

SB 3 Concerns and Recommendations

Postsecondary Readiness Standard: SB 3 does not establish a single definition and single base standard for postsecondary readiness—a standard that students must meet whether they choose to attend a four or two-year college, pursue industry training, enlist in the military, or enter the workforce. While earning a Standard Diploma may be acceptable as a choice that may be made by parents and their children, promoting two “postsecondary” tracks for the Texas Diploma without a single base standard will leave many young Texans unprepared for the training they need and the good jobs of tomorrow.

Recommendation: Reestablish a single postsecondary readiness standard—at least proficiency to Algebra II, English III, and future science and social studies standards—for all students regardless of the postsecondary path they choose.

Issue 2: Alternative Performance Standards and End of Course Exams

SB 3 allows students to receive the “Texas Diploma” (“Recommended Diploma”) by earning an industry certificate (for jobs and specific skills as yet unspecified)—even if they fail the Algebra II and English III end-of-course exams.

The bill removes the requirements set out in recent legislation that students pass end-of-course exams for courses other than English and Algebra. Therefore, for those students who are waived from passing exams in English III and Algebra II, these students could earn the higher diploma without passing any end-of-course exams.

Recommendations: All students earning the Texas Diploma should pass the 4 x 4 classes and at least 2 end-of-course exams in each core subject area—including the Algebra II and English III exams. Students that are unable or unwilling to do so may still earn the Standard Diploma. Require students earning the Standard Diploma to pass at least two end-of-course exams in each core subject area—including the Algebra I and English III exams. Maintain SBOE oversight of the 4 x 4 course requirements and substitutions.

Issue 3: Promotion of Students Who Fail Key Assessments

While SB 3 requires failing students to take an “accelerated instruction program”, it removes state constraints against social promotion that were adopted by the Legislature as part of the Student Success Initiative in 1999.

Recommendations: Require students to pass these key assessments to be promoted. If the “accelerated instruction program” is used, require students to pass a test at the end of the program to demonstrate proficiency or adequate growth. Require the commissioner to lower accountability ratings for districts and schools that show a significant pattern of promoting students who continue to fail assessments in later grades and/or drop out.

Issue 4: Accountability Ratings

SB 3 allows districts and schools to receive distinctions that are not tied to postsecondary readiness goals and that contain few guidelines. Districts and schools that are not performing satisfactorily can still receive distinctions. Results are not disaggregated according to NCLB. Ratings lack proportionality.

Recommendations: Tie the student achievement distinction to postsecondary readiness goals and set basic criteria or limits for the other distinctions. Do not allow schools that are “accredited-warned” or “accredited-probation” to receive distinctions. Ensure that data is disaggregated by NCLB subgroups. Remove the “comparable improvement” measure from the performance indicators, so that it is clear that schools and districts must be achieving adequate levels of proficiency or growth to merit being fully accredited or receive distinction. Provide more proportionality in accountability ratings.

Issue 5: Growth and Value-Added Models

SB 3 does not include specific requirements for the properties or functions of growth-to-standard student achievement model.

Recommendation: Include specific requirements for both the structure and the functions of the growth-to-standard student achievement models.

Testimony to the House Public Education Committee on SB 3
Texas Coalition for a Competitive Workforce

The Texas Coalition for a Competitive Workforce has been very supportive of the work of the Select Committee on Public School Accountability and the corresponding changes to the state's accountability system..

After reviewing SB 3 and HB 3, however, we discovered several potential problem areas that we believe work against the goals that we support and that the Select Committee recommended. These areas are outlined below and we hope that we can resolve them with the committee so that we can fully support Senate Bill 3.

Issue 1: Establishing a single postsecondary readiness standard

Many of the problem areas of SB 3 stem from the fact that it does not establish a single base definition and a single base standard for postsecondary readiness—a standard that students must meet whether they choose to attend a four-year or two-year college, pursue industry training, enlist in the military, or enter the workforce. This standard assures that students have the basic knowledge and skills to become “trainable” in a variety of fields. This idea of “one standard, multiple pathways, and equal rigor” for the Texas Diploma ensures that students can pursue different educational paths, change jobs, or change careers without needing remediation.

Our impression was that passing Algebra II and English III was a proxy for college and career readiness (with science and social studies standards to be set later). No matter what path a student chooses, we believe that they must be able to demonstrate at least this level of knowledge to succeed after high school. If we can reestablish this goal in SB 3, a lot of the other problem areas will be resolved.

Recommendation: Reestablish a single postsecondary readiness standard—Algebra II, English III, and future science and social studies standards—for all students regardless of the postsecondary path they choose.

Issue 2: Alternative Performance Standards and End-of-course Exams

SB 3 allows students to receive the “Texas Diploma” (formerly the “Recommended Diploma”) by earning an industry certificate—even if they fail the Algebra II and English III end-of-course exams. There are three glaring problems with this proposal. First, the end-of-course exams are the only measure the state has to ensure that students have mastered the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) for a subject. Schools and teachers may grade students differently, but the end-of-course exams provide a yardstick to certify that students have mastered the basics of the course. We understand that these exams count as 15% of a student's course grade under the bill, but this does not ensure that they know the material. For example, a student with a class average of 71% could score a zero on the end-of-course exam and still pass the course with a 60%. This student, who scored a zero on the English III exam, the Algebra II exam, or both, could still receive the Texas Diploma certifying college and career readiness by earning an industry certification.

In addition, students would not be required to pass the other required end-of-course exams in order to graduate. We are surprised that this bill would retreat from the principles of SB 1031 that recognized the importance of testing students' competency in the core subject areas.

Finally, while some industry certificates require the practical application of English II and Algebra III standards, SB 3 does not require that students earn such a certificate. Instead, we rely on the Texas Workforce Commission to compile a list of "high-demand, high-wage, and high-skill" occupations that have certifications. SB 3 provides no other criteria by which to judge the appropriateness of these occupations. The high-demand, high-wage, and high-skill job of today may be gone tomorrow and some students may be left with a worthless certificate and few basic skills.

Recommendations: Remove the alternative performance standard as a way to earn the Texas Diploma. All students earning the Texas Diploma should pass the 4 x 4 classes and at least 2 end-of-course exams in each core subject area—including the Algebra II and English III exams. Students that are unable or unwilling to do so may still earn the Standard Diploma. Require students earning the Standard Diploma to pass at least two end-of-course exams in each core subject area—including the Algebra I and English III exams. Maintain SBOE oversight of the 4 x 4 course requirements and substitutions.

Issue 3: Promotion of Students who Fail an Assessment

While current law discourages social promotion, it remains a common occurrence in Texas schools. Research shows that students who fail assessments and are promoted fail future assessments at an alarming rate. On the other hand, students that repeat a grade pass assessments at a much higher rate.

If our goal is to prepare students for college or a career, we must end this practice. SB 3 does require failing students to take an "accelerated instruction program", but there is no way to ensure that students learn anything in this program. In addition, schools that habitually promote failing students face no consequences.

Recommendations: Require students to pass the assessment to be promoted. If the "accelerated instruction program" is used, require students to pass a test at the end of the program to demonstrate improvement. Require the commissioner to lower accountability ratings for districts and schools who socially promote students that later fail assessments. Require districts and schools to publicize social promotion rates and results.

Issue 4: Accountability Ratings

SB 3 allows the top 25% of districts and campuses in student achievement to receive a distinction that exempts them from many rules. This distinction is based solely on how the district or school compares to others and does not take into account their actual performance in meeting postsecondary readiness goals. Second, SB 3 contains few guidelines or limits for other distinctions so that, conceivably, every school in the state could receive some sort of distinction. Third, it appears that districts and schools that are rated "accredited—warned" or "accredited—probation" can receive distinctions even though they are not meeting student progress goals. Fourth, it appears that SB 3 does not require student results to be disaggregated by NCLB

subgroups. Next, there is little proportionality in the school ratings. Finally, SB 3 allows for districts and schools to be accredited under “comparable growth”—i.e. doing as well or better as other similar districts. If we adopt “required improvement” measures to rate performance, the “comparable improvement” category is no longer necessary as districts and schools success can be measured with appropriate growth and value-added assessments.

Recommendations: Tie the student achievement distinction to postsecondary readiness goals and set basic criteria or limits for the other distinctions. Do not allow schools that are “accredited-warned” or “accredited-probation” to receive distinctions. Ensure that data is disaggregated by NCLB subgroups. Increase proportionality in the rating system. Remove the “comparable improvement” measure from the performance indicators.

Issue 5: Growth and Value-Added Models

One of the most important provisions of SB 3 is the adoption of a growth-to-standard model to measure increases in student performance. However, SB 3 doesn’t include specific requirements for the properties or functions of this model.

Recommendation: Include specific requirements for both the structure and the functions of the growth-to-standard student achievement model.

Thank you for your consideration. If you have questions or comments, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Texas Association of Business
Texas Institute for Education Reform
Texas Public Policy Foundation
Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce
Education Trust, Southwest