

Date: June 17, 2008

To: Senator Florence Shapiro (Co-chair) florence.shapiro@senate.state.tx.us/Representative Rob Eissler (Co-chair) Rob.Eissler@house.state.tx.us and Members of the Select Committee on Public School Accountability

From: Zenobia C. Joseph (Educational Consultant, A+ WRITERS Consulting, LLC)

Subject: Written Testimony (Public School Accountability)

1. **Background:** As former Norman Elementary Teacher of the Year (2005), I taught 4th grade in Austin ISD under leadership of four principals in five years at two east Austin elementary schools and currently work as an independent consultant. From 2001 to date, I witnessed 4th graders arriving unable to write a complete sentence, reflecting the harsh reality of "ABT" – Ain't Been Taught (James Patton, 2001). At the Texas Alliance of Black School Educators Conference (February 2007), I asked Senator Royce West: Why is it that 4th graders continue to arrive each year unable to write a complete sentence? I later met with Senator West and testified on SB 2035, Dropout Prevention (May 2007). About 30 days prior to Grade 4 2007 and 2008 Writing Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) I signed a contract, in part, to prepare students who experienced high teacher turnover, three teachers in one year, respectively. Respectfully, I contend Austin ISD's eleventh hour perennial intervention proves untenable! Though Texas Success Initiative focuses on Reading, Writing and Mathematics in preparation for post-secondary education, elementary Writing emphasis lags. My testimony lends insight into accountability problems and solutions.

2. **Topic: Elementary Writing Accountability**

a. Problem: **Data doesn't show what I know!** Texas requires students to take the Grade 4 Writing TAKS, but provides no funding for Writing tutorial in Grade 4 or summer school enrichment for students entering 4th grade in fall. In absence of Accelerated "Writing" Instruction monies, 4th grade teachers often teach Writing tutorial under the guise of Accelerated Reading Instruction. Data thus reflects favorable outcomes for Writing TAKS since teachers spend two-thirds of the school year preparing and a deficit in Reading and Math since two months, coupled with Spring Break reflects too little time to prepare for two tests. **Misleading data** shows that students need no help in Writing.

b. Discussion: From August through February each year, many fourth grade teachers teach writing in its entirety to include upper and lower case letters, spacing of words, penmanship, basic sentence structure and other writing skills that "should have been taught" in K – 3. In part, under No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Reading First mandates 90-minutes of uninterrupted Reading instruction (in absence of Writing). Even prior to current legislation, former first grade colleagues alleged, "Ms. Joseph, I'm trying to squeeze Writing in." Third grade colleagues often asked: "Can you come back after Reading TAKS and help us with Writing [one month before school ends]?"

c. Solution: Amend current law(s) to include K – 3 Writing mandates to afford 4th grade teachers an opportunity to teach Language Arts and overall curriculum in its entirety. **Accountability can be positive!** Consider mandating that K – 2 students publish one authentic story in fall or spring for presentation in a public setting (e.g. PTA Meeting, Literacy Night, or local venue). Mandate Grade 3 students publish twice a year (fall and spring) in a public setting. Two free national publishing options: Studenttreasures® (Hardbound Books), <http://www.studenttreasures.com/> and Reading Rainbow Young Writers and Illustrators K – 3 Contest, <http://pbskids.org/readingrainbow/>. Locally, there's also Write on, Austin! (Ongoing Writing Project), <http://www.writeonaustin.org/>. Also provide Writing tutorial monies.

d. Supporting Documentation: Former gifted student Nationwide Studenttreasures® book excerpts. All About Me – Reflects basic sentence structure; overuse of pronoun "I" from Grade 3 (2002 – 2003)

Audrey's Astonishing Anthology – Reflects academic rigor, e.g. Table of Contents with Roman Numerals, Preface, and student's reflection on her growth as a writer; book dedicated to Ms. Joseph, Grade 4 (2003 – 2004)

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3. Topic: Summer School Programs and Funding Needs

a. Problem: No summer programs exist for Grade 4 TAKS failures and Austin ISD often implies lack of funds. Yet, one board member states the district's \$500K Instructional Planning Guide debt for unspecified outcomes, along with \$40K for a 3-day visit by Cambridge. Superficially, it appears monies could be better spent on direct instruction.

b. Discussion: Per previous hearings, National Assessment of Educational Progress showed Grade 4 gains but my experience reflects the need for summer academics to aid failing 4th graders "placed" in 5th grade, and gifted students whose needs remain unmet. The first week of June 2008, an African-American mother stopped me in Wal-mart to ask if I knew of summer programs for students who failed Grade 4 Reading and Math TAKS. Her son "failed one test by 60 points; the other by 80." Later, the mother of an African-American girl who also failed Grade 4 Reading and Math TAKS inquired about summer programs. Since I knew of no programs, the student enrolled in my Pilot Grade 4 Language Arts (Writing) Project at Overton Elementary (Austin ISD), which remains unfunded! Despite Representative Donna Howard's offer to seek funding, the district made no effort to provide summer program needs.

c. Solution: Amend current law(s) to require Writing TAKS tips in the Grade 3 TAKS Study Guide, along with distribution of a Grade 3 – 5 TAKS Study Guide to incoming struggling students. At present, students who fail TAKS receive a TAKS Study Guide at the end of the school year upon receipt of TAKS results. Yet, it proves moot to explain The Writing Process to a failing student en route to 5th grade when emphasis is no longer on Writing! In a show of transparency, require districts to outline budgetary expenditures online to include Title I funds' distribution.

d. Reference: Senator Obama's Bill – Summer Term Education Programs for Upward Performance Act of 2007 cites BELL Foundation's nationally recognized summer program. Many researchers believe that a lack of high-quality summer educational opportunities is one of the most significant contributors to persistent trends of academic under-achievement, dropping out of school, and engaging in negative behaviors among children from low-income families. Data demonstrates that while all children learn at the same rate during the school year, children from low-income families lose two months literacy and math skills during the summer. At least 40 studies confirmed this "Summer Learning Loss" phenomenon, http://www.bellnational.org/UI_Study_Summer_Program82306.htm.

4. Topic: Principal Certification (21st Century Leadership Principal Preparation Program/McNeil Foundation)

a. Problem: No due process of law exists for Interns to file a complaint against alternative certification program administrators who violate Texas Administrative Code, Title 19, Chapter 247 (Code of Ethics). Current loophole in the law protects administrators. The State Board for Educator Certification (SBEC) states it has no jurisdiction and alleges matter as solely between individual parties. I contend McNeil Foundation failed to provide clear expectations in writing or specify program completion under "extenuating circumstances" via tri-fold, SBEC document or the like. Moreover, the Austin Program Manager denied meeting with my Mentor as I sought guidance via e-mail request(s). Despite paying \$2,750 for the 6-month program (April 2007) and attorney inquiry to Dr. McNeil, he denied my request to take the April 2008 Principal TExES™. On or about April 18, 2008, Ms. Valadez informed me that Attorney Andy stated my case did not meet Title 19, Priority 2 (2) (C), Code of Ethics Violation for forwarding to the State Office of Administrative Hearings. Ms. Valadez stated intent to place my complaint in the file. In absence of due process, **request you review my case** as I still seek an opportunity to take Practice Tests and Principal TExES™ in 2008.

b. Discussion: I filed a complaint in March 2008 against Dr. Jesse McNeil (President, 21st Century Leadership Principal Preparation Program) thru Carla Valadez, Director, Educator Standards, SBEC and provided my training record, reflecting over 180-hours. SBEC file also reflects a Cease and Desist Letter to Dr. McNeil dated April 4, 2008.

c. Solution: Amend current law(s) to include a mandate for all teacher and principal alternative certification programs to provide each Intern a "Policy Handbook" – clearly outlining program expectations to include guidelines for program completion under extenuating circumstances, applicable fees, and Code of Ethics Complaint Proceeding.

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d. Model Handbook: Huston-Tillotson University's Alternative Teacher Certification Program provides a Policy Handbook online for its Teacher Interns. It clearly outlines, in part, Intern monthly fees for program completion, repeat TExES™ administration, employment outside a specified mile radius, and Code of Ethics expectations. The Policy Handbook, however, fails to specify due process (complaint procedures) for Interns to follow in the event administrators violate the Code of Ethics, <http://ce.htu.edu/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=n90ZOWtYvrM%3d&tabid=82>.

5. Topic: Achievement Gap (Strategic Planning)

a. Problem: Per February 29, 2008 Hearing, Senator West mentioned ever-present staggering statistics to Secretary Spellings regarding minority students, in part, 50% fail to graduate on time. Unfortunately, it appears the federal government needs to intervene prior to the 5th or 6th year failing mark for "Dropout Factory Schools."

b. Discussion: Austin ISD released its Strategic Plan (2005 – 2010) on or about August 2005. As a classroom teacher, I asked the author(s) of the document Joey Crumley and Dr. Guerrero via conference call how the district intended to eliminate the achievement gap between African-Americans and their White counterparts by 2010 per Strategy 1.7. I subsequently asked for milestones to be placed online to no avail through the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the African-American Resource Advisory Commission and other organizations. By 2007 when the Annual Scorecard came out, I met with Strategic Plan Tri-Chairs and inquired about milestones once more to no avail. In the end, the "wordsmith" verbiage changed to reflect meeting needs of "all children".

c. Solution: Amend current law(s) to require school districts, especially those with low performing schools, to put milestones (a timetable) online to show its plan to eliminate the achievement gap. Require measurable efforts to improve diversity; dates for achieving goals & objectives; and names of persons charged with implementing change. This information may exist in Campus or District Improvement Plans but needs to be transparent for all stakeholders.

6 Topic: Teacher Recruitment/Retention

a. Problem: In Austin ISD, as may be the case in other Texas districts, nearly 80% of teachers are Anglo women; 50% of Special Education students are African-American (boys); yet Blacks make up 13% of the district's population. **The "I-35 Divide" remains alive and well, but can be overcome through wireless communication and collaboration!** "One school, one score!" is the mantra I created for my students, which could be extended to "One district, one score." Buy-in must come from the top. Unfortunately, teachers with great ideas often remain voiceless and resign!

b. Discussion: In my first year of teaching in East Austin (hired October 1, 2001), I attended a one-day Writing Workshop at Patton Elementary in West Austin. This experience changed the trajectory of my teaching career. As I witnessed the teacher use higher vocabulary followed by a synonym, I learned to better communicate with my students through academic rigor. I later attended training led by a Casis Elementary (West Austin) teacher who stated that if she couldn't teach three subjects in one, she didn't even bother. From her, I learned the value of cross-curricula lessons. I also traveled to Houston and witnessed teachers and students at Mabel E. Wesley Elementary. **However, in Austin ISD training remains segregated** – perhaps due to vertical teams or feeder school patterns. Teachers often meet at a central training location in vicinity of their school location. Diversity may build camaraderie.

c. Solution: Amend current law(s) to require districts to show measurable diversity efforts (i.e. How are teachers in predominantly Anglo schools interacting, planning, and training through Professional Development with teachers in minority schools within the same district or through outreach if the district reflects a homogeneous population?) Also require districts to afford new teachers an opportunity to visit at least one effective teacher of a different hue in a classroom on the "other side of town!" Or through wireless communication, afford diverse classroom teaching and learning opportunities for all teachers. Lastly, require districts to show effective use of data collected through task forces, i.e. Austin ISD's Cultural Connections to Teaching Task Force (2002) remains relevant but unimplemented!

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d. Innovative Idea: In creating Reading Buddies, teachers list students from top to bottom then cut the list in half. (e.g. Take a class of twenty students: Student #1 gets paired with #11; #2 with #12; #3 with #13 and so forth). I contend the same strategy could be used to improve failing schools. List for instance elementary schools in a district from one to twenty; pair School #1 with #11; #2 with #12 and so forth. Afford teachers within each grade level (or as a pilot, target teachers in grades that struggle most) to collaborate on cross-curricula lesson(s) that will culminate in a study trip (most likely to be funded). In Austin for instance, most 4th grade students will attend Bob Bullock Museum as part of studying Texas History. Teachers could conceivably plan during district-wide staff development days and students could engage interactive lessons online, culminating with a T-shirt design for their collaborative study trip. In the end, teachers and students will "do diversity" vice simply reading about it on paper. Perhaps collaboration will increase empathy! Per personal experience decades later I still call Steven, an Anglo "boy" from first grade, "friend!"

7. Topic: Teacher Recruitment/Retention (Higher Education)

a. Problem: Through completion of Huston-Tillotson's Alternative Teacher Certification Program, I believe teacher preparation programs need more emphasis on emotional intelligence. In a field where "customer service" proves paramount, schools must emphasize application of Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences (e.g. inter and intrapersonal intelligence), Daniel Goleman's emotional intelligence theory, and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

b. Discussion: To meet a student's intellectual needs requires an understanding of his/her soul, which I tend to understand through Writing... As an Intern, I found a video clip of a teacher redirecting a defiant student invaluable!

c. Solution: Amend current law(s) to require teacher preparation programs to include video clips of real-time teaching, coupled with course work on empathy, emotional intelligence, and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

8. Topic: TAKS Administration – Consultant "Exception to Policy"

a. Problem: As a consultant, I administered the 2007 Grade 4 Writing TAKS. In 2008, Austin ISD stated that it violated state law by allowing a consultant to administer TAKS. It appears current law excludes the "human factor" and overlooks the fact that a consultant contracted to prepare students for TAKS may establish a relationship and expect more of students than his/her teacher.

b. Discussion: On March 6, 2008 (day after 2008 Grade 4 Writing TAKS), I returned to the low performing school where I previously worked to prepare 4th graders for TAKS. An African-American boy's homeroom teacher yelled aloud words to the effect, "By three o'clock, he wrote two sentences, maybe three; everybody and their grandmother came in to motivate him... you know he failed!" Prior to TAKS, I visited this student's grandmother's house and spoke with his grandmother and his mother. There were times when he shut-down and remained fixated on writing about his grandmother who passed away. Of course, I have no way of telling whether or not the student would have written for me on TAKS day. In 2007, according to the principal 93% of the African-American students I worked with passed TAKS. All I know for sure is that as a consultant, I am like a coach who expects his/her players to perform.

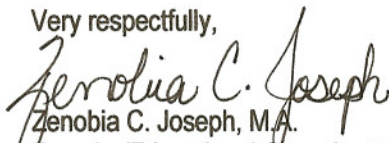
c. Solution: Amend current law(s) to allow districts to submit an "Exception to Policy" request for TAKS to be administered by a consultant contracted to prepare students for TAKS at all grade levels. I contend that as a consultant and certified teacher, I am as capable as a "teacher's aide" to administer TAKS.

9. **Closing:** I believe it is my life's mission to help change law(s) governing Writing accountability. To that end, I extend myself in service to improve education laws governing K – 12 Writing mandates. On the far end, both Senator Obama's Bill, S: 114 – Innovation Districts for School Improvement Act, and the Texas Success Initiative require the 3 R's (Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic) in preparation for post-secondary education. **The missing link remains the need to emphasize K – 12 Writing. "Kids can't learn what they haven't been taught," (Spellings, 2008).**

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According to Bill Gates' Testimony before the US Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee on US Competitiveness, "Employers complain that high school graduates today lack the basic writing and analytic skills required to succeed even in entry level positions," (March 7, 2007). **Perhaps even closer to home, I contend you would be unable to do your job if not for your ability to Read, Write, and Speak!** Is it asking too much to ensure that Writing gets taught to ensure success of "all students"? It is my hope that aforementioned solutions serve to aid the Select Committee on Public School Accountability's "Swat Team" to use Senator West's phraseology. I also urge you to use verbiage from Senator Obama's STEP UP Act of 2007 to provide much needed Texas summer school programs, but recognize the law needs to be amended to emphasize elementary Writing, (<http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c110:s.116>:). In sum, I express my desire to testify before Congress with my corpus of field notes to seek inclusion of elementary Writing mandates under No Child Left Behind, Reauthorization. Thank you for your time and consideration. Point of contact is the undersigned at Zcjsph@sbcglobal.net.

Very respectfully,


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