

## Seat Time and Competency-Based Education

### The Issue

Student attendance, not student attainment, is the engine of Texas schools.

Texas's recent school finance reforms placed a strong and appropriate emphasis on student outcomes. However, Texas school districts are funded based on the number of students who attend their campuses. "Attendance" itself is measured by whether a student is physically present on the premises of a school campus. Therefore, Texas schools are funded based on the number of seats they can regularly fill with students.

Seat time, or the amount of time in a classroom that a student spends studying a particular subject, was an invention of the turn of the last century that took the place of mastery-based admissions standards for higher education institutions.

The time-and-place-based system for measuring education has persisted not because it provided a means to measure student learning outcomes, but because it provided a convenient way to measure inputs into the educational system, as well as custodial childcare.

Ultimately, this means that schools are funded on an inputs-based model, not an outcomes-based model. Regardless of whether students are passing courses or standardized tests, whether or not families are pleased with the education being offered, whether or not students graduate able to read or compute, whether or not those graduates are prepared for life or career outside those classroom seats, as long as students show up, schools get paid.

Despite a rising bipartisan chorus of criticism for this system, the challenge posed to reform has been the fact that the administration and funding of education relies on this method, and there is not a consensus on alternatives to the status quo.

In 2015, the Texas Legislature took a small step to increase flexibility in seat time, allowing schools to report instructional time in minutes instead of days. House Bill 2610 moved the requirement from a set number of days (180) that students must receive instruction on campus to an equivalent number of minutes (75,600). Though it may appear pedantic, this move allowed greater flexibility in creating or adjusting district schedules. However, it left the underlying reliance on seat time in place.

Due to COVID-19, millions of Texas students all became remote students in spring 2020. Students were no longer in their usual seats, and that may not again be the norm for some time. Seat time can help track teacher inputs in this format, but it bears less relevance. In virtual contexts, synchronous and asynchronous instructional methods were deployed by teachers, but the number of synchronous minutes could not equal the number of in-person instructional minutes required by Texas law. Thus, Texas school districts operated under waivers in order to receive funding for instructional support in the spring, and they are again

operating under waivers this school year in order to offer remote learning to students. While these issues have been highlighted by the COVID-19 crisis, they have implications throughout K-12 funding.

Especially in the wake of COVID-19, competency-based education is garnering more attention. Competency-based education focuses on concept mastery and allows students more flexibility to advance or linger based on their needs.

Blended learning models (see "Serving Students Through Virtual and Blended Learning") often include a strong competency-based learning component. Math programs like the popular [Khan Academy](#) use a competency-based approach, and Texas's Math Innovation Zones use a similar structure.

As districts are relying on remote instruction, they are by necessity relying on indicators other than seat time to gauge student progress.

Creating flexibility in seat time is particularly salient for career and technical education (CTE). CTE, by its nature, is based on the concept of mastery. Because of this, moving away from mandatory requirements for contact hours or seat time has the potential to create even more robust apprenticeship, work-based learning, and technical pathways for high school students.

An example of this model is Idaho's Advanced Opportunities Initiative, under which schools provide students with a fund beginning in seventh grade to use toward dual enrollment, online courses beyond a full course load, work-based learning, industry certifications, and other career readiness preparation. In Texas, the CTE allocation of 35% above the basic full-time student equivalent funding could be made more flexible in order to allow students enrolled in programs of study to pursue options that can accelerate their readiness for college and career.

Allowing learning to take place outside the classroom, including in work-based learning settings, such as approved apprenticeship programs, may require adjustments in our system of assessment. The Every Student Succeeds Act, the latest authorization of federal funding for education (excluding one-time stimulus funds), included a [pilot program](#) to allow states more flexibility in the design of their student assessments. To date, Louisiana, New Hampshire, Georgia, and North Carolina are participating, and New Hampshire's pilot is explicitly competency-based. Other states (such as Idaho) have also pursued ways to measure competency. Last session, the Texas Legislature passed [HB 3906](#), which creates optional interim assessments that can be administered during the year and an opening for portfolio writing assessments. These previous measures may provide a framework and examples for Texas to create a path forward.

## **The Facts**

- Texas schools are funded by student attendance, not student achievement.
- The COVID-19 pandemic highlights the drawbacks of using input- or attendance-based school funding models.
- The pandemic has also generated an increase in interest in competency-based models, which offer students, especially those in CTE programs, more flexibility.
- HB 3906, which creates optional interim assessments and openings for writing portfolios, can help provide a framework for a path forward.

## **Recommendations**

- Make the CTE allocation of 35% above the basic full-time student equivalent funding more flexible in order to allow students enrolled in programs of study to pursue options which can accelerate their readiness for college and career.
- Allow school districts to use a portion of their CTE allocation to partner with local businesses to create work-based learning opportunities.
- Allow students to demonstrate readiness for college through a variety of testing options. Currently, the SAT and ACT and the College Board's TSIA tests are the only options. The TEA should create a list of tests that students can take to demonstrate college readiness.
- Consider what models of assessment would be most appropriate to a competency-based learning structure, especially in CTE subjects.

## **Resources**

- [Improving Outcomes for Texas Career and Technical Education Students](#) by Erin Davis Valdez, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Dec. 2019).
- [Moving Beyond Seat-Time](#), ExcelinEd (Nov. 2018).
- [Blended Learning for Texas](#) by James Golsan, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Jan. 2013).
- [Maximizing Assessment Flexibility, Pt. 1](#), ExcelinEd (Sept. 2018).
- [Maximizing Assessment Flexibility, Pt. 2](#), ExcelinEd (Sept. 2018).
- [Career and Financial Outcomes of Graduates in Competency-based Higher Education Programs, Part I](#), by Thomas K. Lindsay, Joseph Goldman, Phoebe Long, and Lillian Leone, Texas Public Policy Foundation (March 2018).
- [Guidelines for Outcomes-based Funding at Four-year Universities](#) by Trevor McGuire, Texas Public Policy Foundation (June 2017).