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**TESTIMONY OF THE TEXAS FEDERATION OF TEACHERS
ON SB 1031
REGARDING END-OF-COURSE EXAMS AND
A "SMARTER TESTING" AGENDA
MARCH 20, 2007**

SB 1031 takes a welcome step forward on some necessary testing reforms but still lacks essential elements of a comprehensive, "smarter testing" reform agenda.

Support for End-of-Course Exams

We support the provisions of SB 1031 that replace the high-school exit-level TAKS with end-of-course exams in core subjects in grades 9-11. A large majority of our members in surveys and in local town-hall meetings have endorsed this change as one that will focus the test on what teachers actually teach at the relevant grade levels.

Nearly 80 percent of our members responding to a January 2007 survey favored replacing the exit-level TAKS exam with end-of-course tests in high school. A typical comment came from high-school social-studies teacher Richard Goodwin of our Alliance/AFT local in Dallas ISD, who said: "Almost 40 percent of the questions on my ninth-grade geography final covered eighth-grade content. If I spend time reviewing eighth-grade content, it is at the expense of the ninth-grade curriculum which I have been hired to teach...a classic example of a 'Catch-22.'"

TFT also supports the proposal to change the exit-level graduation standard to one that more accurately reflects a student's cumulative achievement level, as measured by all the tested core courses in high school—not merely by one standardized test. While this reform eases the rigidity of the exit-level requirement, we believe still more alternative pathways to graduation should be considered, giving more weight to the teacher's evaluation of a student's overall academic performance. But this bill makes a good start.

Issues Not Addressed by SB 1031

Our members have identified four major problems with the current overemphasis on standardized testing that are not addressed by this bill but still should be as it evolves further.

Excessive testing: Eighty-seven percent of our members in a 2005 survey reported significant loss of instructional time caused by excessive testing. This bill does not address the problem caused by layer upon layer of test preparation, practice TAKS tests, campus and district benchmark tests, field tests, administration of TAKS tests, and administration of still other standardized tests, all adding up to a major loss of time that

could be devoted to real teaching and learning. Teachers tell us that a quarter or more of their total class days have been taken over by standardized testing in all these guises.

One fourth-grade teacher at a town-hall meeting on testing in San Antonio spoke for many when she said: "I have been forced to become a drill sergeant battering my poor students with a barrage of TAKS practice after TAKS practice, simulation after simulation, until I have thoroughly suffocated their natural curiosity and yen for learning." Another teacher said: "I asked a student the title of the last book he'd read. He replied: "That testing booklet."

Deteriorating educational quality: Ninety-three percent of our members said on our survey that the quality of education in areas not covered by the TAKS exam has been adversely affected by the emphasis on TAKS scores. For example, a physical-education teacher in San Antonio ISD said: "What the TAKS test means to me and our program at the elementary level is that regular classroom teachers are feeling the pressure so much that they pull students out of physical education classes on a regular basis." This teacher lamented the fact that overemphasis on testing is undermining efforts to address childhood obesity and general lack of physical fitness. Teachers of other "non-core" subjects across the curriculum report the same crowding-out of important subject matter thanks to TAKS testing.

Teachers in core courses as well report that educational quality is degraded by the overemphasis on TAKS. Seventy-two percent say TAKS emphasis has caused their school to pay less attention to gifted and talented students. Forty percent say it has led to reduced attention for special-education students. Fifty-six percent report that their students in regular-education programs are receiving less attention because of the TAKS emphasis.

Compounding the problem: Given the excessive emphasis on standardized testing, it should come as no surprise that more than 92 percent of members in our survey opposed tying incentive pay for teachers to the standardized test scores of teachers' students. Bonuses based largely on standardized tests, along with punitive state policies targeting campuses that fall short on any one of the state's many test-driven performance indicators, both tend to make the standardized state exams even more the be-all, end-all of our educational system, to the detriment of our students.

Contradictory standards: One other major problem not addressed by SB 1031 is the contradiction between our homegrown state accountability system and the system required under the federal No Child Left Behind Act. Parents and educators alike understand that there is something seriously out of whack when exactly the same reading and math scores can yield an unacceptable rating under one system and simultaneously earn an acceptable rating under the other.

Essential Elements of a “Smarter Testing” Agenda

The legislature this session can repair these defects of the current testing regime. As part of a new policy of what we call “smarter testing,” here’s how we recommend you do it:

- Let individual teachers decide when and if benchmark tests, drill and practice for TAKS, and other forms of TAKS test preparation are appropriate for their students.
- Before using campus test-score deficiencies to trigger sanctions, use those scores to trigger provision of necessary resources on a sustained basis to turn around low performance.
- Let teachers have the decisive voice in designing performance-pay plans, and make implementation contingent on approval by a super-majority of the teachers and school employees who are covered by a campus plan.
- Eliminate contradictions between the federal and state accountability systems. The reauthorization of NCLB in Congress is one avenue for this realignment. Sunsetting the state accountability system would offer another. Meanwhile, at least some common sense could be restored immediately, by making it clear that acceptable math and reading scores under federal rules could not simultaneously be the basis for an “unacceptable” state rating.

SB 1031 already amounts to an omnibus testing bill, addressing many issues besides end-of-course exams. We urge you to add to it the essential elements of testing reform we have suggested here. You will find models for each of these elements in legislation already filed in the Texas House and Senate this session.

Other Questions Raised by SB 1031

The bill requires that all assessments in grades 3-12 to be developed in a manner that allows a measure of student progress to be calculated. Use of growth measures is a good idea in principle, but the bill appears to assume that we already have valid measures of growth that the commissioner can adopt in connection with end-of-course exams. However, value-added measures, according to the most thorough and dispassionate review of the literature (2004 Rand analysis), are still in their infancy and are not reliable enough for high-stakes decisions. The experimental nature of this idea needs to be recognized.

The bill also calls for including in assessments an optional series of questions to measure college readiness. Will this provision mean more testing rather than less at the secondary level? The same question applies to the proposed college-readiness diagnostic assessment in eighth grade and tenth grade. Will school districts have two new tests to overemphasize? How will these diagnostic assessments be used?

We are still trying to gauge the effect of proposed changes in assessments in grades 3-8. Our key concern is that the changes (adding a fifth-grade social-studies test, moving the

fifth-grade science test to fourth grade, and integrating into reading assessments at grades four through eight the writing assessments now given in grades four and seven) may actually increase the burden of standardized testing at these grade levels, when we ought to look for ways to reduce that emphasis.

Finally, regarding the issue of allegations of TAKS cheating, we believe the legislature should find ways to ensure that the exoneration of the overwhelming majority of campuses targeted by such allegations will be publicized every bit as much as the original allegations.

Conclusion

TFT has been a part of the standards-based reform movement in Texas for 25 years and more. A two-to-one majority of our members continues to support statewide standards and supports statewide tests to measure students' skills. But fewer than 1 percent are satisfied with the current system of standardized testing. The vast majority wants the system overhauled and wants to see the legislature adopt a "smarter testing" agenda. SB 1031 takes some welcome steps in that direction. But much more remains to be done.