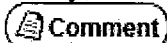


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Advocates Pushing for Broad Reform in Texas Public Schools

By ADAM RUSSELL

Staff Writer

Education system reform may be required to ensure Texas public schools produce students capable of meeting the state future workforce needs.

Texas Institute for Education Reform President Andrew Erben visited the Tyler Morning Telegraph between meetings with area education administrators and business leaders to explain the institute's proposal to better prepare students for the workforce.

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Erben said statistics show that four of five high school graduates are not college or career ready in the four core curriculums of English, math, science and social studies.

"The students we are producing today are going to be taking the jobs of tomorrow and (businesses) are concerned that unless we improve our accountability system that those students are not going to have the knowledge and skills needed to take the jobs that are available," he said. "And from a policy standpoint we need to keep up with our obligation to educate students to the best of our ability."

He said after months of discussion with business representatives and educators the institute produced a preliminary agenda for the upcoming legislative session to present to legislators and other interested groups.

Erben said the institute will encourage change in three basic areas, including public school accountability, career and technology education and teacher quality and performance.

Significant leaps in the quality of education and testing have been made since the state incorporated an accountability system, Erben said, and schools have closed achievement gaps between racial and socioeconomic groups while decreasing dropout rates.

However, he said, the current accountability system is based on the lowest denominator and how many students can make the cut score.

Erben said when a student graduates from high school he or she should be prepared for a two- or four-year institution, advanced military training, career training such as industry certification or immediate placement in the workforce.

"Our main purpose is to have the state adopt career and college readiness as the final goal of the public education system," Erben said. "When they get out of high school we want that high school diploma to certify that they are ready for the next step and we have some ground to make up."

Making up ground includes addressing that Texas' students rank seventh and eighth lowest in the nation in college placement ACT and SAT tests, respectively; that half the state's high school graduates require remedial college courses post-acceptance.

These students face the prospect that 80 percent of new jobs require postsecondary education or training.

Based on current educational outcomes and demographic shifts projected within the state by the Office of the State Demographer, household incomes will decline by 12 percent and poverty will increase by 40 percent by 2050.

Erben said the state's adoption of curriculum and testing starts at the 12th grade exit standard for readiness and works backward.

"We know the skills that they need in the 12th grade, so let's go back to 11th grade and see what skills they need there then go back to the 10th grade and so on," Erben said.

He described readying students as proceeding up a "ramp" toward secondary or college education. Each year, beginning in kindergarten, students' skill levels are measured to ensure they are on track.

The institute would prefer measuring the absolute number of students who are on grade level and on track to meet the graduation requirement. They would also like to give schools credit for student improvements from year to year as value added.

Erben said the institute also recommends that career and technology training be added for students who are not planning to enter two or four-year institutions. Technical training represents another option for students to participate in classes, pre-graduation, that will be required before entering the field.

"We would like more flexibility in the curriculum," he said. "To have more career-oriented courses that could meet the four-by-four (four years of the four core classes) requirements. We would like to see having applied courses in say biology for students who want to go into medicine or nursing."

Concerns regarding the proposals have been limited to accountability and financing, Erben said.

He said "high-stakes testing" and results on a given day is not preferred, by administrators, who would rather see schools assessed by the overall value given to students.

Resources and funding may not be available for additional curriculum and raised standards but he said public education committees are looking into possible "economies of scale or through better economic practices to make those dollars go further" as part of the initiative's financial feasibility.

Erben said overall the belief is that the education system is not a "one-size-fits-all where everyone has to take the same classes to have different results."

He said that has not worked and will not work to meet the state's demand for trained employees or each student's viability in the workforce.

"We want students to have the options," he said. "We know some will want to go to four-year schools so we want them to be ready for that path, some are going to want to go to two-year schools and we don't think that those two types of students need to be on the same path and some are going to want to go out of high school immediately into career training."
