



Testimony

State Board of Education Testimony

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Good afternoon. I am Brooke Dollens Terry, an education policy analyst with the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

As you all know, one of primary goals of education is to teach a child how to read and write well. Unfortunately, our public schools are not doing a good job teaching these skills. More than 162,000 college students needed remedial education at Texas public higher education institutions in the fall of 2006 to be able to do college-level work in reading, writing, or math.¹ These students are graduating from Texas high schools deficient in the basics.


In addition, many adults in Texas can't read. 24 percent of Texas adults read below the fifth grade level and one in six Texas adults cannot read warnings or medicine labels according to Literacy Austin.² Literacy can be the key to opportunity and the way out of poverty.

Many students are not learning adequate writing skills in school which is a necessary skill for success in college and the workplace. College students need writing skills for essays, blue book exams and term papers. High school graduates going directly into the workforce need writing skills as well. The National Commission on Writing finds that two-thirds of salaried employees at large American companies have some type of writing responsibility.³ Yet a 2006 survey found that 81 percent of employers viewed recent high school graduates as "deficient in written communications" needed for letters, memos, formal reports, and technical reports.⁴

Our public schools need to focus on teaching the basics of reading and writing. We support higher standards and believe the proposed English/Language Arts standards will help schools improve.

The proposed standards are more rigorous than current standards, are easy to understand, and are very specific. It is also important to note that they been reviewed and approved by national curriculum expert Dr. Sandra Stotsky and five Texas experts from various universities and a Scottish Rite hospital (Dr. Paige Ferguson, Dr. David Chard, Dr. Alfred Tatum, and Dr. Karen Averitt). It is my understanding that one expert has expertise on the needs of English language learners and another expert has expertise on the needs of special education students

As you move forward on adopting these standards, I recommend that the "suggested" reading list be only used as a guide for schools and that local school districts maintain local control over which books they choose.

I commend the Board for raising standards. I hope that all teachers will raise the rigor in their classrooms and will not shy away from using open-ended test questions and assigning essays. I also hope that the State Board of Education will consider putting essays on the English and history end-of-course exams. Ultimately, for all of our students to prosper and succeed they need to know how to read. 

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¹ Brooke Terry, "The Cost of Remedial Education," Texas Public Policy Foundation (Sept. 2007) 1, <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2007-09-PP25-remediation-bt.pdf>.

² Phone conversation with Literacy Austin, Program of Lifeworks, March 25, 2008.

³ National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools and Colleges. *Writing: A ticket to work... Or a ticket out: A survey of business leaders*. New York: The College Board (2004) http://www.writingcommission.org/prod_downloads/writingcom/writing-ticket-to-work.pdf.

⁴ Casner-Lotto, J. & Barrington, L. *Are they really ready to work?* New York: The Conference Board (2006).