

Change in School Accountability Ratings is a Good Thing for Texas

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Last week, the Texas Education Agency released the 2010-2011 accountability ratings for Texas' schools and school districts. The number of districts rated as "exemplary" dropped from 241 to 61 and the number of campuses earning this distinction fell from 2,637 to 1,224. More districts and campuses were "academically unacceptable" as well with the number of districts up from 37 to 88 and the number of campuses up from 104 to 569.

At first glance, it would appear that our students and schools performed worse in 2010-11, but that is not the case. Instead, Texas Education Commissioner Robert Scott took bold steps to realign the ratings to reflect a new emphasis on rating districts and schools based on their students' progress towards postsecondary readiness. We applaud Commissioner Scott on taking these important steps.

The changes in ratings were the result of several key improvements: requiring districts and schools to meet goals for students who are on track to graduate at the postsecondary-readiness level; discontinuing use of the "Texas Projection Measure" (TPM); and requiring more students to pass math and science assessments.

First, and for the first time, districts and schools had to meet postsecondary readiness goals in order to earn the "recognized" or "exemplary" designations. To be "recognized", 15% of more of all students, and 15% or more of economically disadvantaged students had to score at the "commended" level on the English and math assessments. To be rated "exemplary", 25% of each group had to reach the "commended" level on these two assessments. The "commended" level—which is significantly higher than the passing standard—is a good indicator that a student is on pace to graduate with the knowledge and skills to succeed in college, community college, industry certification, or other job training programs. TIER was a strong proponent of this change and we believe this was an important first step in aligning the accountability system with postsecondary readiness.

Next, the 2010-11 ratings were calculated without using the TPM. Under the TPM, students who failed an assessment could be counted as passing if—based on a statistical model—they were projected to pass in future years. Ultimately, the use of the TPM boosted district and school ratings because failing students were counted as passing. Last year, approximately 70% of districts and schools were rated as "recognized" or "exemplary" based in large part on the TPM. This year, 39% of districts and 48% of campuses earned these ratings and we feel this is a much more accurate reflection of academic performance. TIER opposed the TPM's role in the accountability system for several reasons. First, by counting failing students as passing, it overestimated the progress that our students were making. Secondly, by artificially reducing the number of "academically unacceptable" districts and schools, it prevented the state from providing the extra resources and oversight that students in unacceptable schools desperately needed. Finally, the TPM was not based on individual student growth toward postsecondary

readiness. TIER supports including student growth and “value added” measures to the accountability system and will work with the Texas Education Agency as they consider future improvements.

Finally, the ratings reflected stronger math and science expectations for our students. Both standards were raised by 5% over the preceding year. As the state implements the new STAAR exams, which better measure progress to postsecondary readiness, academic standards will continue to become more rigorous in the future.

While this year’s lower ratings may cause some to question the accountability system, this adjustment was necessary to reset the system and realign it with the overarching goal of postsecondary readiness for all students—which was the major accomplishment of House Bill 3 in 2009 which TIER strongly supported then and successfully defended in 2011. Our students and teachers didn’t suddenly become less successful. Instead, our evaluation system just got a lot better. By linking our K-12 standards, assessments, and ratings to the knowledge and skills needed for students to succeed after high school, we are giving a more accurate picture of the progress that our schools and students are making and can better make the changes needed to drive student achievement.