



Support for Texas' New A-F Academic School District and Campus Accountability System

Testimony before the Texas Education Association

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Texas Student Reading and Math Results are Lackluster and Declining

According to the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) (annual assessment given to all third- to eighth-graders in reading and math), 55 percent of Texas third-graders are reading below grade level; 52 percent of Texas third-graders are doing math below grade level; and 51 percent of Texas eighth-graders are reading below grade level.

According to the April 2018 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Texas reading scores are some of the lowest in the nation and declining: Texas ranks 46th in fourth-grade reading (down from 40th in 2015) and 42nd in eighth-grade reading (down from 39th in 2015). Further, 84 percent of Texas students do not attain a college-ready score on the SAT/ACT, including many students from high-income areas. In addition, the achievement gaps between white and minority children are persistent. In a state with a growing number of economically disadvantaged students, we must focus on measuring and improving these student results.

Why Is School District and Campus Academic Accountability so Important?

There is no school district or campus academic accountability system that can perfectly capture all of the critical learning, student engagement, athletics, and other programs happening daily in our Texas schools. **But, the most critical obligation of our schools is to ensure that all Texas students—regardless of their background or neighborhood—are learning and growing at grade level or above each year, especially in reading and math. Therefore, we must hold schools accountable.**

More importantly, most Texas students are assigned to their schools by ZIP code or school line, with no meaningful choice in the matter. As a result, thousands of Texas students are perpetually trapped in poorly performing schools, where they simply are not learning. In a situation where school districts have a monopoly on education and on students' school assignment, it is imperative that Texas parents and students understand academic outcomes, so that failing schools are identified for a quick turnaround.

In addition, without district and campus accountability systems, vast differences in student performance between schools teaching economically disadvantaged students and wealthier student populations can grow undeterred over time. Further, there is no consistent way to measure whether students are learning or growing and no way to make comparisons across

Key Points

- The critical task of our schools is to make sure all students are reading and doing math at grade level. Texas students' reading and math results are lackluster and declining; 55% of third-graders read below grade level according to the Texas' STAAR.
- To improve student results, we must be highly transparent about how are schools are doing. Texas' new first-of-its kind A-F Accountability System will transparently give each school district in Texas an A, B, C, D, or F rating starting in August of 2018, and a campus rating starting in August of 2019.
- Texas' A-F Accountability System is fair, easy to understand, allows for local ratings, provides that all districts can earn an A, and is partly based on the STAAR test, which is developed by Texas teachers.
- A similar transparent A-F system in Florida is associated with improved student results and new school choices for parents and students. In fact, Florida is one of the only states with improving reading and math scores on the Nation's Report Card (NAEP).

similar districts or schools. Additionally, children can be moved from grade to grade, unable to read or do math at grade level.

Texas' One-of-a-Kind A-F Accountability System Is Transparent and Fair

HB22 (85th Legislature) created Texas' A-F Academic School District and Campus Accountability System, which is a transparent, first-of-its-kind method for determining academic performance. Starting in August of 2018, each district will get an A, B, C, D, or F rating from the Texas Education Agency (TEA). Starting in August 2019, each individual campus will also get a rating. The system will allow parents, students, taxpayers, policymakers, and educators to—

- Ensure the \$114 billion that taxpayers spend on education each biennium is monitored.
- Understand how schools and groups of students compare to others across Texas.
- Incentivize improvement in student performance to go from D or F to A or B ratings.
- Recognize schools with high levels of student performance so that best practices can replicate.
- Identify D and F rated schools so that turnaround efforts can be deployed to help students.
- Improve student results by pressuring all schools—even in high wealth areas—to improve student performance, for example by growing students from “meets grade level performance” to “masters grade level performance.”
- Measure if economically disadvantaged and minority students are progressing.
- Determine if statewide, district, and campus student performance is getting better or worse over time.

Texas' A-F Academic Accountability System is transparent, thoughtfully designed, and the first of its kind in the nation. The Texas A-F Academic District and Campus Accountability System—

- Utilizes easy to understand and meaningful A-F letter grades for districts and schools.
- Allows for a school district to design its own “local” campus accountability ratings.
- Relies in part on the STAAR test, which is developed with Texas teachers and is the only assessment that allows for statewide, uniform student performance measurement and growth comparisons.
- Provides that all school districts and schools can earn an A grade. There is no forced bell curve.
- Will remain the same for at least five years so that school districts and campuses that improve will receive higher grades over time (assuming no significant legislative changes).

Importantly, the new Texas system is very fair. Previous accountability systems sometimes gave schools with high levels of economically disadvantaged students poor ratings mainly based on raw STAAR passage rates. However, Texas' new system addresses many problems that existed in previous national and Texas academic accountability systems by giving school districts and campuses significant credit for—

- Student growth. Even if a campus has many students that do not attain grade level STAAR performance, the campus can still earn an A, so long as those students are growing and learning, in combination with other positive outcomes.
- High-performing, economically disadvantaged children. Even if a campus has many economically disadvantaged students, it can still earn an A if the campus is performing well when compared to other campuses with similar numbers of economically disadvantaged students, in combination with other positive outcomes.

A similar transparent A-F accountability system in Florida has vastly improved student results. In fact, Florida is one of the only states where student results are improving on the Nation's Report Card (NAEP) in reading and math. In addition, Florida has passed legislation to allow students to have many more choices, and thereby, leave their previously assigned D and F graded school campuses for another option.

References

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[“Nation's report card: 'Something very good is happening in Florida'”](#) by Leslie Postal, *Orlando Sentinel* (April 10, 2018).

[“Texas Public Education Outcomes”](#) Presentation by Texas Commissioner of Education Mike Morath, Texas Commission on Public School Finance, (Jan. 23, 2018).



Kara Belew, J.D., CPA, is an attorney and accountant with expertise in public education finance and policy. She served both Gov. Perry and Gov. Abbott in key education and budget positions. She recently served as Gov Abbott's statewide budget director, focusing on franchise and property tax relief. As the senior education advisor at the Texas Public Policy Foundation's Center for Innovation in Education, Kara is devoted to ensuring that the \$114 billion in taxpayer dollars spent on public education each biennium is utilized to improve student outcomes across Texas, and not on water parks and expensive administration buildings. In addition, Kara works to ensure that taxpayers, parents, legislators, and educators are informed about Texas' dismal student results. She also focuses on policies that will support every child in Texas having good school options in their neighborhood, because no child should be trapped in a failing Texas school.

Currently, despite the tremendous and ever-increasing taxpayer investment in public education, only 16 percent of Texas students graduate college-ready. That means thousands of children—even those in wealthy Texas neighborhoods—are graduating without the knowledge and skills necessary for success. Texas can and should do better. One way to improve student outcomes is to hold school districts and individual schools accountable for ensuring more Texas students are reading and doing math at grade level by being transparent about student results and supporting Texas' new A-F Academic Accountability System, wherein every Texas school will be assigned an A, B, C, D, or F letter grade.

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