

Texas Institute for Education Reform

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Texas Public Schools Today and Tomorrow: Call to Action and Agenda for Success

Academic Standards for the Schools We Need

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“There is substantial evidence...that the [Texas] public education system reached a point where continued improvement will not be possible absent significant change, whether the change takes the form of increased funding, improved efficiencies, or better methods of education.” Nathan L. Hecht, Opinion of the Supreme Court of Texas, 2006ⁱ

“Now is the time to take the next steps—to push students farther. Texas can, with some further improvements, establish itself as a ‘high skill state.’ But in my judgment, the current system will not take Texas there. The policies that led to improvements over the past decade appear to be hitting a plateau.” Eric A. Hanushek, Testimony for the Texas Senate Select Committee on Education Reform and Public School Finance, 2006ⁱⁱ

These statements reflect the broad, growing recognition that higher standards for academic achievement are necessary to improve Texas public schools and push students to fulfill their potential. We have substantial evidence today that academic expectations established by state curriculum standards such as the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) are insufficiently rigorous. Evidence comes from evaluations conducted by independent organizations and comparisons of Texas standards with standards set by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), other states, and other nations, in addition to national benchmarks for postsecondary readiness. We also have a growing knowledge about what reforms are necessary to equip students with the academic proficiency necessary to succeed in today’s global economy.

ⁱ Texas Supreme Court Opinion, No. 04-1144, Shirley Neeley, Texas Commissioner of Education, Et Al., Appellants v. West Orange Cove Consolidated Independent School District, Et Al., Appellees consolidated with 05-0145 Alvarado Independent School District Et Al., Appellees consolidated with 05-0148 Edgewood Independent School District Et Al, Appellants, Issued November 22, 2005, pg. 69.

ⁱⁱ Dr. Hanushek is Sr. Fellow at the Hoover Institution of Stanford University and Member of the Koret Task Force on K-12 Education, also Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Texas Schools Project at the University of Texas at Dallas and Research Associate of the National Bureau of Economic Research.

This paper will outline the evidence that higher academic standards are needed in Texas public schools, suggest benchmarks for student learning, and identify the policies that must be introduced to establish the schools we need.

The Evidence That Texas Standards Need Strengthening

- Asked to review the state standards for English Language Arts by the State Board of Education in June 2006, national experts noted that TEKS fail to identify explicit expectations for grade-level performance, do not establish a clear progression of increasingly difficult expectations as grades progress, and are not measurable.¹ These weaknesses were previously identified for all of the core subjects in TEKS (English, math, science, and social studies) by a panel of academic experts assembled by Achieve at the request of the Texas Education Agency in 2001.²
- Texas standards for elementary and middle school math and reading earned a failing grade (D+) from a 2006 comparison of state standards for proficiency with standards set by the National Assessment of Educational Progress by Paul E. Peterson and Frederick M. Hess.³
- In a 2006 analysis of academic standards in the 50 states, the American Federation of Teachers gave a low grade to Texas for weak academic standards in K-8 reading.⁴ The report calls for reading standards to be made clearer and more specific at all grade levels, identifying the level of proficiency students are required to achieve at each grade.
- Evaluations of state curriculum standards for English, math, and science by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation in 2005 suggest Texas standards need additional academic rigor.⁵ English TEKS earned a B, math TEKS received a C, and science TEKS received an F.
- In 2004, ACT issued a report on the weakness of TEKS, noting that state curriculum standards do not “articulate a clear sense of increasing complexity and sophistication across courses and grade levels. The lack of specificity, course differentiation, coverage interpretation and qualifying achievement language in TEKS could very likely promote mastering lower level skills. The acquisition of such skills doesn’t necessarily prepare students for the kind of academic work they will be expected to produce at college.”⁶
- A report issued first by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board in 1999 and later in 2000 by Just for the Kids⁷ noted that approximately 60 percent of students taking TEKS high school courses to earn the Recommended High School Diploma—a program of study that is designed as college preparatory—did not demonstrate college readiness by passing the state or national tests of postsecondary readiness. This report also found academic standards varied greatly within, as well as between schools, for different student groups.
- An analysis of the state’s new college readiness standard for TAKS, performed by the National Center for Educational Accountability, indicates that the college readiness standard for mathematics only provides a 26 percent likelihood that a student will be ready for college freshman algebra (and corresponds to a math score of 521 on the SAT and 21.9 on the ACT).⁸

- National evaluations of student performance furnish the strongest evidence that standards are too low.⁹ On tests administered by the National Assessment of Educational Progress only about one of four students in Texas elementary and middle schools are scoring At or Above Proficient. Scores on tests of post-secondary readiness show that the vast majority of Texas students are unprepared to succeed after graduating from public schools, despite the fact that state law identifies the purpose of the public school curriculum is to “prepare and enable *all* [italics in text] students to continue to learn in post-secondary education training or employment settings (Texas Education Code, Section 28.001).
- International comparisons of student performance demonstrating the weak performance of American students, particularly in math and science, underscore the need to strengthen Texas standards for learning.¹⁰
- International comparisons of the academic expectations for students in high-performing nations, particularly China, indicate the need for Texas to establish a common core curriculum and course sequence for all students that requires high school completion of biology, chemistry, physics, algebra, and geometry to earn a diploma.¹¹
- International comparisons of academic instruction show that Chinese schools, unlike schools throughout the U.S. (including Texas), teach knowledge and skills to a standard of mastery.¹²
- Policies to align high schools with the demands of college and work have not yet been completed by Texas, according to an annual 50 state progress report produced by Achieve in 2006.¹³ Only five states have completed this alignment: California, Indiana, Nebraska, New York, and Wyoming.

House Bill 1 and Current Reform Efforts

Recognizing the need for public schools to rise to the increased demands of college readiness and the 21st century workplace, the 3rd Special Session of the 79th Texas Legislature enacted provisions in House Bill 1 to begin the necessary enhancement of standards, focusing on high schools as follows:

- The Commissioners of Education and Higher Education are required to establish vertical teams to recommend college readiness standards and expectations, evaluate high school curriculum requirements, develop instructional strategies to prepare students for success, and design courses in core areas for students who need additional assistance. The State Board of Education is required to incorporate college readiness standards into the TEKS.¹⁴
- Graduation requirements for the “college preparatory” Recommended High School Program and the Distinguished Achievement Program must include four courses in each of the core subject areas (English, math, science, and social studies), and one or more courses must include a research writing component.¹⁵
- The Texas Education Agency is required to develop standards for evaluating the success and cost-effectiveness of high school completion and college readiness programs, and provide guidance for districts and campuses in establishing and improving programs.¹⁶

- Districts and campuses are required to use funds allocated by House Bill 1 to implement college readiness programs, implement programs that encourage students toward advanced academic studies, and implement programs that align curriculum for grades 6 through 12 with postsecondary curriculum.¹⁷
- Districts are also required to implement a program that allows students to earn the equivalent of 12 hours of college credit while in high school and directs institutions of higher education to assist public schools if requested.¹⁸
- The Commissioners of Education and Higher Education are required to create a P-16 college readiness and success strategic plan that is focused on increasing student success in entry-level college courses and decreasing the number of students enrolled in developmental education at institutions of higher education. The Texas P-16 Council is to assist by providing definitions of college readiness standards, defining components of an individualized graduation plan, defining how model curricula should be provided to districts, recommend strategies for decreasing remediation, and determine how college readiness should be incorporated into educator certification and professional development.¹⁹

These provisions supplement and extend an effort to improve high schools that began in 2003 when the state created the Texas High Schools Project—a public-private partnership that includes the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Michael and Susan Dell Foundation—to increase high school graduation rates and the number of students prepared for college. In 2005, Governor Perry issued an executive order to enhance college readiness standards and high school success; it established college readiness indicators for high schools, established end-of-course tests as an alternative to the 11th grade exit exam, developed an electronic records system to allow student information to be exchanged by high schools and colleges, and founded 35 math-science academies in high schools throughout the state.²⁰ As one of the 22 states in the American Diploma Network, Texas established an action plan for high school reform in 2006 that includes refining state standards to better meet expectations for college and workplace success.²¹

Essential Next Steps

House Bill 1 significantly moves Texas forward, but these reforms are primarily focused on Texas high schools. We must do more. Strengthening standards for high schools alone—without fixing weak standards in the earlier grades—will not produce the significant improvements in student performance needed in public schools today. Comprehensive, systemic reform of academic standards in K-12 is required. Recommendations for developing an agenda for enhancing academic standards are offered below.

- Establish one common core curriculum and one set of academic standards for all students—standards and curriculum that are globally competitive and designed to prepare all students for college and work.
- Strengthen TEKS from K-12. Incorporate the efforts to develop new high school standards into a comprehensive agenda for system-wide change. Efforts to improve Texas

public schools are doomed to fail if elementary and middle school standards are not raised and aligned with expectations for high schools.

- Explicitly define and base new state K-12 standards on recognized national standards for work and college readiness, such as:
 - National Assessment of Educational Progress (Achieve),²²
 - America Diploma Project Benchmarks (Achieve),²³
 - Standards for Transition (ACT),²⁴
 - Springboard (College Board), and
 - Knowledge and Skills for University Success (Association of American Universities).²⁵
- Revise K-12 TEKS to establish explicit, measurable, and differentiated standards for proficiency at each grade level that progressively culminate in work and college readiness at graduation—aligning standards for the K-12 sequence.
- Commission an independent evaluation of new standards and periodically commission independent audits to ensure continuing alignment between public education and workforce needs.
- Identify a required sequence of high school courses in the core subject areas—that includes biology, chemistry, and physics in science and algebra I & II and geometry in math—plus a fourth course in each subject area that has demonstrated additional academic value to college readiness, such as trigonometry and statistics in math.²⁶
- Make literacy a priority. Emphasize literacy development in the elementary grades for all students and provide developmental instruction to enhance reading/writing skills for grades 6-12 for students who are more than one grade below grade level reading.
- Increase the amount of time that students invest in mastering challenging standards, similar to practices of high-performing Asian schools by:
 - Increasing instructional time by expanding the proportion of the school day devoted to structured teaching and learning and expanding the school year, and
 - Requiring regularly assigned and corrected homework.
- Incorporate new K-12 standards into student assessments, teacher preparation programs, and professional development for educators. Commission an independent evaluation to ensure appropriate alignment and conduct periodic independent audits to ensure alignment is maintained.
- Deliver standards in more flexible, innovative, and effective ways, including:
 - Expanding distance learning opportunities—establish live, electronic, interactive middle and high school courses that all schools can access;
 - Providing after-school and Saturday tutoring for all under-performing students;
 - Fast-tracking high performers from elementary grades on, accelerating students into more advanced studies based on demonstrated proficiency rather than on time in class or grade;

- Establishing 11th and 12th grade academies in at least one district high school where students can also elect to enroll in community college courses for college credit, and arrange for these advanced high school courses to be taught by community college instructors who come to the high school academy on a part-time or course-by-course basis;
 - Providing skilled vocational training for high school students as a collaborative with community colleges—students take academics at their public high school and complete a coherent sequence of courses that culminate in a skills certificate at their local community college to earn a high school diploma; and
 - Developing a registry of research proven/evidence-based instructional programs that demonstrate effectiveness in helping students acquire mastery of standards for schools and parents.
- Create success initiatives for the highest one-third of students at each grade level, similar to initiatives for low-performing students, to accelerate mastery of standards and facilitate more rapid progression through the grades into more advanced coursework in high school.
 - Direct each Education Region Service Center to establish a K-16 Council (composed of public school administrators, higher education representatives, business leaders, and parents) to evaluate the connection between their public schools and postsecondary education/training, create an action plan for improving the K-16 pipeline, and assist with implementation.
 - Direct institutions of higher education to develop formal associations with school districts for the purpose of improving the K-16 pipeline by sharing information and efforts.

For students to reach the high level of achievement required by the 21st Century, globally competitive standards must be imbedded in an academically rich core curriculum for all students. Rigorous academic standards must be established for *all* students.

Recent studies by Achieve and ACT show that a comparable level of academic performance is now required of high school graduates who transition to college as well as those who enter workplace training.²⁷ Over the past 30 years, educational requirements for jobs have dramatically increased across all occupational groups, particularly for blue collar jobs and jobs in the service sector.²⁸ Today about 60 percent of the jobs in the U.S. require some form of post-secondary education,²⁹ and almost two-thirds of new jobs created today require some postsecondary education or equivalent skills.³⁰ In Texas today, nine of the 25 fastest growing occupations require some postsecondary education, with half of these jobs requiring at least a bachelor's degree.³¹

Advanced high school math and science courses, once thought necessary only for college-bound students, are increasingly important prerequisites for youth who want blue collar jobs. Today, for example, electricians need algebra, geometry, trigonometry, and physics, and food industry employees need trigonometry, pre-calculus, and calculus.³²

Long-held assumptions that rigorous academic standards are just for an elite group of students—wasted on under-performing students, wrong for students who intend to pursue the arts or trades, and unwarranted for students in the “middle”—must be discarded if students are to survive in the knowledge-based economy and succeed in a globally competitive workforce. Rigorous academic standards and a rich common curriculum are necessary to help students acquire the advanced skills that are now a prerequisite for all jobs that pay a living wage.

High standards and a rich common curriculum also represent civil rights imperatives. Studies show the rigor of academic instruction plays a major role in closing the achievement gap associated with—but not caused by—race, ethnicity, family income, and parental education.³³ High academic standards and a college preparatory curriculum are the hallmark of schools demonstrating the greatest success with disadvantaged students, according to the growing body of research on schools that close the achievement gap.³⁴

The saying “all children can learn” must be completed with the words “to master the skills required to be successful.” High standards offer the means to achieve this goal. As we set standards for the schools we need, we would do well to heed the following advice:

“In a global economy it is no longer enough for a state or school district to compare itself with the state or district next door; they need to compare themselves against world standards. In a global age, benchmarking to world standards is becoming a competitive necessity.” Asia Society, 2006³⁵

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Endnotes

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- ¹⁴ House Bill 1, 79th Texas Legislature, 3rd Called Session, Section 5.01 College Readiness.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid*, Sections 5.02 and 5.09 Graduation Requirements.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid*, Section 5.06 College Readiness Programs.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid*.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid*, Section 5.01 College Credit Program.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid*, Section 5.08 College Readiness.
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- ³⁴ *Gaining Traction, Gaining Ground: How Some High Schools Accelerate Learning for Struggling Students*, The Education Trust, November 2005, pg. 5.
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