



Web Posted: 12/05/2008 12:00 CST

## **Educators must look beyond backpacks**

By Andrew Erben - Special to the Express-News

Back-to-school season is a cliché of images — new backpacks, lunchboxes and colored pencils, all the amenities kids need for their first-ever day of school.

Unfortunately, if we fast-forward 13 years, we are not sending our students into the world fully prepared. Research shows that the vast majority of students who graduate from Texas public schools are not prepared for college, technical training or a skilled job.

According to the ACT, the American College Testing program, only 19 percent of 2007 Texas graduates were college or career-ready in English, mathematics, reading and science. The Legislature responded appropriately by replacing the cumulative high-stakes TAKS test with end-of-course exams in grades 9-11.

Now it's time to take the next step, aligning our curricula, standards and assessments to ensure that high school students graduate with the knowledge they need for their futures. Every child must leave high school ready to transition to skilled employment, advanced military training, technical training or college.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the fastest growing occupations through 2014 will require higher levels of education and training. Sixty-five percent of the new jobs created in the U.S. require some college or equivalent skills, according to Education Testing Service.

A newly formed Texas Coalition for a Competitive Workforce (TCCW), consisting of several business and state policy groups, recently unveiled a series of principles focused on career and college readiness. The principles call for revised curriculum standards, phased in over three years.

To complement the new curriculum, the principles include an improved accountability system based on the percentage of students who are on track — or who are making progress to be on track — within three years. Assessments, standards and goals would be adjusted upward over a three-year period to provide local districts sufficient time to implement the new system,

Whenever the debate about career/college readiness and rigorous curriculum arises, myths about education reform run rampant. Critics allege that standards and accountability increase dropout rates, despite empirical research to the contrary.

To enhance students' flexibility and choices, Texas can dramatically improve its Career and Technology Education (CTE) programs. Once in high school, students should have access to rigorous yet diverse academic pathways. CTE curriculum must provide academically rigorous math and science courses taught in a hands-on, applied approach. Creating core classes that complement CTE coursework will expose students to valuable skills.

Texas needs to attract and retain its best teachers through higher pay. TCCW urges the Texas Legislature to increase funding through “pay-for-performance” grants for school districts rather than a one-size-fits-all statewide approach giving all teachers the same raise. Local school officials should have the flexibility and control to decide which teachers effectively place children on the path toward a skilled career or higher education.

Education reforms geared toward college/workforce readiness are paramount in today's economic landscape. Texas is at risk of falling behind in the global economy as our competitors' workforces become larger and better educated.

As the U.S. slips in economic standing, we may see the first generation of Americans who are economically worse off than their parents. If nothing changes, the Texas state demographer estimates a 12 percent decline in household income and a 40 percent rise in the poverty level in 2050.

Texas education reforms, which seemed daunting at the start, have produced great results. Now we must capitalize on the momentum, looking beyond backpacks and pencils to the realities of the 21st century workforce.

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