



## Budget crisis poses threat to educational standards

### Let's keep commitment to accountability in schools

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The current Texas legislative session is largely about the budget crisis, and the media reports have particularly sensationalized the potential cuts in public education funding. But if one looks more closely, there is a larger threat in public education policy, one that would undermine much of the progress we have made in standards and accountability.

Let's retrace why the recent Texas public education reforms were necessary and why the Legislature spent so much time and effort crafting them.

Prior to the adoption of the landmark House Bill 3 in 2009, we needed a more rigorous high school curriculum with serious and focused assessment and accountability. Among other provisions, these reforms called for the end of the dreaded TAKS exit exam in high school, to be replaced with end-of-course exams in the 12 core high school subjects.

This was a big step forward because these exams could be used as finals, total testing time would be reduced and instruction could be devoted entirely to the curriculum instead of teaching to an unrelated test. Educators, parents and students would take these courses and exams seriously because the exams would count as 15 percent of course grades.

This means that for the first time, after HB 3 is fully implemented, postsecondary readiness, defined as college and workplace readiness without the need for remediation, will be the organizing principle of the Texas school accountability system. In addition, it means that we have adopted a postsecondary ramp, with benchmarks for achievement at every grade level and vertically aligned assessments that tell us where every child is on that ramp leading to the postsecondary readiness standard as the exit.

We have been on a journey leading to this standard and these expectations for our students and our educators for more than a decade. With the adoption of HB 3 in 2009, we are there.

These reforms increased focus on quality instruction, eliminated time spent teaching to an unrelated test and the assessments mattered in students' grades, providing great hope to getting students more prepared for college or a meaningful career. This was a very big deal, a stop-the-presses moment in reform. In fact, Achieve Inc., a national consortium of business and education leaders, named Texas as the only state that met all of its criteria for college- and career-readiness graduation standards.

Now a series of proposals in the current session, primarily House Bill 500 recently passed by the House, threaten to roll back much of that progress, to revisit the old HB 3 debates, to refight the last war.

If these proposals become law:

- End-of-course high school exams will not count as part of the student's grade in the course.
- Graduation standards will be lowered so that students will be able to fail as many as eight of the 12 end-of-course exams and still receive a high school diploma. This means a student would have no motivation whatsoever to take seriously English I or II, geometry, two of the science exams and two of the social studies exams.

Many would like to do away with state testing in the interest of local control or delay implementing end-of-course exams on a hollow argument about costs. But if reliability of funding for instructional and curriculum materials is the issue here, we should have that discussion. You will find that our coalition fully supports the necessary funding for the implementation of HB 3 on schedule, including the end-of-course exams, and I cannot conceive of legislators leaving town without fully funding the instructional materials our students need to begin the next school year. And we support the principle of local control as it pertains to the concept of full operational authority commensurate with responsibility, but accountability standards should be a matter of state policy.

We also support the maintenance of funding that provides intervention to support remedial initiatives in the schools for those students who need it. But we shouldn't allow the budget crunch to be a red herring in delaying the full implementation of these enhanced standards and altering the ultimate mission of public education. And we shouldn't allow the mantra of local control to undermine the most rigorous high school graduation standards in the nation that have put Texas back at the top in our expectations for our educators and our kids.

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