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Perspective



Accreditation of Texas Public Schools: *Increasing the Value*

by Chris Patterson, research director and director of the Center for Education Policy Studies

Some say Texas has left no reform behind in a decades-long comprehensive effort to improve public schools. In just the last 10 years, the state legislature has revised standards for school accountability, assessments, and curricula. However, legislators have yet to revisit the cornerstone of school quality—state policy pertaining to accreditation of public schools.

Revising statutory requirements for public school accreditation offers legislators an opportunity to address the failure of reforms to translate elementary and middle school improvements into high school success. Strengthening accreditation would substantially improve the entire K-12 system, and increase public trust in the value of public education.

Public schools are accredited today on the basis of state law passed in 1993 that created the state school accountability system. The Texas Education Code outlines accreditation in the barest of terms:

- The code says that each school district must be accredited, and the Texas Education Agency must issue accreditation [TEC 11.001].
- As a condition of accreditation, districts must provide instruction in the essential knowledge and skills at appropriate grade levels [TEC 28.002(c)].
- Standards for accreditation are embedded in school accountability ratings. The code requires the State Board of Education to adopt rules to evaluate performance and assign school ratings of Exemplary, Recognized, Academically Acceptable, or Academically Unacceptable schools [TEC 39.072].

- School ratings are based on indicators that are identified by the code (such as results of state assessments, attendance rates, and dropout rates) [TEC 39.051].
- The commissioner of education is authorized to determine how the indicators are used to determine ratings [TEC 39.073].
- The code requires the state education agency to review and rate schools annually, and when schools run afoul of requirements for achieving an Acceptable rating (the minimum requirement for accreditation), the commissioner is authorized to investigate, intervene, and sanction.

Missing from this complex system of accreditation is any statement of law pertaining to the quality of education that public schools must provide to deserve accreditation. The job of determining what is sufficient academic quality for public school accreditation is delegated to the commissioner of education.

Since 1994 when the school accountability system was put into place, the commissioner has defined academic requirements for public school accreditation by identifying the minimum passing rate of state assessments that must be demonstrated by schools and districts to earn the rating of Academically Acceptable.

The minimum standard for school accreditation has ranged from 25 to 55 percent over the past 10 years. As shown by Table I, schools and districts have never been required to demonstrate more than 50 percent of their students—students enrolled in regular education

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and not provided special services for learning disabilities—pass all sections of the annual state assessment.¹

Table 1
Minimum Standard for School Accreditation

Year	Math	Reading	Social Studies	Science	Writing
1994	25%	25%			25%
1995	25%	25%			25%
1996	30%	30%			30%
1997	35%	35%			35%
1998	40%	40%			40%
1999	45%	45%			45%
2000	45%	45%			45%
2001	50%	50%			50%
2002	55%	55%	50%		55%
2003					
2004	35%	50%	50%	25%	50%
2005	35%	50%	50%	25%	50%

Over the years, it has been argued that these standards provide a reasonable assurance of academic quality because low accreditation/accountability standards allow public schools to adjust to more challenging assessments and result in an overall, long-term increase in academic proficiency for all students. This argument contends school standards should be low when more rigorous tests initially push down passing rates, and made higher as student achievement catches up with new academic expectations.

Independent tests of student achievement suggest this logic has limited merit. Low standards for accountability/accreditation, paired with more difficult tests, seem to have improved academic achievement in Texas’ elementary and middle schools (according to scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress), but shown no discernable academic benefit in Texas’ high schools (according to ACT and SAT scores). In short, this approach has not demonstrated a positive academic impact across the grades, from kindergarten through high school.

Accrediting schools on the basis of a 50 percent success rate for student achievement *does* fulfill the legislature’s constitutional obligation to ensure that public education provides a diffusion of knowledge, according the recent Texas Supreme Court ruling on West Orange Cove.²

Although state policy for public school accreditation passes legal muster, how is accreditation judged by the court of public opinion? Experiences in daily lives suggest most people expect *more* than a 50 percent success rate to be assured about quality. For students, minimum expectations for performance are generally no lower than 70 percent. For outcomes other than public education, expectations are generally even higher than 70 percent for such things as hospital stays, car repair, and holiday cruises.

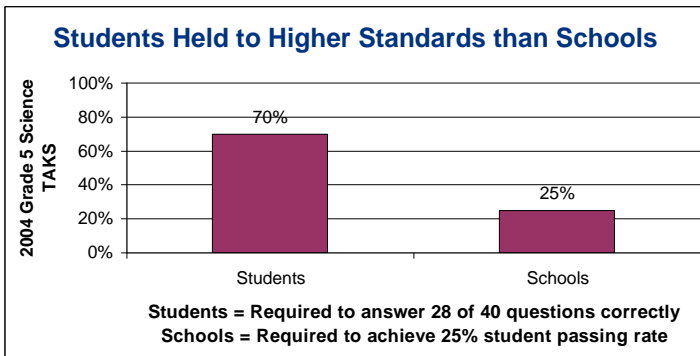
Ensuring that school accreditation sets a high threshold for academic success is important. More important, however, is the necessity to ensure that the measurement of the academic threshold really does represent academic success at a level that people broadly recognize as reasonable. How much credibility would school accreditation have if schools were required to demonstrate a 90 percent passing rate on assessments that measured academic proficiency at a level far below what other states generally identify as proficient?

The value of accreditation for Texas public schools depends heavily on what it means to pass TAKS. Unfortunately, there is limited information available about the academic rigor of TAKS. Texans cannot compare results of state assessment with results posted on independent, norm-referenced tests because Texas, unlike many other states, does not administer both types of tests. Only the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) offers a way to benchmark academic proficiency of Texas public school students in the early grades. When proficiency standards for 4th and 8th grade reading and math of states are compared with standards for proficiency set by NAEP, Texas ranks among the five states with the lowest standards for proficiency in the nation.³

Missing from the complex system of accreditation is any statement of law pertaining to the quality of education that public schools must provide to deserve accreditation.

Two conclusions can be drawn. First, state policy for accrediting public schools does not establish a definitive threshold for academic quality. Second, state policy allows schools and districts to earn accreditation on the basis of low academic expectations. The percentage of students who must pass state assessments as a prerequisite for school accreditation is low. State standards for academic proficiency are also low.

Table 2



How can Texas strengthen accreditation to ensure academic quality? State policymakers will find few ideas by looking at state-level policies developed throughout the nation. The most recent national report on state-level accreditation policies was published in 1998 by the Education Commission of the States.⁴ Although this report is almost 10 years old, it is likely that most states, like Texas, have not significantly altered state-level accreditation policies.

Thirty of 50 states surveyed in the report have state systems that accredit schools; however, several of these 30 states make accreditation voluntary and only 17 of the 30 states link student performance to accreditation. Three states do offer interesting approaches to accreditation:

- In *Virginia*, standards for accrediting public schools are specifically designed to “provide an essential foundation of educational programs of high quality in all schools for all students”...and “encourage continuous appraisal and improvement of the school program for raising student achievement.”⁵ In the 2003-04 school years, public schools in Virginia had to demonstrate 70 percent of eligible students passed assessments in each of the four core academic areas.⁶
- In *Indiana*, accreditation standards require school districts to demonstrate continuous improvement

Strengthening the state system of public school accreditation offers a means to substantially increase academic quality for all students, from kindergarten through grade 12.

in academic achievement.⁷ In the 2005-06 school year, for example, schools with a 70 percent passing rate on state assessments were required to demonstrate 1 to 3 percent gains during the year.

- In *Las Vegas*, *Clark County School District* supplements state accreditation standards with a management process system.⁸ Using the ISO 9001 Standards of Quality Management, the district benchmarks operational outcomes and engages in continuous improvement to improve academic performance, reduce costs, and increase public confidence.


Only in the exception, rather than the rule, will state policymakers find a model for strengthening public school accreditation in private education, where academic standards are also given short shrift. Only one of the 15 private school accrediting bodies examined for this report (4 specific to Texas and 11 national)⁹ includes a standard for academic proficiency.

While most accreditation bodies do require private schools to meet students’ academic needs and provide a balanced curriculum, only the Independent Schools Association of the Southwest in the group examined sets an absolute, objective academic standard. It requires elementary schools to provide the foundation for students to work at a level in secondary school which will prepare students for college success, and requires high schools to prepare students to meet the entrance requirements of four-year colleges and universities.¹⁰ Surprisingly, many private school accrediting bodies require private schools to provide instruction comparable to public schools or to meet public school standards.

The absence of a national model for strong state-level accreditation provides Texas an opportunity, once again, to show leadership. If public school accreditation is contingent on standards that are widely accepted as academic proficiency, it is likely significantly more

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students will acquire the academic skills necessary to succeed in high school and be prepared for college or skilled vocational training. Research is clear; a strong academic foundation is required for students to advance through the grades successfully and to master advanced instruction.¹¹ In Texas, high school success is limited by low standards for proficiency in elementary and middle schools, and post-secondary success is limited by low high school standards.¹²

Today, state accreditation fulfills only half of what dictionaries define as the meaning of accreditation. Although state law does require Texas public schools to meet standards, there is no statutory provision for assuring any type of academic quality. By making sure that accreditation certifies the academic quality that students need for success, Texans can make significant, system-wide improvements and increase public confidence in the value of public education. 

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Policy Recommendations

- Create a 70 percent statutory academic threshold for accreditation standards;
- Link academic standards for assessment, accountability, and accreditation to (1) benchmark proficiencies developed by NAEP or a widely used commercial test, such as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills; and (2) academic proficiencies required for success in entry level college courses and professionally accredited vocational programs;
- Incorporate statutory standards for continuous annual academic improvement in school accreditation; and
- Link academic and financial standards in school accreditation by encouraging districts to establish ISO accreditation.

Endnotes

¹Standards for Acceptable ratings in annual accountability manuals are published by the Texas Education Agency and available at <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/accountability.html>. Blanks in the table indicate years when tests were not administered or ratings were not issued, due to introduction of a new testing regime.

²Opinion of the Supreme Court of Texas, No. 04-1144, No. 05-0145, and No. 05-0148, issued Nov. 22, 2005, available at <http://www.supreme.courts.state.tx.us/Historical/2005/nov/041144.pdf>: 65.

³John Chubb et al., Comparison of Texas assessment standards with NAEP 4th and 8th grade math and reading proficiency standards, "Do We Repair the Monument," *Education Next*, available at <http://www.educationnext.org/20052/8.html>.

⁴"State-level Policies Regarding Accreditation in Public Schools," *ECS StateNotes*, Education Commission of the States, 1998, available at <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/14/38/1438.htm>.

⁵Regulations Establishing Standards For Accrediting Public Schools In Virginia, Draft Amended Oct. 26, 2005, Virginia Department of Education, available at <http://www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/Accountability/proposed-SOA-regs.pdf>: 6.

⁶Regulations Establishing Standards For Accrediting Public Schools in Virginia, 8 VAC 20-131-10, available at <http://www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/Accountability/soafulltxt.pdf>: 33.

⁷Accreditation Requirements, Indiana State Board of Education, available at <http://www.doe.state.in.us/accreditation/accredreq.html>.

⁸Clark County School District Management Process System, available at <http://www.ccsd.net/mps/>.

⁹The list of private school accrediting bodies will be provided on request.

¹⁰Standards for Accreditation, Independent Schools Association of the Southwest, available at http://www.isasw.org/aboutisas/accredi_standardsformember.asp.

¹¹Omar S. Lopez, "The Relationship of the Texas High School Curriculum to College Readiness," Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, Austin, TX, 1999; and Clifford Adelman, "Answers in the Tool Box: Academic Intensity, Attendance Patterns, and Bachelor's Degree Attainment, U.S. Department of Education, 1999, available at <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/toolbox/Exec.html>.

¹²Ibid; Omar S. Lopez, "Determining the Education Pipeline," Texas Public Policy Foundation, Summer Legislative Conference, Austin, TX, Sept. 6, 2002, available at <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2002-09-06-educationpipeline.pdf>; and "College Readiness of the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) Compared to ACT's Standards for Transition, ACT Information for Life's Transitions," ACT, Austin, TX, 2005.

