-risk students to a high standard in the delivery of effective reading instruction methodology.
- Vocabulary and literacy instruction should begin early; Texas should offer pre-kindergarten to all children, beginning with those considered at-risk. Funding for this effort, as well as for those designated for special education, should be voucherized by phasing in the current funding available for Head Start, pre-kindergarten, and other accredited child care facilities and giving parents complete choice as to their provider, using the McKay Scholarship Program for special education in Florida as an example;
- Teacher preparation programs, particularly colleges of education, that supply large numbers of teachers to at-risk urban populations should be required to install the most effective phonics-based methodologies in their elementary education curricula, protestations of “academic freedom” to the contrary notwithstanding, and have their continuing accreditation based on the value-added assessment of the student performance achieved by their graduates;
- Greatly increased time on task – including longer school days, school weeks, and school years – should be provided with concentrated corrective methodologies to under-performing students at all grade levels; and
- Chronic reading difficulties should be addressed by awarding a voucher, possibly of Title I funding, to parents of children who fail end-of-year reading assessments to receive supplemental tutoring in reading. After two years of failure, a full instructional voucher should be awarded that can be redeemed at any public or private school.

Recommendation 5: Empowerment Through School Choice

One of the extrinsic reform elements of the 21st century revolution in education will be the complete restructuring of delivery systems. This will entail a range of alternatives to the current “one best system,” the development of some of which are already well underway – including charter schools, contract schools, home schooling, and online schools. But the centerpiece of delivery system reform must be the full introduction of

competitive dynamics to the incentive structure through the adoption of comprehensive school choice in all of its manifestations, at least in larger urban counties.

School choice is the ultimate accountability system, and it would have the additional benefit of completely transforming school finance. It should be noted that school choice already exists for those who are privileged to be able to afford a private school or a home in an affluent neighborhood with a high quality public school. The substantial majority of those left behind without such choices are relatively poor, inner city, and often minority children. We owe them the same opportunity.

The major disappointment of the *No Child Left Behind Act* was that it left behind on the cutting room floor the innovation that would have provided significant incentive for change – giving parents the power to transfer children from failing schools to schools of choice, public or private. As noted by Congressman Mike Price of Indiana in a recent *USA Today* article, President Bush’s original vision for *No Child Left Behind* linked testing – to identify failing schools – and choice – as a competitive remedy; when choice was eliminated from the proposed legislation, the opportunity of improving public schools was lost.

One of the mysteries of the school choice debate over the years has been the reluctance among many, including a large number of supposedly market sensitive business leaders, to understand the dynamics of competition and how these dynamics will produce both quality education alternatives and improvements in public schools. So entrenched is the static one-size-fits-all delivery system, with its top-down mandates and accountability, that some fear the dynamics of a deregulated market for education. This concept has never been fairly tested in Texas, because religious schools, which comprise the vast majority of private schools, have never been included in the available universe of options.

Short of the ultimate goal of universal or comprehensive school choice, which is a political minefield at best, we should at least begin to increase competitive pressures and the supply of alternatives by:

- Significantly expanding the authority to increase open enrollment charter schools from the current limit of 215 to at least 1,000 – at the same time exercising more stringent due diligence on charter school applications in such matters as management, finance, and market feasibility. Full funding, including facilities funding, should be provided that is based on the average per student cost in the district in which the charter is located;
- Schools should be required to provide a coupon for supplemental or compensatory instruction to students who fail the state assessments, redeemable at any education provider approved by the Commissioner of Education;
- Students who have failed state assessments for two consecutive years should be allowed to transfer to any other public school or to use the district’s portion of state funding to enroll in a private school, with transportation provided by the district; and

- Following the example of the successful McKay Scholarship Program in Florida, we should develop a program to voucherize funding for special education and allow parents to seek their own choices among public and private providers.

Recommendation 6: Educator Quality

Any education delivery system is only as good as the educators in the school building. As Secretary Rod Paige noted in his first annual report to Congress on *Meeting the Highly Qualified Teacher Challenge* (June 2002), the teacher preparation system is “broken,” and, although Texas has done a better job than most states in raising teacher preparation standards and accountability, Texas is no exception to this observation. To transform the effectiveness of human resources in public education, every aspect of the way teachers are prepared, certified, mentored, retained, evaluated, and compensated must be based on the value they add to student achievement.

Gone is the paradigm that assumes the impact of educators is largely limited by the socio-economic and cultural environment from which children come, a paradigm linked to the landmark Coleman Report of 1966. The wrongness of this assumption has been disproved over the past several decades by a wealth of data and research demonstrating the power of a teacher to improve student achievement – regardless of the student’s background. However, the teacher preparation system remains largely mired in the constructivist, learner-centered thinking which denigrates and restricts teacher impact. The system continues to focus on in-puts, particularly what students bring to the classroom, rather than the student outcomes that teachers can produce. The system is highly controlled because licensing is primarily governed by the traditional college of education, and both the qualifications of educators and administrators are highly regulated by state bureaucracy.

Educator preparation programs must be transformed into customer-driven institutions with assessments grounded in output- and performance-based criteria, so that Texas becomes the model for value-added evaluation of such programs. To do this, teacher preparation programs, particularly the colleges of education, must adopt the goals and strategies that the leading business schools were forced to embrace several years ago to avoid irrelevancy. This means student achievement must drive colleges of education. As the Koret Task Force notes, policies that regulate the teaching profession should have one clear aim: differentiating between people who teach well and those who do not, and licensing and certification should be used only as warranted by evidence of their effects on teacher effectiveness.

To improve the quality of educator preparation programs and teacher effectiveness, several things should be done:

- Texas should fully define what it means to be a “highly qualified teacher” – not as a regulatory term, but in language that identifies the qualities and performance expected of educators. Developing this definition will require revising state policy goals for teachers that are established by the seminal document, *“Learner-Centered Schools for*

Texas: A Vision of Texas Educators” and the HOUSSSE standards adopted in response to the *No Child Left Behind Act*. Although this recommendation was introduced in a previous section, its importance justifies repetition;

- The Accountability System for Educator Preparation (ASEP) should be enhanced by the addition of a provision for a system of value-added assessment, to be developed by the Commissioner of Education, for the graduates of teacher preparation programs that is based on student achievement. Accreditation of these programs should be based on the demonstrated effectiveness of programs in producing teachers that improve student achievement;
- State policy must encourage creation of privately and publicly sponsored alternative preparation and certification programs – programs that truly offer different ways for educators to prepare for and work in schools. Through rule changes and other inducements, the profession must be opened to “let many flowers bloom” and create an atmosphere of competitive certification that links value-added assessment of the graduates with student achievement;
- Standards for teacher certification standards should be adopted that prioritize mastery of academic content, particularly in grades 5-12, and verbal and cognitive skills, particularly in grades PreK-4. New certification standards would, in turn, encourage educator preparation programs to focus on academic knowledge and skills;
- The classes of standard teacher certification should be reduced to three Generalist classifications – (1) Early childhood through 6th grade; (2) 4th through 8th grade; and (3) 6th through 12th grade – and classroom assignments should be based solely on the Generalist License. Ultimately, classroom teacher certification should evolve into a multi-step process whereby strong subject area knowledge and teaching competence is demonstrated by rigorous standardized examination and new teachers engage in a two-year apprenticeship of mentoring and value-added assessment that measures teacher impact on student achievement. The American Board Certification program should be considered as a pilot for this process;
- To supply the kind of leadership needed in a less regulated environment, Texas should adopt administrator certification standards that place more emphasis on management and leadership skills, education, and experience. We should seek the means by which more entrepreneurial talent can be recruited to education administration from non-traditional backgrounds;
- To encourage teaching excellence, state policy must be crafted to reward excellence. Teacher compensation should be restructured to link incentives to performance, first by significantly reducing the number of steps on the salary scale and then by phasing in a performance-based system at the same time that value-added assessments of student achievement becomes available at the individual classroom level. The Koret Task Force offers an attractive recommendation for an Alternative Professional Contract for principals and teachers that is worthy of serious consideration;
- A high-level public/private sector task force should be appointed to lead a cross-jurisdictional effort to attack the teacher retention problem in Texas in all of its aspects;
- State education agencies should emphasize regulatory rule making that allows for maximum flexibility for school district administrators to prudently manage their human resources. To help administrators be successful, it is essential to give them an

authority that is commensurate with their responsibilities; to hold administrators accountable, it is necessary to free administrators from regulations that hinder results; and

- The Commissioner should be authorized to allow districts to terminate ineffective educators without going beyond the requirements established by Texas law for other public employees; the age-old practice of assigning educator on seniority should cease.

Recommendation 7: Financial Accountability

The debate over the adequacy and equity of funding for public education in Texas rages on but, regardless of how it is resolved, the functional allocation of resources leaves much to be desired. According to an analysis by Educational Resource Group, LLC,⁹ education spending in Texas has increased by 43 percent over the past five years, over twice the sum of enrollment growth and inflation during that period. In addition, depending on whose data is used, about 55-60 percent of education expenditures are allocated directly to the classroom.

While some would have us believe that this is reasonable given the increasing burdens of the necessary support services, it should be noted that Texas spent 60 percent of its total personnel costs on teachers in 1965 – whereas today less than 40 percent of personnel costs is invested in teachers. The declining investment in teachers and teachers underscores the reality that resources will not be allocated properly until financial incentives are aligned with student performance.

There is a dire need for more robust reporting and a financial management system that will make funding and spending transparent, and allow accountability standards to be established for education dollars. These standards must reach to the campus level, be directly linked to academic standards, and provide sufficient information to enable district administrators, boards of trustees, and the Commissioner of Education to exercise meaningful financial oversight.

Until these objectives are accomplished, questions of equity and adequacy cannot be solved – questions that have dogged education finance in Texas for the past twenty years. The Governor’s Business Council has developed specific recommendations for developing such a system for the 79th Texas Legislature; these recommendations should be given serious consideration before the state authorizes any additional funding for public schools.

Recommendation 8: Structural Deregulation

A recent New York Times editorial alluded to the fact that the American school system, particularly high schools, “were developed a century ago in the standard factory-style format as a combination holding area and sorting device that would send roughly one-fifth of its students to college while moving the rest directly into low-skill jobs.” This is the “one best system” that, by and large, we still use today; this system should have

evolved long ago from a model emphasizing “access” to one emphasizing “proficiency,” and acquired the flexibility necessary to adapt to the new realities of a rapidly changing society.

Preparing the majority of our high school students for college or the workplace will require corrective intervention that cannot be delivered without significantly more “time on task” and greatly enhanced application of technology. It is evident that there must be major restructuring of the school year and schedule; this will necessitate broad waivers of regulation by the commissioner for districts that wish to experiment with innovative restructuring and scheduling strategies. Other impediments to innovation, such as the 22:1 class size guideline, should be eliminated or at least subject to waiver.

Consistent with the recent shift in policy focus to high school reform, the National Association of Scholars (NAS) presented the National Governors Association with specific recommendations in nine major areas to increase the quality of the nation’s high schools.¹¹ These recommendations cover changes in structure, curriculum, and staffing – several of which are similar to recommendations forwarded in this report and are worthy of serious consideration. NAS emphasizes the importance of research-based core curriculum and structural changes in delivery, with the explicit objective of proficiency and college readiness for all students. However, NAS cautions policymakers, “The most effective way to strengthen the American high school is to strengthen the K-8 curriculum and increase student achievement in reading and mathematics before students go to high school.”

As this report is published, the administration of Houston ISD is taking a bold step to establish a model for high school restructuring as administrators attempt to deal with three failing Houston high schools. For many years these high schools – and the elementary and middle schools that feed them – have woefully underserved the heavily minority population, despite decades of reform. It would be tragic if the opportunity to introduce meaningful systemic transformation is missed because of vested interests or the lack of leadership, lack of public will, or lack of support from political leaders and the business establishment.

Structural reforms currently underway in Philadelphia may represent a model for Texas and the rest of the nation. James Nevels, Chairman of the Philadelphia School Reform Commission, is now leading a major restructuring of the city’s schools. This restructuring is guided by two novel (at least in education) concepts – to treat the children they serve as their “customers,” instead of the adult constituencies, and run the schools with businesslike systems that produce a new culture of accountability for student achievement. The administrations of over 15 percent of the campuses have been reconstituted under private management, with the commission’s commitment that those who produce good results will receive more schools to manage. The results over the past two years have been impressive.

Whatever education reform model is chosen for Texas, it should be clear that “business as usual is out of business,” and that drastic restructuring of the “one best system” is long overdue. Reform will require a complete attitudinal transformation to the extrinsic approach outlined by Hill and Celio. It will also require a rejection of the idea that

structural reform equates to “experimentation” with our children and, as such, carries undue and detrimental risk.

This misguided view was deftly dispelled by Rick Hess in a recent editorial¹² that articulated the critical distinction between research-based education reforms, as they pertain to pedagogical disciplines, vs. organizational disciplines. His bottom line is that the former lends itself to the scientific method, but the latter already have validity because they are not unique to education, they draw upon a mass of experience gained in other sectors, and they are consistent across a broad swath of human activity.

Any discussion about deregulation must include the notion of “local control.” This is a long-standing and certainly a worthwhile principle, but a principle that education leaders have virtually sanctified in Texas. In the ideal world where parents can exercise comprehensive school choice and demand real accountability for student performance, there is no need for top-down, one-size-fits-all regulation. However, today we live in a culture of compliance mixed with state and local accountability for public funding – this world is driven by “voice” over “choice.” While all would like to believe that 1,100 school boards, delivering education to 4.3 million students on 7,800 campuses, are sufficiently responsive to local pressures to produce the excellence and public accountability Texans would like to have, it is naïve to assume that this is the case. Until local control is transferred out of the grip of bureaucracies into the hands of consumers, this principle will remain more an ideal than reality.

CONCLUSION

Texas now has a great opportunity to take a giant step forward in K-12 school reform. We have a strong foundation, constructed by a commitment to accountability and local control and a decade of achievement. There is great impetus for taking this step: higher standards set by the state accountability system, requirements of the *No Child Left Behind Act*, and accelerating demands for higher student achievement from the workplace. The imperative to replace Robin Hood with a new finance system provides the opportunity to move forward. This opportunity was articulated in a policy statement issued by the Texas Education Reform Caucus in September 2003, "...the Texas Legislature must make it possible for school districts to drive accountability into the classroom and every corner of district operations."

There is no question that seizing hold of this opportunity will be difficult. Old entrenched habits, vested interests, and perverse incentives die hard – and will not die without a furious fight. The next phase in the evolution of Texas education reform will not be possible without fighting and winning some major battles at the attitudinal, ideological, political, legislative, and policy levels. It will not be won without breaking down some long standing barriers of distrust among education stakeholders. None of this will be possible without the complete support of the state's major opinion leaders, primarily from the business community. The business community, which has never been a monolith in matters of education policy, must now take lead in an honest appraisal of where we are and the direction in which we need to go to revive and advance "The Texas Education Miracle."

Joel Klein, New York City school chancellor, noted in a national CEO summit on education in late 2004:

"Other than global security, I don't think there's a more important issue facing our nation – and I don't think as a nation we're remotely serious enough about the issue.....there needs to be a profound shift among educators and political leaders from a culture of 'excuse' to one of 'accountability'the whole educational system is run on the myth that we can figure out through a compliance-based model a way to manage ourselves to success.....if there was ever a set of dysfunctional incentives, it's in public education.....the most irrational set of human resource decisions you can imagine."¹³

In Texas, there are few education and business leaders talking in these terms, terms necessary if we are to continue on the forward edge of public education reform.

The current situation in Texas is analogous to the beginning of the furious debate over tort reform in the early 1990's when business leaders were energized and organized to engage and win a protracted battle against a serious threat to the state's economic viability. Even though the current state of and prognosis for public education represents the most onerous threat to our economic and cultural future, there is scant evidence that a similar leadership consensus is sufficiently energized today to move Texas public schools toward the next phase of reform. Public education reform will stagnate until unified,

state-wide opinion leaders shoulder the commitment to push hard and long for fundamental, comprehensive change. This commitment is certainly warranted, and as importantly, will be necessary to win what is certainly the civil rights revolution of the 21st century.

ENDNOTES

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13. *The K-12 Dilemma: What Can Be Done?* Chief Executive, January/February 2005.



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