

COLLEGE READINESS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

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TEXAS SELECT COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY MARCH 27, 2008

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to meet with you today. Our task this morning is to understand the implications of the State's policy commitment to prepare all young people for success in postsecondary education, on the design of a state education accountability system.

This is not an easy issue to address, and I applaud you for taking it on. Through the American Diploma Project Network, of which Texas is a founding member, Achieve has been working with more than half the states in the country to design and implement a set of policies that accurately, clearly and effectively convey to students, parents and educators the knowledge and skills students must have when they graduate from high school in order to be prepared for postsecondary education and careers that pay well and have advancement potential, most of which require some level of education and training beyond high school.

We have learned through our research that, up until very recently students could graduate from high school without the academic preparation they need for postsecondary success, in every state in the U.S. We learned that there is an "expectations gap" between what students must know and be able to do when they complete high school, and what they are expected and required to do in order to earn a high school diploma. We also learned that to close this expectations gap, states must:

- Align academic standards for high school students with the demands of postsecondary education and careers
- Require students to take a curriculum aligned to college- and career-ready standards in order to earn a diploma
- Include assessments that measure these college- and career-ready skills in the high school assessment system
- Hold schools accountable for increase high school graduation rates, and for making sure that students who do graduate meet college- and career-ready standards.

Texas Experience with College-Ready Policies

Texas is one of the first states to address this set of issues overall, and is also among few that are facing the accountability issue itself head on,. Of course, it is clearly the right state to be among the nation's leaders in this area.

Texas has long been a leader in standards based reform. Beginning in the early 1990's Texas was one of the first states to implement a system of standards, assessments and accountability, and to sustain the system over the long haul. As a result Texas saw some of the largest and most rapid gains on state tests and on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) during the 1990's, and continues to show impressive gains in some areas, such as 8th grade math.

Texas was also one of the first states to participate in the American Diploma Project. It was one of five states to participate in the initial R&D phase of this project, starting in 2002 and helped define a core set of math and English skills that students need in order to be able to enter and succeed in credit-bearing college courses and have access to jobs that pay well and have advancement potential. It also helped Achieve identify the expectations gap and define the policy agenda I just described. With the help of leadership from Texas, some 32 states that collectively educate 75% of the nation's public school student have embraced this policy agenda and are addressing it through their participation in the American Diploma Project Network.

Texas is leading by taking action. The legislature saw the need to create college readiness standards and align high school standards with them, and this work is nearing completion. Achieve has reviewed the proposed English Language Arts standards and found them to be well aligned with the American Diploma Project college- and career-ready benchmarks. Texas has adopted, and recently strengthened, a rigorous recommended college-preparation course of study and has made that the default option for students entering high school. TAKS is one of the few high school assessments in the country that include a "college-ready" cut score, signaling that students who achieve at that level can do credit-bearing rather than remedial work in state postsecondary institutions. The legislature is moving the state beyond that single high school assessment to a system of end-of-course exams, including ones that will also serve as indicators of readiness. And Texas is one of a handful of states with data systems that make it possible to follow individual students through the K-12 system into and through the postsecondary system. This data system is an essential foundation for a robust accountability system, and as important, for learning what really works.

While Texas has accomplished much, there is still more to be done. In particular, Texas must build on its efforts with respect to college-ready standards, graduation requirements and assessment to create and implement a high school accountability system aligned with these steps and with the broader policy objective of better preparing all young people for success in postsecondary education.

A Context for High School/College-Prep Accountability Policies

Before turning to specific recommendations for high school accountability, it is important to keep several things in mind.

First, accountability for college-readiness is not a simple straight-line extension of the testing and accountability regime in place for grades K-8. Tests will continue to be important, but not all important tests should be used for accountability purposes. A good assessment system will also include formative assessments that carry no stakes for students, educators or schools. Instead, these short-cycle classroom level assessments, combined with supportive professional development, can be the foundation for a system of continuous instructional improvement. A good accountability system must also include and clearly value a range of indicators in addition to tests, including course taking patterns and graduation rates. These behaviors are important in addition to, and to some extent independent of, test scores.

Second, particularly at the high school level, accountability policies don't exist in a policy vacuum. They must be carefully aligned with other college-ready policies, such as standards, assessments, postsecondary admissions and placement policies in order to provide a coherent approach and to provide the incentive to improve preparation, not just measure and report it.

Third, each state is free to design its own accountability system for high schools, without being shaped or constrained much by federal mandates. Indeed, the federal testing and accountability requirements at the high school level are pretty minimal, particularly when compared to federal policies targeted to grades 3-8. Testing is required in only one grade and other than graduation rates virtually no other indicators of student and school performance are mandated. While the existence of separate state and federal accountability systems has often resulted in confusing and at time demoralizing signals to elementary and middle schools, this should not be an issue at the high school level. Indeed, while NCLB reauthorization appears to be on hold now, one of the best ways for states to ensure a coherent state/federal approach to high school accountability is to move quickly and aggressively to establish robust state high school accountability systems, and then work to shape federal legislation to support rather than overwhelm state efforts.

Finally, states must be smart as well as tough in designing high school accountability systems. The fundamental design imperative is to figure out the right incentives and data that students, educators and schools need in order to improve teaching, learning and preparation. No state has done this in a comprehensive manner, though growing numbers are attempting to. There isn't a simple formula to follow, but we are learning about the considerations that need to be taken into account in order to get this right.

Considerations in Incorporating College-Readiness in the Accountability System

Most state accountability systems developed over the past decade have been shaped by federal requirements and state requirements for high school graduation tests. As a result, the fundamental accountability question has been whether schools are helping 10th or 11th

graders meet minimum standards. Only recently have schools also been asked to account for whether their students graduate, and most states are still working to measure that accurately.

Designing an accountability system focused on preparing all students for success in postsecondary education requires asking a different set of questions, and using a much richer set of indicators. It will require systems of assessments and other indicators that are designed to improve teaching and learning, report and credential student performance, and finally to hold school systems, schools and educators accountable for ensuring all students graduate college and career-ready. All three of those purposes need to be central.

To best support improvement, readiness should be understood not just as a fixed end state, but as a goal students progress towards and can exceed. An accountability and indicator system should provide information that can trigger appropriate actions as students make progress towards, meet, and even exceed college readiness standards. This is particularly important because many students enter high school well behind in their academic skills, and many, including those who enter with weak skills, will be able to perform at levels that go beyond readiness to do college level work by the time they complete high school.

To these ends, attention must be focused on three key areas: curriculum completion and success; achievement; and attainment.

Curriculum participation, completion and success

Successfully completing a rigorous core curriculum is essential for postsecondary preparation. Texas has defined such a core and made it the default curriculum for all high school students. The accountability system must include indicators of the proportion of students in each school that complete this core, disaggregated by demographic groups to promote equitable access and participation. It should also include indicators that acknowledge students who go beyond the core, through participation in AP, IB, dual enrollment and other college-level courses. To promote career-readiness as well as college-readiness, consideration should be given to acknowledging student completion of a focused and rigorous CTE program as well.

Schools must be able to monitor progress toward completion of the core curriculum in order to help students at risk of falling off track. This requires timely information on credit accumulation, particularly for 9th graders, so they can provide support to students at risk of failing, and help students who do fail courses to recover needed credits in a timely manner.

Achievement

The end of course exams Texas is developing will be an important part of an accountability system. Compared to the TAKS, these have the advantage of being tied to specific course, being given when students learn the material the test covers, and collectively can address a broader set of basic and advanced content and skills. By requiring the scores to count toward a course grade, students can be motivated to take the tests seriously and somewhat greater consistency in grading practices can be achieved

without removing teacher professional judgment from the mix. Ideally the tests would replace locally developed final exams so that there is not a net increase in testing burden.

Because the state is in the process of defining college-ready standards, it will be important to ensure that the course descriptions used to inform test development and curriculum are aligned with these new standards. Exams for upper level courses such as Algebra II can provide an indicator of college-readiness, providing actionable information to individual students and to postsecondary institutions. Students who do well on the exams should be able to enroll in credit bearing courses, and told so. As important, students who do not reach a college-ready level should be provided additional instruction in their senior year so they can improve preparation and reduce the need for remediation once they enroll in postsecondary institutions.

To serve this purpose it will be important to involve postsecondary faculty in key parts of the development process, including the development of course descriptions, item reviews and the like. It will also be important to conduct predictive validity studies so that cut scores for readiness can be established on the basis of empirical evidence rather than just on professional judgment. Ideally this will involve looking at the relationship between scores on the end-of-course test and subsequent performance by these students in first year credit-bearing college courses.

ACT has done such studies for the ACT test, and consequently can identify benchmark scores students must reach in order to have a 75% chance or better of earning a C or better in first year credit-bearing courses, or a 50% chance of earning a B or better. The California State University System and State Department of Education have done similar studies to determine the score students must reach on the 11th grade exams in order to be exempt from taking placement exams when they enter CSU campuses. In California's case the CSU system requires students to reach a score that signals a 95% chance of success in postsecondary courses. Achieve is working with a group of 13 states developing a common Algebra II exam, and with these states will have to determine the level test performance that signifies college-readiness.

To encourage students and schools to exceed college-readiness, the accountability system should also take into account students who take and pass AP and IB exams

While performance on end of course exams in advanced courses can signal college readiness, performance on exams in lower grades can provide indicators of progress toward readiness, triggering needed supports an interventions early in a students high school career.

But end of course exams on their own will not provide teachers with the information they need to adjust instruction to meet the needs of their current students. This purpose can be better met with high quality formative or interim assessments, carefully aligned with course standards and curriculum. Of course many teachers do this already, though the quality of such assessments often varies widely. The state should consider developing such tools, perhaps in partnership with local districts or with other states, and making

them and the necessary professional development available for teachers and districts to use.

Attainment

Successfully completing a rigorous curriculum and demonstrating that students have learned the material are essential components college readiness. So are indicators of educational attainment, including earning a high school diploma and enrolling in postsecondary education and training programs. The state accountability system should include and hold high schools accountable for 4- and 5-year cohort graduation rates, and should report information on postsecondary enrollment and performance for each high school.

The state should also include in its data system a set of research based early warning indicators – such as attendance in the first 30 days of 9th grade, chronic absenteeism, credit accumulation and the academic performance of students in middle school. These indicators can serve as early warning signs of students at greater risk of dropping out of high school, and should trigger early action by administrators and educators to provide students the necessary supports and interventions to get and help keep them on track to graduation.

The types of indicators described above should provide a rich set of data to support improvement and to evaluate the performance of Texas secondary schools. It will be important, but not simple, to determine the best ways to combine these indicators in a manner that is easy to communicate and understand and that provides the right incentives for students, educators and schools.

Let me close by pointing out that Achieve and the Education Trust are working together with an advisory committee of state officials, educators, policy analysts and educators to address the design of college- and career-ready assessment, accountability and indicator systems. We hope to have a set of recommendations completed by this Fall, and I hope they will be useful to you then.

I look forward to discussing these and other issues with you in the remaining time. Thank you again for the opportunity to discuss these issues with you.