



Policy Perspective

House Bill 2237 Analysis

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With graduation rates below 50 percent in some urban areas, and with 40 percent of those who do graduate requiring remedial education in college, there is certainly a need to improve high school education in Texas. House Bill 2237 sets out to increase college and workforce readiness in public schools through a host of new programs. But with a price tag of more than \$67 million, legislators must critically consider how HB 2237 will contribute to achieving its goals of college and workforce readiness.

DROPOUTS

The main focus of HB 2237, as amended, is to decrease dropout rates. The bill takes several approaches, ranging from scientific research to desperate attempts to curb the dropout rate with well-intentioned, feel-good policy. It is worth remembering that more than \$1 billion was devoted to high school reform and dropout reduction less than one year ago, through the newly created high school allotment.

Best practices

In the 2006 special session, HB 1 established a “best practices clearinghouse,” or online database of best practices found in Texas public schools. HB 2237 would add “dropout prevention” to the categories of best practices, which already includes instruction, public school finance, resource allocation, and business practices. There is certainly no harm done by including dropout prevention strategies in the clearinghouse.

The bill also calls for a study of best practices for dropout prevention. Further research into the causes and solutions of the dropout crisis

could be helpful. But with millions of dollars of private resources being poured into similar research, it is unclear why the state should use half a million dollars of taxpayer dollars for this research. Furthermore, multiple studies have proven that school choice has a positive effect on reducing dropout rates, but empirical evidence demonstrating that school choice best meets the needs of children has been largely ignored for political reasons. Since many studies already exist, there is no reason for the state to pursue its own study on best practices for dropout prevention. If best practices need to be made available, privately-funded research can meet that objective.

Interventions for at-risk students

House Bill 2237 would create an “intensive technology/career-oriented and scholastically innovative academic intervention pilot program” targeted to students at risk of dropping out of school. The program would provide at least 90 minutes of technology-based supplemental instruction each week in the four core subjects. Interestingly, only \$50 per student is allotted for this program. If dropouts could be saved with additional instruction at such a nominal cost, it is hard to imagine why schools are not already implementing similar programs on their own.

Similarly, HB 2237 would establish summer pilot programs where at-risk students would spend at least four weeks of the summer in “intensive academic instruction.” This program would cost a maximum of \$750 per participating student, at a total cost of \$7.6 million annually.

Feel-good solutions

House Bill 2237 would create the High School Completion and Success Initiative Committee, a new committee charged with reviewing grant applications and making funding recommendations. The administrative costs alone of the committee would run about \$1 million in the first biennium. One of the committee's primary responsibilities would be the distribution of funds from the High School Initiative, which would be renamed the High School Innovation Grant Initiative. The TEA currently spends \$28.7 million on the High School Initiative.

In addition, HB 2237 would award \$2.5 million each year to fund student club activities for at-risk students. But current research shows that solutions to the dropout crisis should include school choice and improved curricula—not chess club and drill team. Not to mention, these clubs already exist in high schools throughout the state, and have had no discernible impact on dropout rates to date.

The bill also would grant \$10 million each year to districts to implement local collaborative dropout reduction programs. But with staggeringly high dropout rates and \$1 billion in new high school allotments since last year, one would hope that schools are already doing everything they can to reduce dropouts. Giving schools more money for something they should already be doing is not the answer to the dropout crisis.

Along the same lines, the bill would require districts to submit to the TEA Commissioner dropout prevention strategies detailing the use of their compensatory education allotments. It is certainly a valuable exercise to think about such strategies, but again one would hope that schools are already doing so.

Finally, the bill would create a mandatory “Education: Go Get It” week in all Texas middle and high schools. During this week, schools would promote the importance of higher education and provide students with comprehensive information about college admission and financial aid. While the intent behind this requirement is good, like many bills in the legislature it infringes upon local control. Schools can already host their own college-themed weeks, and many already do. In addition, the most successful schools create a college-going culture throughout the school year—not just during one designated week.

The Foundation agrees strongly that the number of Texas students dropping out of high school is too high. According to our research, approximately one-third of Texas students fail to graduate high school within four years, and urban graduation rates often dip below 50 percent. However, many dropout “solutions” contained in the engrossed version of HB 2237 are duplicative of past efforts or rooted in flawed or unsubstantiated assumptions of what the state can do to keep kids in school. While intensive instruction may benefit at-risk students, and there is certainly value in researching best practices, these solutions should be provided using existing public or private funds. At the same time, the bill ignores one reform that is proven to reduce dropout rates: school choice. Short of enacting school choice legislation, the state should be very cautious about arbitrarily throwing money at the dropout problem.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The bill creates three new professional development programs for teachers. Unfortunately, the current state of professional development spending is a black hole. Our nation's public schools spend up to \$12 bil-

QuickFact:

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lion each year on professional development, with virtually no accountability for results. House Bill 2237 would continue this trend.

- The bill would create \$5 million in grants to support “technical assistance and professional development activities” for teachers and administrators.
- The bill would establish a mathematics instructional coach pilot program at the cost of \$1 million.
- The bill would establish mathematics, science, and technology teaching academies at the cost of \$1.25 million.

CURRICULUM

The bill requires the State Board of Education to add college readiness standards to the high school curriculum beginning with the 2008-2009 school year. Since only 18 percent of 2006 high school graduates in Texas met all four college

readiness benchmarks by ACT, adding college readiness to the standard curriculum is a step in the right direction. It is imperative that the high school curriculum include college readiness standards to better prepare students with the necessary skills for success in college and the workplace.

CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

The bill makes two efforts to more closely examine the achievement gap in Texas public schools. First, the bill would add a measure of the achievement gap in test scores and graduation rates to the list of indicators used for accountability purposes. Second, the bill would provide for research into achievement gaps among minority students. Both of these measures will provide valuable information, but ideally the research would be funded with private dollars. ★