



Testimony Before the Texas House Committee on Public Education Regarding the A-F Accountability System

by Kara Belew, Senior Education Policy Advisor

HB 3904 — TPPF Position: Against

Rationale:

The most fundamental obligations of our schools is to teach our children to read and do math at grade level or above. Parents, students, taxpayers, and legislators have a right to know if our schools are teaching our students to read and do math at grade level. Now more than ever, Texans need accurate information about school performance, as taxpayers may be asked to invest an additional \$5 billion per year—on top of the \$62 billion they are already spending—on public education.

The new Texas [A-F School District and School Accountability System](#) currently gives accurate information about whether Texas children can read and perform math at grade level or above. The system has three “Domains” to measure student performance. Importantly, in elementary and middle school, Domain I’s focus is on the number of children who can actually read and do math at or above grade level as measured by the STAAR test. Hence, it measures our schools’ most fundamental and important goals. Domain I, along with the other Domains:

- Helps Texans understand how many children can *actually* read and do math at grade level at their school, school district, and statewide.
- Provides incentive for improvement in student achievement by encouraging school districts to take children from approaching grade level to meeting grade level to mastering grade level.
- Recognizes and rewards schools with high numbers of students performing at grade level or above.

2018 Texas Student Performance STAAR			
	Estimated Number of Students Below Grade Level	Percent Below Grade Level	Change From 2017
3rd Grade			
Reading	233,565	57%	Declining
Math	217,174	53%	Declining
8th Grade			
Reading	203,224	51%	Declining
Math	195,255	49%	Improving
Science	191,270	48%	Improving

2017 Texas Student Performance - Nations Report Card (NAEP)			
	National Rank	Percent of Students Below Proficient	Change From 2015
4th Grade			
Reading	46th lowest	71%	Declining
Math	19th lowest	59%	Declining
8th Grade			
Reading	42nd lowest	72%	Declining
Math	25th lowest	67%	Declining

While there are some good reforms in HB 3904, the changes to the state’s A-F Accountability System will undermine its *transparency* and *accuracy* to the detriment of students. It does this by overemphasizing and measuring extracurricular activities and other programs and practices that are not proven to improve student outcomes.

HB 3904 may result in further declines in Texas student results. As a consequence, TPPF does not support this legislation. Specifically, HB 3904 would harm student outcomes by:

- Obscuring student achievement data and providing misleading information to parents, teachers, and taxpayers; for example, school district could receive an A and B letter grade in Domain I and other domains even if extremely high numbers of their students are not reading and or doing math at grade level and/or not growing when compared to similar districts.
- No longer holding school accountable for achieving grade level or above performance for all students.
- Holding school districts accountable for and encouraging districts to spend time and resources on extracurricular programs that are *not demonstrated* to improve student results, including interscholastic events.

Simply put: Should a school district receive an “A” when its students can read and do math at grade level or when its children are participating in extracurricular activities?

Further, changes to the Texas [A-F School District and School Accountability System](#) are not necessary. School districts that are teaching high levels of students in poverty or students that start school behind grade level [can still receive a high grade](#) overall and in Domain II, so long as their students are learning and growing compared to other schools with similar student populations. In addition, HB 22—a major accountability system overhaul—was just passed in 2017. School districts need year-over-year stability in measuring student results, and HB 3904 disrupts HB 22’s implementation.

HB 4242 — TPPF Position: Against

Rationale:

In most cases, HB 4242 would prevent implementation of the state assessment performance labels, sanctions, and interventions based on 2018-2019 STAAR results.

Currently, [606,000 Texas students attend one of Texas’ 1,066 traditional schools rated D or F](#) by the state’s [A-F School District and School Accountability System](#). This means that more than 1 in 10 Texas students sits in a classroom where very little learning is taking place. Pausing interventions for these schools—not just in reading, but in math, science, and writing—could mean another year of learning lost for hundreds of thousands of Texas students.

The pause in the 2018-2019 intervention schedule is supposedly because questions have been raised about the [readability of STAAR passages](#). However, according to the TEA, the [STAAR is a fair and accurate measure of student](#) reading performance. Consider the following facts about the [STAAR test](#):

- Current *Texas classroom teachers in the tested grade and subject* review and approve all STAAR questions.
- All questions are field-tested before being utilized for accountability purposes.
- Parents and teachers can go online and see all STAAR test questions for every student, as well as their student’s answer, the answer rationale, and how the question aligns to the TEKS.
- The STAAR reading test indicates 54 percent of Texas children read below grade level. That is similar to the outcomes in math (50 percent below grade level) and science.

Further, and more importantly, the Nation's Report Card (NAEP)—the gold standard for testing—indicates Texas' urban districts are failing to teach children to read at a proficient level and Texas' national rank is declining when compared to other states.

Texas achievement gaps by urban district on NAEP TUDA 2017			
	Percent of white children that are proficient	Percent of African American children that are proficient	Percent of Hispanic children that are proficient
4th Grade Reading			
Austin ISD	67%	17%	19%
Dallas ISD	Not Available	10%	15%
Ft. Worth ISD	49%	13%	15%
Houston ISD	58%	10%	16%
8th Grade Math			
Austin ISD	61%	12%	23%
Dallas ISD	Not Available	9%	15%
Ft. Worth ISD	41%	6%	16%
Houston ISD	53%	11%	15%
4th Grade Math			
Austin ISD	73%	26%	30%
Dallas ISD	Not Available	19%	33%
Ft. Worth ISD	62%	12%	25%
Houston ISD	70%	20%	30%
8th Grade Math			
Austin ISD	70%	11%	21%
Dallas ISD	Not Available	13%	19%
Ft. Worth ISD	46%	8%	18%
Houston ISD	67%	13%	21%

Finally, it is undisputed that some Texas schools with high populations of economically disadvantaged students and English Language Learners are achieving a high level of reading at grade level performance.

Putegnat Elementary	
Subject	Percent of students performing at grade level
Reading	69%
Math	74%
Demographics	
Economically Disadvantaged Students	99%
English Language Learners	78%
Hispanic Students	97%

HB 2983 — TPPF Position: On

Rationale:

Previously, the Texas Education Agency utilized confusing and misleading terms to describe student outcomes, including “Level II: Satisfactory.” However, in Texas’ new [A-F School District and School Accountability System](#), parents, teachers, school districts, and taxpayers were empowered with meaningful and actionable labels, that encourage continuous improvement. Specifically, parents are told when their student:

- **Did not meet grade level.** This means their child does not have enough understanding of the material and did not meet the grade-level learning goals.
- **Approached grade level.** This means their child showed some knowledge of the material but did not show an understanding of some of the most important parts.
- **Met grade level.** This means their child showed a good understanding of the subject material and is ready for the next grade.
- **Mastered grade level.** This means their child showed a strong understanding of the subject material and is well-prepared for success in the next grade.

HB 2983 encourages a focus and consequences based on whether a student receives a “minimum satisfactory adjusted scale score.” This is inconsistent with the recently adopted “meets grade level” terminology and labeling, could encourage TEA to revert back to using difficult-to-understand labels to describe student performance, and could confuse parents and teachers trying to determine the proper course of action based on STAAR results. ★



Kara L. 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, Belew 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, Belew 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.

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