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Testimony to Select Committee on Public School Accountability By Holly Eaton, Director of Professional Development and Advocacy February 18, 2008

Thank you for this opportunity to give input on one of the most important and far-reaching issues in education today - our state accountability system. As I'm sure you're aware, there is literally no facet of our education system in Texas that's not impacted in some way by our state accountability system. As a result, the task before you is an enormous one, but presents a hugely important opportunity to create a system that provides the impetus for desired behaviors and results without creating some of the perverse effects we've seen with our current system. Because of the enormity of what this opportunity represents, and because when we talk about accountability, we're talking about "the universe", we thought it would be appropriate to suggest some guiding principles we would ask the committee to consider in designing a new system.

Some may argue with this point, but I think most will agree that by and large, federal and state accountability policies are overinvested in testing and sanctions and underinvested in the kind of support for human capital required to meet the targets set by the accountability system.

Accordingly, one of the guiding principles we would suggest is that when you set the criteria or standards for schools to meet under the accountability system, you require that the state provide the supportive infrastructure necessary to achieve the standards. By that we mean, requiring that the state invest in the types of strategies that will be needed in order to realistically reach stated goals - strategies such as meaningful and relevant professional development for teachers, specialists who can assist teachers in moving kids forward, small learning environments, safer and more disciplined school environments, better working and learning conditions for teachers and students.

Without this supportive infrastructure, an accountability system that places unrealistic demands on schools will ultimately be a house of cards, collapsing under its own weight.

A corollary guiding principle to this is to design a system that focuses more on appropriate timely interventions and less on sanctions.

When setting standards, do so at a level that will strike a balance between standards that cause students and schools to stretch but are not so high as to be unattainable. We've actually done a good job of this in Texas, by setting

standards that strike this balance, and then slowly increasing them. However, if standards are set unrealistically high, people will give up and the system will lose support, as other states have experienced.

Another guiding principle is to ensure that whatever measures you decide upon to hold schools and educators accountable are scientifically research-based and validated for that particular use. Too often in education, in our rush to address issues, we implement initiatives that aren't research-based. We then waste time, money, and energy in implanting unproven ideas while our students and schools suffer the consequences.

We would encourage you to design a system that is adaptable to the unique circumstances of many of our schools, as well as a more nuanced rating system (such as numerical ratings) that is more meaningful to public, rather than one-word ratings. Even at the federal level, there is talk of distinguishing in the ratings between schools that barely miss the target versus those that are seriously struggling; we encourage consideration of this issue in our accountability redesign. In this same vein, we would encourage you to consider a rating system that incorporates a common standard for all schools and districts to meet, but also recognizes how schools and districts are doing compared to schools and districts with similar demographics.

The new accountability system should encourage schools to engage in certain desired behaviors, including continuing to progress all levels of learners forward, including those who master grade level objectives early on.

It's no secret that there's a backlash against the emphasis we have on testing in our state accountability system. So we encourage you to design a system that places less emphasis on testing, and more emphasis on other criteria, some of which are already contained in the AEIS indicators and the Gold Performance standards, and some that could be added. The system should also encourage desired behavior on the part of schools/districts, such as giving credit for not having class size waivers, having low teacher turnover, few out of field assignments, and recovering dropouts.

Speaking of testing, another guiding principle we would suggest is that when determining which assessments will be part of the accountability system, look at ways to reduce the costs associated with developing new tests and instead investigate using existing standardized tests that could also meet our desire for criterion-based tests. For example, groups like Achieve are working with thirteen states to develop and administer a common Algebra II end-of-course test. This would also help alleviate some of the burden of field testing in Texas.

Again, we appreciate the enormity and importance of the task before you, and we look forward to working with you in the evolution of our state accountability system.