

# **Common Ground**

**A Declaration of Principles and Strategies for Texas Education Policy**

**By**

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## Preface

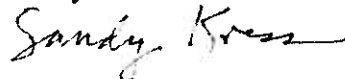
Many education leaders have lamented the lack of consensus and sharp disagreements that have characterized Texas education policy discussions in recent years. In December 2007, the five of us agreed to begin the search for a remedy. We determined to meet as individuals, unaffiliated with any group and speaking only for ourselves, to share views on Texas education policy and assess prospects for reaching common ground on recommendations for the next session of the Texas Legislature and beyond.

All of us had worked on Texas education policy for many years. We had different views on many issues and a history of some spirited disagreements. If we could reach common ground, we reasoned, then perhaps so could others. We determined to engage in intense conversations over an extended period of time, submit our beliefs and policy positions to each other for rigorous critique, and determine if consensus could be reached on major points. We have done so, and we have found common ground.

This paper is the product of our work. It is a compromise document. We put it forward with the hope that it will serve as a starting point for conversations among a wide range of education leaders and that from these conversations Texans will reach common ground on core education policy issues for the next session of the Legislature and beyond. We understand, and hope all Texas education leaders understand, that compromise is the essence of democracy. Only by compromise will Texans be able to respond to our public education challenge, and indeed to all the challenges facing our state.

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## Introduction

It is time for Texas education leaders—elected officials, educators, business and civic leaders, academics, foundation executives, and all those who have a responsibility to provide leadership for public education policy in Texas—to come together around a state education policy framework that will significantly accelerate improvements in student achievement. Beginning in the mid-1990s, a broad base of Texas education leaders supported standards-based reform, and building on the balanced pillars of standards, accountability for results, acceptable resources, and local control, Texas made notable improvements. But in recent years the consensus has eroded, many public policy decisions have lacked coherence, and the momentum that made Texas so academically competitive in the past has failed to move our student achievement to the next level.

Clearly, though, Texas is on the right road. National assessments show that African American and Hispanic students in Texas have made dramatic gains since 1992 and, in many cases, are outperforming their peers in other states. The achievement gap between white and minority students is still unacceptably wide, but it has been narrowing over the last 15 years.<sup>1</sup> Texas needs to build on this momentum. We can go from good to great. But to do so, education leaders must come together and reach common ground on core principles and overarching strategies.

Indeed, in a state as large and diverse as Texas, there will always be different points of view and spirited discussion. Ideology, partisanship, and self-interest are as much a part of Texas as the Piney Woods, the Valley, and the Great Plains. Consensus on all points is not expected or required. But common ground on core principles and overarching strategies is essential. And such common ground, if we can reach it, must be held, even as state leaders come and go, even as political parties wax or wane. For creating a world-class public education system will take constancy of purpose, political will, and time.

Around what state education policy issues must Texas education leaders seek common ground? Four issues stand out: standards, accountability, capacity, and control. These are at the heart of the state's responsibility to provide a free, efficient public education for all children. Standards define the goals: what should a high school graduate (and a child at each grade level) know and be able to do? Accountability defines the method by which taxpayers know to what extent schools are reaching the goals and prescribes consequences that are appropriate to foster improvement. Capacity describes the resources, technical support, and policymaking structures and processes that the state provides so that schools can do what they have been asked to do. And control clarifies what decisions are made at the state level and what decisions are left to local school boards, schools, and parents.

Within each of these areas there are, and always will be, numerous policy questions that require attention. What is important is that within each area, state policies are in alignment. What is critical is that the four major areas be aligned, for they are the foundation for the entire enterprise.

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<sup>1</sup> National Assessment of Educational Progress results, National Center for Education Statistics, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/profile.asp>.

This paper proposes, at a fairly high level but with specific examples, aligned principles and strategies in each of these four areas. In brief, we recommend:

- College/workplace readiness as the standard for all high school graduates, with three diplomas and multiple curriculum paths within the recommended diploma;
- An accountability system with easily understood principles that fairly evaluates and promotes greater effectiveness in school districts and schools toward reaching high standards;
- Adequate resources to cover enrollment growth and inflation plus new funds for high-leverage investments as well as supportive state systems for policymaking, technical assistance, and information management;
- A shared partnership between the state and local districts in which the districts have the primary authority and responsibility for implementing the state's system of public education.

Before setting forth our specific recommendations in these four areas, we wish to proclaim unequivocally our support for Texas educators. We believe Texas public schools are educating our diverse student populations—that is, all our students—more effectively than at any time in history. There was no golden age before standards-based reform when the wide range of our children were learning and graduating at higher rates. Texas public schools are better than ever, and they are getting better each year.

The challenge for Texas is that this record of achievement is not good enough. The world has changed. The workplace has changed. In today's global information economy, with every state and every major trading partner striving to improve its educational system, Texas will have to run faster just to keep up.

This will inevitably challenge Texas educators. They will respond to these challenges and commit to accelerating improvements in student achievement if they are listened to, treated with respect, and invited to be partners in the work. This does not mean that educators will have the final say in policy and get all the resources they want. Public education is a public good, and the public, acting through the democratic process, has the authority and the responsibility to make the rules and allocate the resources. But without the enthusiastic support of Texas public school boards, administrators, and teachers, Texas will not create a world-class system of public schools. We are clear on this point and kept it before us as we developed our recommendations.

### **Standards**

Texas needs higher standards. Texas standards should be rated among the best in the nation. Currently, they are not. According to results on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), 89% of Texas eighth-graders meet state standards in reading. Yet, tests administered

by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicate that only 28% of the state's eighth-graders are proficient in reading.<sup>2</sup> We have to set the bar higher.

It is not just the lack of rigor that is causing Texas standards to compare poorly with other states. Analyses by organizations such as ACT show that the state's standards are poorly aligned, fail to articulate a clear sense of increasing complexity, lack specificity, and are likely to result in students mastering lower-level skills.<sup>3</sup>

### **High School Standards**

What should be done? The place to start is the standard for high school graduation. The Texas standard should be postsecondary readiness, defined as "the range of academic, workforce, and social proficiency that high school students should acquire to successfully transition to skilled employment, advanced training in the military, an associate's degree, a bachelor's degree, or technical certification"<sup>4</sup> without the need for remediation. We believe a Texas high school diploma should be evidence that the student who holds one has the knowledge and skills necessary to (1) begin college, career and technology training, or advanced military training without remediation or (2) enter the workforce with a good-paying job. Our short definition of this minimum standard for high school graduation, used hereafter, is "ready for community college work without remediation," or in even shorter form "postsecondary success."

We also note as a related point that community colleges should join with secondary school educators to define the standard for community college work. The need for remediation should be based on an objective standard that does not vary from one community college to another. Further, state funding procedures that create a financial incentive for higher education to push students into remedial courses should be carefully examined and changed if necessary.

The current standard-setting process in Texas is broken. This process should be replaced with one that (1) assures our standards are benchmarked to the best in the nation; (2) emphasizes the knowledge and skills that will build to postsecondary readiness; and (3) reflects the expectations of employers and institutions of higher education as well as the wisdom of our teachers and parents. With respect to grades 8-12, these standards must reflect the knowledge and skills needed for postsecondary success, and they must be benchmarked against the best available standards for these grades, such as those developed by ACT.

This standard for high school graduation, though it can be succinctly stated, needs amplification. High school students have a wide range of interests and career goals, and some are clearly more capable of high performance in rigorous courses than others. The high school curriculum must recognize this by providing multiple paths to a high school diploma. We recommend three high school diplomas: distinguished, recommended, and basic. We wish to elaborate below on the recommended diploma, as this will be the one most students receive.

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<sup>2</sup>These 2007 figures come from the National Center for Education Statistics and the Texas Education Agency.

<sup>3</sup>College Readiness of the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) Compared to ACT's Standards for Transition, ACT, 2005.

<sup>4</sup>Strategic Plan, Texas High School Completion and Success Initiative Council, 11 March 2008.

The recommended diploma should be the default diploma for students entering 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Then, depending on their interests and capabilities, students should be able to opt for the more demanding distinguished diploma or the somewhat less demanding basic diploma. Course requirements for the basic diploma will be comparable to those for the current minimum graduation program. However, since the recommended diploma should be the expected diploma, we must set limits on when students may choose to pursue the basic diploma. We suggest such restrictions as permitting a student, with written consent of parent or guardian, to move to the basic program only after completing grade 10, after reaching age 16, or after having failed to have advanced from grade 9 to grade 10.

Most students will seek the recommended diploma, which will have embedded in it a core curriculum of coursework in four areas that every student must complete. This, minimally, should include: four years of English/language arts; Algebra I, Algebra II, geometry; biology, chemistry, and either physics or principles of technology; and American history, government/economics, and either world geography or world history.

Building on these required courses, Texas high schools should provide within the recommended diploma at least three curriculum paths, with variations in each, so that students can pursue their interests and career goals and prepare for postsecondary success.<sup>5</sup> The 80<sup>th</sup> Texas Legislature has already laid the groundwork for a high school curriculum that serves the diverse interests and talents of students. House Bill 3485, which was added to the Texas Education Code in 2007, encourages school districts “to establish for each student entering grade 9 a personal graduation plan that identifies a course of study that (1) promotes: (A) college and workforce readiness; and (B) career placement and advancement; and (2) facilitates the student’s transition from secondary to postsecondary education.”<sup>6</sup>

The multiple paths we recommend, all of them rigorous, would allow students to choose paths focused on college or university enrollment or a technical career. Enabling students to choose one of these paths would help motivate them to stay in school through graduation because they would know they were preparing themselves for the work, career, or educational option of their choice.

The first curriculum path to the recommended diploma would be for students who plan to attend a college or university with a focus in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics. Students on this curriculum path would add to their core curriculum requirements advanced math, science, and related courses so that the total number of courses in the four core areas would be at least 16.

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<sup>5</sup>Most jobs today require at least some postsecondary education. Even in fields such as welding, manufacturing, and automotive repair, one to two years of advanced technical training is called for to acquire the necessary skills (Clint Shields, “Texans: In Demand; Students get specialized work force training for jobs ahead,” *Fiscal Notes: A Monthly Review of the Texas Economy*, Office of Susan Combs, Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts, 2008). And more and more jobs of the future will require college degrees or technical training. In Texas, for example, 19 of the 25 fastest growing occupations require some form of postsecondary education. Of those occupations, 12 require at least a bachelor’s degree while seven require either an associate’s degree or postsecondary technical training (“Texas: Fastest Growing Occupations 2002-2012,” *Texas 2012 Long-Term Projections Occupational Outlook*, Texas Workforce Commission).

<sup>6</sup>Texas Education Code, Section 28.0212 (g).

The second curriculum path would be for students who plan to attend a college or university with a liberal arts focus. These students would add to their core curriculum requirements advanced courses in art, music, languages, history, philosophy, and social sciences. These liberal arts courses, whether advanced placement or not, would match in rigor the advanced courses offered in math and science. For these students, the total number of courses in the four core areas would be at least 16. In addition to the 13 required core courses, these students would take up to two advanced courses in history, philosophy, or other social sciences for which the required social studies courses are prerequisites. Also, up to two courses could be foreign language courses that are third-year and beyond or courses in music and art that are deemed advanced by the State Board of Education.

All students completing the science/technology/engineering/math or liberal arts college or university readiness curriculum would receive a solid academic foundation sufficient for them to pass entry-level college courses in all disciplines.

The third path would be for students seeking a career/technology (CT) industry certificate at graduation or the academic foundation that would lead to a CT certificate or degree in a technical field, most likely at a community college. This path would require applied math and science courses or applied math and science content embedded in required CT courses. This path would be equal in rigor to the college preparation path, and students who completed any CT variation within this path and then decided to enroll in a college would be able to do college work without remediation.

These three curriculum paths, with variations within each, would prepare every graduate for college or the workplace without remediation. And every graduate, whatever his or her initial career choice, would be prepared for community college.

At this time, too many Texas students are not prepared for the rigor of postsecondary learning, whether in college, technical institutes, or on the job. Based on the TAKS exit exam and national college readiness tests, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) calculates that only 48% of Texas students in the class of 2006 graduated college-ready in English while only 52% were college-ready in math. Just 35% were considered college-ready in both math and English.<sup>7</sup> The impact of this is felt in the state's colleges and universities. In 2006, 53% of the high school graduates enrolled the following fall in Texas colleges and universities. Of these, 35% had to take at least one remedial class in reading, math, or writing before they could take credit-earning courses.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Postsecondary Readiness Ramp**

To better prepare high school graduates for postsecondary readiness, new content standards are needed for K-8, for clearly, if high schools are expected to graduate students ready for college or the workplace, they must enroll 9th-grade students who are ready for high school. Currently, Texas K-8 standards are inadequate. They need to be more specific, more progressive by grade level, and more rigorous.

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<sup>7</sup>2007 State Academic Excellence Indicator System, Texas Education Agency Web site.

<sup>8</sup>Annual Texas Success Initiative Test Report of Student Performance, 2005-2006 High School Graduates Enrolled in Texas Higher Education, 2006-2007, Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, April 2008.

It is critical that K-8 and 9-12 standards be vertically aligned with college or workplace readiness standards so that students can move at progressive levels of rigor from year to year and master the skills they need to be high school ready by the end of eighth grade and college or workforce ready by the end of high school.

Think of K-12 as a ramp that leads to college or workplace ready. At the end of each grade, a child is either on or off the ramp. Let's call this the postsecondary readiness ramp. Standards from K to 12 and their accompanying assessments should be aligned so that at any grade level in any subject passing the test means the child has met the standard and is on the ramp to college or workplace readiness.

Currently, the passing standard for the 11<sup>th</sup>-grade TAKS exit exam is a scale score of 2100. This passing standard is well below the benchmark for college or workplace readiness. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) considers 2200 on the exit TAKS as the college-readiness standard for English Language Arts and math. But research by the National Center for Educational Achievement (NCEA) has determined that even this score is too low.

According to the NCEA, an English score of 2300 on the 11<sup>th</sup>-grade exit test is the appropriate benchmark because it indicates a 90 percent probability that the student will be college ready in reading and writing as compared to a 77 percent probability if the score is 2200. An exit math score of 2300 indicates a 77 percent chance that the student is ready for college algebra, while a 2200 projects only a 26 percent chance of readiness.<sup>9</sup>

NCEA research indicates that 2300 is in line with similarly predictive scores on national college readiness tests. A score of 2300 in English correlates to an SAT score of 543 and an ACT score of 22.5. In math, 2300 corresponds to an SAT score of 570 and an ACT score of 24.3.<sup>10</sup>

To assure that at each grade a student is on the college readiness ramp, NCEA has determined a comparable benchmark TAKS scale score at every grade level. Students who perform at this benchmark are proficient in essential knowledge and skills and are on the ramp to finish 8<sup>th</sup> grade high school ready and graduate from high school ready for college or the workplace without remediation. Based on NCEA's research, the following scale scores in grades 3-10 would place a student on the ramp to a score of 2300 in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Chrys Dougherty, Lynn Mellor, and Nancy Smith, *Identifying Appropriate College-Readiness Standards for All Students*, National Center for Educational Achievement, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

### Reading

Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8	Grade 9	Grade 10
2391	2350	2350	2404	2337	2369	2285	2256

### Mathematics

Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8	Grade 9	Grade 10
2357	2341	2370	2338	2235	2271	2264	2228

An analysis using these TAKS benchmarks shows that in 2007 most students statewide were not on the ramp to postsecondary readiness. Among students on the free- and reduced-price lunch program, less than one-third at any grade level met that standard. Following are the percentages of students for each grade who scored high enough on the TAKS to be on the ramp to postsecondary readiness (as defined by the NCEA) in 2007.<sup>12</sup>

#### All Students – Reading

Grade	% on Ramp
3	36
4	30
5	25
6	42
7	25
8	42
9	36
10	35
11	44

#### All Students – Math

Grade	% on Ramp
3	28
4	34
5	39
6	39
7	42
8	32
9	29
10	33
11	29

#### Low-Income – Reading

Grade	% on Ramp
3	23
4	19
5	15
6	30
7	14
8	29
9	24
10	23
11	28

#### Low-Income – Math

Grade	% on Ramp
3	19
4	23
5	29
6	28
7	30
8	21
9	17
10	20
11	17

<sup>12</sup>The National Center for Educational Achievement calculated these percentages based on scale scores correlated to college readiness on the 2004 TAKS. Because of different rates of improvement and the lack of precision in equating scale scores across years, the 2007 charts show wide grade-level variations in the percent of students on the ramp. Time does not permit updating these numbers. This issue, however, underscores the critical need to adjust the college-readiness ramp benchmarks on an annual basis until a new, more accurately aligned assessment is adopted.

Clearly, these levels of performance are unacceptable. There are many things that need to be done to put things right, but the place to start is standards. Let the state declare that college/career ready without remediation is the standard. Let the high schools provide three diplomas and multiple curriculum paths to graduation in order to meet the needs of all students and the needs of the job market, but with the same minimum postsecondary readiness standard for all. Let all standards be specific, progressive, and rigorous. And let us in Texas be one of the first states to put into place a performance standard at each grade level to determine whether or not a student is on the postsecondary readiness ramp.

### **Accountability**

Standards without accountability are like New Year's Resolutions. Unless performance to standard is measured, reported, and acted upon, standards have little power to transform. Texans have known this since 1993, when the Legislature created the nation's first state accountability system to hold public school campuses and districts accountable for the performance of every student. This system has served the state well. It has been not only the driving force behind significant improvement in Texas schools; it also has provided educators with a wealth of knowledge about the academic performance of the state's children and the continuing challenges they face.

However, it is time for a change. Texas needs an accountability system that fairly evaluates school and district performance against the postsecondary readiness standard described above. The current system measures performance against a lower standard, perplexes parents, and frustrates educators. By holding schools and districts accountable for as many as 36 different performance metrics and rating schools according to their lowest-performing student group, the system places at a disadvantage schools and districts that are large and diverse. Consider this simple illustration: a man walking across a minefield with 36 mines is more likely to step on a mine than a man walking across a minefield with 18 or even fewer mines.

What's more, the state accountability system is not aligned with the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. In 2006-2007, eight of the state's 50 largest school districts that were rated either Academically Acceptable or Recognized failed to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under the federal accountability system. And 16 schools that did not meet AYP were rated either Recognized or Exemplary by the state system.<sup>13</sup>

For many reasons, Texas is ready for a new accountability system. We believe policymakers, educators, business leaders, and all those deeply engaged in improving public education in Texas can reach consensus on a new system that will provide a fresh boost for improving student achievement and once again place Texas at the vanguard of educational accountability. This new system should set the bar high for all children in the state, fairly represent school and district performance, and be understandable to the public. It should also be rich in detail for educators, parents, and the community; and it should provide schools and school districts with strong incentives to make certain all children are meeting state standards.

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<sup>13</sup> 2007 Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), Texas Education Agency Web site.

## **New Accountability System Design Principles**

There are certain basic design principles we would like to see in this new accountability system.<sup>14</sup>

- **Expanded Ratings:** The system should have a sufficient number of ratings to allow the state to spread school and district performance broadly. More numerous and narrower rating bands will make it easier to continuously raise the bar for performance, give schools and districts more opportunity to show improved performance, and allow the state to calibrate interventions more precisely.
- **Proportionality:** The system should measure performance across all grades, all subjects, and all subgroups. But instead of rating a school or district by the performance of its lowest-performing group, it should rate a school or district by the percentage of performance targets it meets. This “proportional” method would allow schools and districts that are subject to numerous performance targets because they have large diverse populations to have an equal opportunity to achieve a high rating with schools and districts subject to only a few performance targets because they are small and homogeneous. In short, it would be fair. However, if a particular student group within a school or district persistently fails to meet performance targets, there should be rating and intervention consequences. The new system should get away from rating schools by their lowest-performing group, but it is still important to ensure that no student group repeatedly fails to meet performance targets.
- **Weighted Indicators:** The system should weight performance indicators by placing them in tiers. This is critical, because although there are many important indicators of performance, some are more important than others. The system should enable more weight to be given to key performance indicators, such as proficiency in reading and math, but not ignore other important indicators such as participation and performance in Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate classes. We believe at least three tiers are needed.
- **Performance and Growth:** The system should measure schools and districts for both student performance levels and performance growth. So that it is fair to high-performing and low-performing schools and districts and provides both with an equal incentive to achieve high performance for all children, the system should rate acceptable schools and districts that are either performing acceptably or acceptably improving performance. Acceptable growth expectations should be higher for schools with low-performing students and decline as performance improves.
- **NCLB Alignment:** AYP should be incorporated into the system. Texas should vigorously seek greater flexibility in meeting federal requirements—specifically regarding growth measures, differentiated consequences, and better assessment and accountability for disabled and ELL students—and federal law may change, but whatever

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<sup>14</sup> We wish to acknowledge our indebtedness to the Texas Star System, a new accountability system proposed by Raise Your Hand Texas, from which we have borrowed both principles and nomenclature.

the federal requirements are at any given time, this metric should be incorporated into the system. And to emphasize the importance of meeting the federal standard, no school or district that misses AYP should receive the highest rating.

- **Consequences:** Interventions in cases of unacceptable performance should be calibrated to the performance of the school or district; that is, the more severe or sustained the low performance, the more intensive the intervention. Consequences should range from assistance from the state and community groups, to an improvement plan under a specific set of guidelines, to restructuring or reorganization, and eventually to loss of accreditation. Interventions should always provide assistance of real value and benefit for improving student achievement. Consequences and interventions in the new accountability system should be no less rigorous than those currently required by House Bill 1.
- **Comparable Improvement:** The system should provide measures of comparable improvement among schools so that the best practices of schools that are performing at high levels can be shared.
- **Flexibility:** The system should have great flexibility so it can be modified easily to accommodate changes in performance assessments, metrics, and targets without increasing complexity.
- **User Friendliness:** The results should be easy to understand. All the weighted and moving parts should come together in a logical way to fairly identify school and district performance using a readily interpretable rating system.
- **Older Immigrant Children:** The new system should consider immigrant children who enter the Texas public education system at 12 years or older and who are largely illiterate in both English and their native language a distinct group. These students should not be grouped with others for purposes of accountability. These children present educators with an especially difficult challenge and need intensive intervention to catch up. Schools and districts should be accountable for the growth of these students but not for their performance level. However, because their performance level is low, the growth standard should be steep.
- **Accountability for Postsecondary Readiness:** As stated above, however the system is designed, the most important feature of the new accountability system should be accountability for the new standard of postsecondary readiness. Specifically, the new system should measure schools and districts on the percentage of students who are on the ramp to postsecondary readiness. A metric that does this should be added to the new accountability system, and because postsecondary readiness should be the most important of all performance indicators, it should be in the top tier of weighted metrics. And to emphasize the importance of meeting the postsecondary readiness standard, no school or district that fails to meet this standard should receive the highest rating.

At this point, it is appropriate to comment on the different ways to measure student growth, each of which has its appropriate use for particular purposes. We think of growth models in two broad categories, with many variations in each – “growth-to-standard” and “value-added,” the latter based on predicted student achievement growth.

Growth-to-standard is fairly straightforward; we look at where students are as opposed to where they need to be to be on track to meet an objective level of performance. The strength of this approach is that it is simple and transparent and is tied to an objective level of expected performance, such as post-secondary readiness. We recognize that students start in different places academically, and that it will require more effort for students who start far below the standard than for students who start close to, at, or above the standard.

Value-added models based on predicted growth have the strength of recognizing to what extent growth is achieved. The weakness of this approach is that it does not focus on getting students to a common level of expected performance, such as post-secondary readiness. Also it is dependent on sophisticated and non-transparent multi-variable regression equations.

Both methodologies have their appropriate uses. We believe that predicted growth models have great value for district, campus, and classroom performance and incentive programs, where the goal is to recognize and reward the efforts of educators, as well as for the evaluation of educator preparation programs. However, for the state's accountability system, we believe that the growth-to-standard model is best, with a modification for older immigrant children, as noted earlier.

However quickly a new accountability system can be put into place, a phase-in period for the postsecondary readiness metric is required. It is not fair to adopt a new standard and immediately hold students and educators responsible for meeting it. This point requires amplification. We wish to be clear that the current TAKS standard of 2100 at each grade level would continue to be the benchmark for passing the TAKS. Students would not be expected to meet the higher postsecondary readiness standard in order to be promoted to the next grade or graduate.

We wish to further elaborate on a phase-in strategy, not to provide specific guidance to policymakers, but to illustrate how a phase-in could be accomplished. This is not a trivial point, for to educators fair phase-in of new, significantly higher standards is of critical importance. But first, we need to describe the postsecondary readiness metric.

First note that the TAKS is not well suited to assess whether or not a child is on the ramp to postsecondary readiness. Texas needs to replace the TAKS with a new assessment designed to do this. The state already is discontinuing the exit TAKS and moving to end-of-course examinations in high school, which will begin with the freshman class in 2011-12. These end-of-course examinations can and most definitely should be aligned with the postsecondary readiness standard.

New vertically aligned assessments in grades 3-8 also are necessary. These new tests should provide a natural staircase to the high school end-of-course exams and should measure how well students are meeting the specific grade-level expectations required to be on the ramp to

postsecondary readiness. Because it may take up to four years to develop and field-test these new assessments, the state should begin developing them immediately. But until such time as end-of-course examinations are fully in place and new tests are brought to market, the TAKS will have to do.

Fortunately, the NCEA analysis of grade-level TAKS scale scores shows that the TAKS will do. Using the TAKS scale scores shown above, which would need to be re-calculated each year to maintain alignment with the postsecondary readiness standard, one could determine if a student was or was not on one of two ramps, the reading ramp and the math ramp. We propose, for simplicity, not to use other ramps—science, writing, and social studies—at this time because (A) these subjects are assessed at only a few grade levels and (B) because reading and math are foundational for science, writing, and social studies. However, as high school end-of-course examinations come on line, it should be possible to construct additional ramps. Using the scale scores aligned with 2300 on the 11<sup>th</sup> grade exit TAKS, the TAKS could be used as an interim metric for measuring postsecondary readiness until a replacement assessment is ready for K-8 and aligned end-of-course examinations are in place.

How might this new accountability system be phased in? During the first phase, 2009-2010 and 2010-2011, schools and districts would continue to be rated under the current system. However, in 2010-2011, the state would begin reporting performance results under the new system, using principles we have outlined above, including weighted measures and proportionality.

The state also would begin reporting in 2010-2011 the percentage of students at each grade level who are on the reading and math postsecondary readiness ramp, both for all students and for low-income students. Parents would receive in their child's TAKS report card everything they receive now plus an explanation of the postsecondary readiness ramp and the scale scores required for their child to be on the ramp. This reporting to parents and the public would, by itself, create statewide recognition of the new postsecondary readiness standard and put pressure on public education to meet the standard.

Also during those two years, 2009-2011, the state would work to align the new accountability system with the No Child Left Behind law, upgrade the data system, and develop a sophisticated growth mechanism to better track student gains and growth expectations.

In the second phase-in step, 2011-2012, 2012-2013, and 2013-2014, the state would begin rating schools under the new accountability system, using current standards and the TAKS. This new system would be based on performance and growth and use weighted measures and proportionality as described above. Also, a metric for postsecondary readiness would be incorporated into the accountability system, and a new expanded system of ratings—for example five or six stars—would be used to indicate school performance, including the postsecondary readiness standard. There are several ways this could be done. Following is an example for illustration purposes only.

- Schools and districts would calculate the percentage of all students on both the reading and math ramps. If more than 40 percent were on both ramps, the school or district would hit the performance target. Or, if the number of low-income students on both

ramps improved by at least 10 percentage points in the previous two years, the school or district would hit the performance target.

- Each year, the percent of all students required to be on the ramp to hit the target would go up by 5 until it reached 80 percent (or until new assessments were available).
- The improvement percentage for low-income students required to hit the target would be reduced to 5 percent for performance above 60 percent.

These numbers are put forward for illustration only. Obviously no numbers can be proposed for consideration until the state has refined data analysis and tracked actual performance. But by 2011-2012, it should be possible for state policymakers to propose fair but stretch targets for the postsecondary readiness ramp.

With good preparation, the state would be ready for the third phase-in step in 2014-2015 and 2015-2016. By this time Texas will have had time to align the high school curriculum with the best available national standards, develop the full range of end-of-course examinations aligned with the postsecondary readiness standard, and have in place a new 3-8 vertically-scaled assessment designed specifically to measure progress to postsecondary readiness. These new assessments could easily be inserted in the accountability system to replace the TAKS ramp. Several years of phase-in for the new assessments might be required. The goal would be to have the postsecondary readiness standard be the pass rate on all state assessments at the earliest point possible.

### **Capacity**

The effort to place more students on the ramp to postsecondary readiness will create new challenges for schools. But we are confident that school boards, educators, and parents will understand the stakes and rise to the challenge. Texas educators have not been afraid of higher standards in the past. Each time the state has raised the bar since accountability was introduced 15 years ago, they have responded positively and with good results. But the move to a postsecondary readiness standard is a major leap, and for schools to meet this challenge, Texas must be willing to make a strong commitment and provide the necessary capacity

Capacity is not just another word for money. Money is indeed critical, and we will be specific on this point; but capacity is much more. It is everything the state must provide so that educators can do their work. It includes state level governance, a coherent, stable policy framework, infrastructure, information, and technical support.

### **Funding**

First, money. Obviously resources must be sufficient for the work. If standards without accountability are analogous to New Year's Resolutions, then standards without necessary resources are analogous to ambitious architectural plans unrelated to a construction budget.

To prepare students for postsecondary success, educators must have adequate and stable funding so they can execute now and plan effectively for the future. Texas still has significant long-

range school finance issues to consider. House Bill 1, passed in special session in May 2006, set goals of college/career readiness for the students in our state. But the state did not recognize that current resources are insufficient to meet those goals. Nor did it address many of the fundamental problems with the Texas public school finance system. Many formulas continue to be years, and even decades, out of date. Also, districts are capped at an amount per weighted student set in 2006, with no recognition of inflation or higher standards.

One of the most serious remaining flaws, both for taxpayers and schools, is that any increases in local property values, and any corresponding increases in the taxes constituents pay to their schools, do not actually benefit the schools. Instead, as citizens pay more taxes locally to their schools, the state simply reduces its contribution and puts the savings into general revenue. It does not even dedicate these revenues to public education.

Whether or not these issues will be considered in the 81<sup>st</sup> Session, the Texas Legislature will still have difficult financial decisions to make, for revenue will be perceived as insufficient or taxes will be perceived as too high. It is a rule of life that revenues are always scarce. Our desires always exceed our resources. But education must remain at the forefront as policymakers decide how revenues are allocated.

Of course, just to stay even over the next biennium, Texas legislators will have to spend more on education. There is no way to avoid it. The TEA reports that the state is likely to experience a growth of 80,000-90,000 students per year, which will cost about \$1.6 billion or more over the next biennium.

State funding processes recognize the cost of student growth, but not the cost of inflation. Since the passage of HB 1 in 2006, many school districts have had to use much of their discretionary revenue to cover the inflationary costs of utilities, insurance, transportation, salaries, technology and other necessary expenses. While we will not opine on any legal consequences relative to school finance issues, we recognize that to the extent districts continue to incur these increasing costs, their spending discretion will be reduced. We recommend that the state funding system recognize the cost of inflation as well as student growth. The revenues that the state receives when local property values and taxes go up should be used as one source of funds to pay for inflation.

More money for growth and inflation are required just to meet the old standard. We believe that additional resources will be necessary to get all students on the ramp to college and workforce readiness. However, we believe these additional resources should not be across the board. They should be targeted on changes designed to enable schools to meet this specific goal. We have identified three areas that we believe are high leverage opportunities for additional funding: intervention for students who are struggling to get on the postsecondary readiness ramp, middle and high school enrichment, especially for math and science instruction, and human capital.

Schools will need to provide intense intervention at all grade levels for children who are far below the postsecondary readiness ramp. These interventions should primarily address deficiencies in math and reading. In math, a high percentage of students are struggling to make the journey from arithmetic to algebra. In reading, too many students still struggle with basic

reading skills, and an even greater number lack the comprehension skills necessary to study at the secondary level.

The state should support a revived and enhanced K-8 reading initiative and should begin to implement immediately a math initiative to assure that all students enter high school at least ready to begin the study of algebra. The principal share of new money should be made to districts in the form of an increase to the high school allotment, with flexibility for use in middle schools, and would pay for effective strategies that could include smaller classes, Saturday classes, tutoring, summer academies, or remediation.

In Texas, as in most states, middle and high schools are the least effective levels of education. Although we believe improved elementary school standards and curriculum aligned to these standards will have a dramatic positive impact on secondary success, we know that districts will have to enrich the middle and high school curriculum, especially in math and science, and enhance coursework to create the multiple paths required for college and workforce readiness. Specifically, high schools will need to increase course offerings for CT programs. The state should define standards for these courses based on requirements for community college programs, industry-recognized credentials, or state licenses, and by 2013 the state should phase out weighted funding for CT courses that are not part of such a sequence.

We recommend increased state funding in the amount of \$500 million for the biennium as a down payment for these initiatives to help our students get on and move up the postsecondary readiness ramp. In supporting this additional funding for secondary initiatives, we intend that the total district spending from federal, state, and local sources for the specific purposes of strengthening secondary education will be increased by at least the amount of this additional state spending.

None of the above, however, will be to any effect unless teachers are fully prepared for this work. Clearly, the right curriculum and effective instruction are the two highest leverage points for improved learning. Texas has many great teachers. But more should be done to attract the best and brightest to public education—especially in those areas that are chronically plagued with shortages—and reward those whose students are meeting and surpassing state standards.

School boards and superintendents have been hamstrung in their efforts to improve student achievement by teacher shortages in critical areas. The most significant shortages in both middle and high school are math and science. In 2007-2008, 31% of middle school math teachers and 34% of high school science teachers were not certified in the field they taught.<sup>15</sup> For certification as a high school math or science teacher, Texas requires a college major in math or science plus education coursework. Though it would increase shortages, we believe this also should be the standard for middle school teachers.

College graduates with math or science majors have high-paying job opportunities in the private sector. To attract these graduates to middle and high school teaching, school districts must offer

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<sup>15</sup> These figures are from the Texas State Board for Educator Certification at [http://www.sbec.state.tx.us/Reports/WhoisTeaching/frm\\_whois\\_main.asp](http://www.sbec.state.tx.us/Reports/WhoisTeaching/frm_whois_main.asp).

competitive salaries. To help make this happen, we support additional state funding for differentiated pay for teachers in high-demand areas.

Texas, since 2006, has offered districts grant money for performance and differentiated pay. These pay plans are being embraced by a growing number of school districts. The state funding that supports these plans should be continued and expanded, with a special emphasis on attracting and retaining effective teachers in critical shortage areas such as math and science.

This year the state is funding \$245 million for both the Texas Educators Excellence Grant program and the District Awards for Teacher Excellence program. We recommend that these be combined into one enhanced program that creates incentives for local districts to utilize performance and differentiated pay in ways that fit their needs. We support the TEA's request for additional funds for these programs.

We wish to make one additional point about resources. The fiscal notes that are attached to new legislation and regulations should reflect the full state *and* local impact of that legislation. School boards and educators need to know the projected total cost of any new program or legislative mandate. At present, the fiscal note process for legislation and regulations is not working well. Staff members at the Legislative Budget Board and TEA do the best they can, frequently with short timelines and other constraints. But the reality is that the state does a fairly good job of estimating its own costs, and a fairly poor job of estimating local districts' costs, in part because there is neither an incentive nor a consequence for getting local costs right or wrong.

While appropriate details would have to be worked out, we recommend that the state create an administrative mechanism for school districts to challenge inaccurate estimates of local costs. Further, we support a range of remedies in case it is determined through this administrative process that the local costs imposed by new requirements are significantly understated. In the most egregious cases of substantially incorrect estimates of cost burdens that negatively affect districts generally across the state, suspension of the relevant cost-driving elements of the requirement until the error is corrected would be in order. Just as there must be accountability for districts, campuses, educators, and students, there must also be accountability for the state itself.

### **Human Resources**

Districts must be able to adequately staff their schools with high-quality teachers, and more money is required. But money is not enough. In addition to raising salaries for teachers in hard-to-fill areas, state policy should change to make it easier for highly qualified professionals to become teachers. This is another measure of state capacity. Public policy in educator preparation should be guided by several priorities that have as their objective the advancement of student achievement in Texas.

- Policy that regulates teachers and administrators should have one clear objective: differentiating between those who teach and lead well and those who don't; and certification should be used only as warranted by evidence of its effect on educator effectiveness.

- Texas should define “teacher effectiveness” by identifying the knowledge, personal qualities, and performance that are required to advance student achievement.
- Texas should transform educator preparation programs into customer-driven institutions by assessing them on the performance of their graduates in improving student achievement.
- And consistent with accountability for results, Texas should demand rulemaking that gives boards and superintendents maximum flexibility to manage their human resources. For example, the State Board for Educator Certification (SBEC) rules now keep many qualified people out of the classroom because they lack a traditional teaching certificate. These onerous regulations should be revised. The Balkanization of certificates that limits flexibility in assignment of qualified teachers also should be changed.

### **Governance**

Adequate resources are necessary but insufficient. Effective state governance and supportive infrastructure are also required. Educators must have access to standards and aligned curriculum materials well in advance of new assessments so they can know exactly what their students are expected to master. And they must be able to rely on a supportive, responsive infrastructure that provides comprehensive and targeted data so they can better evaluate their students’ strengths and weaknesses and determine the appropriate strategies for helping them reach the required standard.

Texas currently does not have the necessary governance structure for a high-performing public school system. Its most glaring weakness is its incapacity to make coherent education policy. Education policymaking is diffused among the Legislature, the State Board of Education (SBOE), the TEA, the THECB, and SBEC.

Consider the most obvious example of incoherence. The SBOE sets standards, approves teaching materials, and sets cut points for assessments; but the TEA determines the difficulty of questions on assessments and the percentage of children who have to pass them for a school’s accountability rating. These decisions are not always aligned or even made in proper sequence. Numerous other examples could be given.

Education policy will always be made through the political process. But Texas should at least align the political process so that whatever it is, the state’s education policy framework is coherent and stable. It may be time for Texas to study other states and determine best practices for making and overseeing education policy. In the meantime, the various state bodies that make education policy should strive to unite behind common goals, standard definitions, clear expectations, and aligned systems; and compatible with reasonable regulatory and management flexibility, the Legislature should assure coherence by placing as much as possible of the state’s policy framework in statute.

A second requirement for adequate state governance is a TEA staffed with sufficient people of wide and deep expertise to do necessary research, award grants, oversee contracts, offer policy advice to state policymakers, and provide technical support to school districts. Currently the

TEA lacks the financial and human capital to do much of this work, with negative consequences for public education in Texas. We recommend that salaries for professional staff at the TEA be tied to salaries for appropriate professionals in the public schools so that the TEA is able to attract and retain experienced and talented educators. We recognize that this will entail costs, which we cannot estimate at this time.

### **Information**

Texas has been a leader in education data, but we are not keeping up with opportunities. Our last capacity recommendation is to urge the 81<sup>st</sup> Legislature to approve and fund a new K-20 education information system. The new information system should encompass current state data systems for public education, higher education, and SBEC.

To maximize the ability of schools to improve student performance, the information system should organize, analyze, manage, and report performance data in forms that schools, districts, independent researchers, and state policymakers can use to inform decision-making and evaluate programs, policies, and systems. The system should establish an open interface between the state information system and district and school data systems to enable data exchange and incorporation. It should include a dropout subsystem that provides real-time information to schools and districts, identifying potential dropouts and related performance according to research-based factors. The system should also track individual students statewide in regard to information on institutions, classes, instructors, programs, attendance, disciplinary actions, assessment results, on-track progress toward graduation, and postsecondary studies. Schools need real time reporting of this information.

The system should provide comprehensive performance data linkages of students with their teachers and teachers with both their initial preparation programs and professional development programs. It should be compliant with the Family Educational Rights Privacy Act (FERPA) and provide researchers maximum permissible access.

The Legislature should require that the data system have the capability to collect data and generate reports on districts and school expenditures and their correlation with academic performance down to the campus level. The new system should incorporate a capability for generating reports that compare the financial performance of schools and districts over time and with other schools and districts. The TEA should report and rate the levels of success in the areas of financial management, resource allocation, and business practices, and develop an online clearinghouse of best practice models that is specific and actionable. We recognize that creating and implementing this system will entail costs for the state and local districts, which we cannot estimate at this time.

### **Control**

The fourth core issue that must be aligned within a comprehensive state education policy framework is control. At the heart of state policy is the question: “At what level should certain decisions be made?” Texas has a state system of education, but the fact that the state has established school districts indicates that the state does not intend to make every education decision. Indeed, it could not. On the other hand, there are some decisions that the state must

make. What standard should guide state policymakers as they decide what decisions they should make and what decisions they should leave to school districts, or even to schools and parents?

Our answer, given the unique needs of individual children, the interests of parents, the complexity of the work, the vast size and geographic spread of the enterprise, the need to keep parents and communities deeply engaged in their schools, and our fundamental commitment to democracy is clear: The ruling principle should be a shared partnership between the state and local districts in which the districts have the primary responsibility for implementing the state's system of public education.

This does not mean that the state does not have final responsibility for everything. It does. It has constitutional authority and responsibility for education and duties under federal law. And it has a compelling interest in some areas: setting standards and assessing performance, and of course, safety, fundamental fairness, and financial oversight. But the state will be most effective in carrying out its responsibilities if it works in partnership with school districts and makes an effort to honor local control.

Some regulations are necessary, and we support those required for the purposes above, including greater financial accountability from school districts for the effective and efficient use of state funds. But when making regulations, the state should ask itself: Is this regulation really necessary? What is the compelling state interest?

It is not only a core management principle, it is also a core principle of democracy that authority and responsibility should go together, that people are more productive when they have more control over their work, and that parents want choices in the education of their children. Also, as a practical matter, if Texas expects its school board members and educators to be change agents for high achievement, if Texas wants all children to graduate from high school college or workplace ready, and if Texas wants parents deeply engaged in the education of their children, then it must make school board members and educators stakeholders in the work to the maximum level consistent with an aligned state system of public education and give parents as much choice as possible within the public school system.

It is vitally important that the state set high standards and hold districts accountable for results. It is also required that the state give school districts the resources and support necessary to meet high standards. But if the state wants results, it is necessary for school districts to have maximum freedom to act without the burden of onerous state regulations that tie their hands unnecessarily or detract them from their core mission.

Let state regulations be tested by a simple rule: Does this regulation deal directly with safety, fundamental fairness and equity, financial oversight, or the system's core business of teaching and learning? If so, does it go only as deep as necessary to obtain the desired results? Some regulations are needed, but let the burden of proof be on those proposing the regulation and let the Legislature move only when it feels it must.

Texas was committed to local control with accountability for results in 1995. It needs to renew this commitment, for sadly the Legislature has in recent years been sliding down the slippery slope of micromanagement.

### **Conclusion**

Texas education leaders must find common ground for creating a coherent, transforming education policy framework for the state, and we must maintain constancy of purpose over successive changes in state leadership. Much depends on it. If we don't raise standards, improve achievement, and better prepare students for a productive life after graduation, we will all pay the price.

Texas is in the midst of challenging demographic changes. If we project current achievement gaps onto the population of Texas in 2040, we will be in a major state crisis. Improvement at the present rate of improvement is not sufficient. Significantly accelerated improvement is required.

What needs to be done? As we said in our introduction, four issues stand out: standards, accountability, capacity, and control. These are the areas that define the state's responsibility for public education. Within each of these areas, there are, and always will be, numerous policy questions that require attention. And there will always be spirited disagreements.

For example, we have failed to reach consensus on a number of issues we have discussed. Among them are reducing the disparity between districts in their "target revenue" levels; expanding pre-kindergarten programs; and equitably funding and expanding the number of charter schools. We will continue to discuss these and other issues and may update this paper if we are able to reach consensus.

However the state responds to these challenges and others, it is important that policies and systems be aligned. And it is critical that at the high level of standards, accountability, capacity, and control state policymakers seek perfect balance. Only by coming together and finding common ground at this high level of state policy and maintaining constancy of purpose over time can we keep Texas on the path to high educational achievement and all the benefits that will follow from it.

In summary, we propose as principles to guide this alignment:

- College/workplace readiness as the standard for all high school graduates, with multiple paths to a diploma;
- A clear, understandable accountability system that fairly represents the effectiveness of schools in reaching high standards;
- Adequate resources to cover enrollment growth and inflation plus new funds for high-leverage investments as well as supportive state systems for policymaking, technical assistance, and information management; and

- A shared partnership between the state and local districts in which the districts have the primary responsibility for implementing the state's system of public education.

We have met many times and gone through many drafts to reach agreement. As stated above, some of us are more enthusiastic about some recommendations than others. It has been hard work, but by compromise we have reached consensus. We believe our recommendations will be good for Texas, are doable, and will be acceptable to most education leaders. We have reached this common ground and agreed to stand on it. We invite others to join us.