



Texas Institute for Education Reform

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Andrew Erben has served as the President and C.O.O. of the Texas Institute for Education Reform since 2008. During his tenure, Erben has served as a member of the Commissioner of Education's Accountability Advisory Committee and has been named to several committees and task forces charged with developing education policy for the state.

Erben's background includes over twenty-five years in Texas public policy and legislative affairs, including four years as chief of staff for a state representative, four years as director of legislative affairs for the Texas Association of Builders, and seven years as a senior strategic marketing officer and director of marketing and governmental affairs for two major home building companies. His policy experience also includes five years' service with the Texas Department of Commerce and the office of the Texas Secretary of State in the administration of Gov. Bill Clements. He holds a B. S. degree from the College of Communications at the University of Texas at Austin and attended the Graduate School of Business at the University of Texas at Austin.



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I. Fully Implement Texas' Rigorous New Accountability and Assessment Systems under HB 3 (2009) and SB 1031 (2007).

With the passage of HB 3 in 2009 and SB 1031 in 2007, Texas established a framework for the best accountability and assessment program in the U.S. Because these bills required the establishment of postsecondary readiness standards, vertical alignment of standards from grade-to-grade, the creation of more comprehensive assessments, and the implementation of a new testing system, the state is still in the process of implementing the laws. It is imperative that these bills be properly implemented as suggested below so that our students will be prepared, without remediation, for college and/or the 21st-century workforce upon graduation. In fact, the proper and timely implementation of the new accountability system is a condition precedent to the success of the enhancements embodied in the recommendations in sections II and III.

1. Policymakers should defend against changes to HB 3—especially those that would lower graduation standards and testing requirements, reduce district accountability for student improvement, and reduce or eliminate the state's ability to intervene in failing districts.
2. Policymakers should ensure that the STAAR and end of course (EOC) exams matter to districts, teachers, and students. The legislature should direct the TEA to create and distribute guidelines for the use of EOC exam results in grading policies and districts should properly implement (and be held accountable for implementing) the state requirement that EOC exams count as 15% of a student's final grade.
3. Districts should ensure that students who fail the STAAR exams are not promoted without receiving proper remediation and support.
4. The TEA should use externally-validated growth and value-added measures as part of the district and school rating and accreditation system.
5. The timetable for state intervention in failing districts must be shortened so that these districts cannot delay meaningful action for years. Failing districts must show significant improvement each year or face reorganization through charter management or consolidation with successful districts.
6. Promote transparency at the school and district level by requiring districts to publicize budgets and requiring the state to report school performance in real time, establish robust report cards for schools and districts, create employer clearinghouses to inform students and parents of the skills needed to compete for various jobs, and create standards for sharing district, school, teacher, and aggregated student data at the state level.
7. Ensure that the enhanced data systems being developed by the TEA and the THECB are compatible, provide free access for eligible school district managers and qualified research institutions, and track individual annual student progress throughout K-20. Additionally, the systems should include student/teacher/educator preparation program linkages.

II. Expand Education Choice for Families.

No single educational option works best for every student. Instead of the "one best school" model of the past, Texas must transition to a "system of schools" that increases the educational choices available to families. State constraints to choice must be eliminated, but the state must still hold all educational programs accountable for results.

1. Create an independent charter school agency to authorize, monitor, and close ineffective charter schools.
2. Lift the arbitrary cap on the number of charters that can operate in Texas.
3. Promote fair funding for charter schools to include facilities funding and maintenance and operation funding.
4. Allow district-charter compacts to share facilities and other resources.

5. Allow students the choice of intra-district and inter-district transfers and require districts to honor transfer requests on a space-available basis.
6. Restructure transportation policy to support school choice for low-income families.
7. Adopt a “parent trigger” law to allow parents in low-performing schools to bring in new management—including charter management.
8. Create “opportunity scholarships” for children trapped in failing schools to transfer to other schools.
9. Create scholarships to provide choices for parents of special education students similar to Florida’s McKay Scholarship program.

III. Increase School District Autonomy to Improve Efficiency, Enhance Educator Effectiveness, and Spur Innovation in the Classroom.

Too often, state law mandates how districts must handle personnel policies, instructional requirements, and operations which result in higher costs to the districts without improving student achievement. Given current budget constraints, Texas must find a way to allow districts to find savings without sacrificing educational quality. To address this, the state should:

1. Leave staffing decisions—e.g., decisions on hiring, promotion, termination and placement—to districts and principals. Appeals should be resolved by the local school board—not the Texas Education Agency.
2. Provide value-added data to schools and districts and provide incentives to them to use this data as part of the teacher and principal evaluation process.
3. Streamline state credentialing with an emphasis on subject matter competency. The state’s role should be limited to certifying subject matter competency while the district’s role should focus on teacher effectiveness—including the value brought by certain “soft skills”.
4. Complete the implementation of SB 174 (2009) pertaining to accountability for educator preparation programs—including the use of value-added methodology in the criteria for accreditation of these programs.
5. Eliminate the statewide salary schedule and allow districts to pay teachers and other employees based on the value each brings to the district.
6. Subsidize efforts to recruit and train effective teachers in low-income areas. State and private grants should be made available to districts that attract and retain effective teachers.
7. Stop imposing unfunded mandates on districts and repeal those that are currently in place.
8. Abolish the cap on class size. Instead of placing an arbitrary limit on class size, allow districts to use value-added and other data to create the most cost-effective class structure that drives student achievement.
9. End the state’s bilingual education mandate for English language learners. Allow districts to choose the method that produces the best results for their students.
10. Authorize flexible class schedules and academic calendars to meet the demands for students who work or are pursuing dual credit. School districts must be given control over scheduling classes with the use of internet-based alternatives to provide more educational options for students.
11. Authorize and promote the use of blended learning models including self-paced learning, competency-based progression, and virtual classrooms, where appropriate.
12. Expand and promote the use of digital content for instructional materials.

IV. Education Funding and Productivity

1. Restore non-foundation school grant programs that directly drive HB 3 and other vital interventions that promote postsecondary readiness.
2. The state should study cost effectiveness and productivity, rank school districts in terms of financial productivity and accountability, and create incentives within the state funding mechanism for greater efficiencies in spending.

TARGET 2020

Texas Institute for Education Reform

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Since the beginning of the Texas commitment to public education standards and accountability based reform in 1993, the state has made remarkable progress in student achievement. Based on results measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), improvements in accountability have significantly raised achievement in reading and math among all student groups. In addition, high school graduation rates have steadily increased over this period and have improved 2% over the past ten years, as recently noted by America's Promise Alliance.

However, significant problems remain: 51% of students entering community colleges need remediation and, more significantly, based on a recent study sponsored by Houston Endowment, only 20% of Texas students are earning any sort of postsecondary credential within six years of expected high school graduation. The latter statistic represents the “pipeline” of those ready for college and the 21st century workplace and is a more realistic measure of educational success and the challenge we face than any “dropout” calculation might indicate.

Our organization, the Texas Institute for Education Reform, has identified the primary challenge to Texas public education by 2020 to produce 80% postsecondary ready high school graduates without the need for remediation—a very tall order.

How do we do this? With a serious commitment to the following fundamental points.

First, we must defend and demand accountability. Postsecondary readiness should be the organizing principle of PreK-12 education and, when fully implemented, House Bill 3 (2009) for the first time makes it so. The new accountability system shifts the student achievement focus from “passing” to “readiness” for higher education and the 21st century workplace, a major change from the previous system. As a result, Achieve, Inc. gave Texas its only top rating in accountability criteria in terms of its inclusion of all four critical college and career readiness indicators.

Accountability must have three components—diagnostics to assist educators in determining the intervention needs of students; transparency for parents and taxpayers; and consequences, for educators in terms of compensation and continuing employment and for students in terms of promotion and graduation.

Postsecondary readiness, in addition to meaning fully qualified for college and/or the workplace without remediation, must also mean “one standard, multiple pathways, equal rigor” in the Texas recommended high school plan, so that students must have multiple pathway choices to college or to a meaningful career represented by industry standards, with equal rigor of curriculum. The proxy for this standard is community college readiness without the need for remediation.

How do we assess this standard of readiness? Texas is committed to an assessment that measures student achievement against the standards at each grade level that indicate what students should know and when they should know it, leading to the postsecondary readiness standard at graduation. In addition, we should have the capability to measure the value-added to each student's achievement on an annual basis, as a diagnostic measure of annual progress of the student and the effectiveness of educators.

This segues to the debate on testing, and it is difficult to cut through the rhetoric and paranoia on this subject, except to say that every meaningful pursuit in life involves an assessment of achievement related to a standard. The abuses alleged in the testing process appear to be more a problem related to constant practice and benchmark testing at the school district level than problems with the requirement of the state accountability system, which are benign by comparison. It seems that opponents of high stakes standardized testing are fighting an old war; the old TAKS regime is gone and we should give the new system a chance to work.

Second, we should enhance choice and competition and allow the evolution from a "school system" to "a system of schools", with robust choices for parents and students that meet their needs, and with funding that follows the student. To begin, we should adopt comprehensive public school choice throughout the state, subject to capacity. But more capacity for choice is needed, and we should expand and improve the charter school system, with more co-location of charters with traditional schools, equalized funding, and a more robust "parent trigger" to authorize parents to change the management of unacceptable schools, and we should provide a state funded scholarship for students in chronically failing schools to transfer to any school of their choice.

Third, we must adopt policies that enable deregulation and innovation in the schools and move away from the top down, compliance and input driven system to one that is output and performance based. The role of the state beyond accountability should primarily be to enable and encourage new teaching and learning methods through the use of technology and innovations in scheduling and delivery. Schools should be free from unnecessary state bureaucracy and the time-honored management principle of "authority commensurate with responsibility and accountability" should be the prevailing operational model. This should include eliminating the role of the state in managing local human resources, including compensation of educators and arbitrary class size restrictions. And we should expand truly alternative routes to the teaching profession and hold teacher preparation programs accountable for the effectiveness of the product they deliver.

Fourth, we must spend education dollars much more efficiently. In all of the current litigation on school finance, we must ask ourselves, which is the most important consideration—adequacy, equity, or efficiency? I submit the following response: (1) aggregate statewide funding is adequate and, in fact, public education funding from all sources over the past 14 years has increased significantly more than the increase in enrollment and inflation combined, even when adding a factor for the increase in special needs students; (2) equitable funding is questionable in many ways, including between administration and the classroom, between and among many rural and urban areas, and between traditional and charter schools; (3) the "Robin Hood" finance system is a failed attempt at equity; and (4) the constitutional mandate for school "efficiency" should have priority in driving the school finance debate.

Let's face it—the current education delivery system is not sustainable. We cannot continue to finance this top-down, compliance and input driven system. Only when we replace it with a more competitive, deregulated, and innovative system that incentivizes educators and enables productivity with true financial accountability will we know what funding adequacy and equity really mean.

All four of these areas of reform must “hang together” as a comprehensive whole, but it begins with the state system of accountability for results, for without the infrastructure provided by this system the other pieces have no coherence.

A formidable challenge? No doubt, but we must get on with our response to it. Contact us at www.texaseducationreform.org to find out how you can help.