

May 17, 2008

Members of the State Board of Education
c/o Texas Education Agency
1701 North Congress Avenue
Austin, Texas 78701

RE: Written testimony on the ELAR TEKS

Dear SBOE Members:

TIER has reviewed the latest draft of the ELAR TEKS. While we understand that there are many different viewpoints and appreciate all the work that has gone into this document, we feel that many parts of the standards are repetitive and lack specificity. We also understand the time constraints that you face in adopting standards. Because of this, we feel the best alternative is for you to augment the TEKS by incorporating standards from the nationally-recognized standards that were adopted by states such as Indiana and Virginia. Chris Patterson will provide testimony on behalf of TIER at your May 21st meeting and we urge you to support her specific recommendations.

To illustrate the repetitive nature of the proposed TEKS, let's review one of the standards for the writing/writing process section. An example from third-grade follows:

“(A) generate ideas and plan a first draft by selecting a genre appropriate for the intended meaning and audience.”

This standard appears, verbatim, in the TEKS for grades 4 through 12.

Are the proposed standards stating that 3rd graders should exhibit the same mastery of genre selection as high school seniors? While the answer is likely, “no”, it is impossible to tell what advances we expect students to make on a yearly basis by reading the TEKS. We need to add specificity to these standards so that our teachers have a concrete idea of the advancing level of rigor we expect from grade to grade.

One of the consistent complaints about the Texas public school accountability system is that we “teach the test”. Unfortunately, if we adopt ambiguous and repetitive standards, the only measurable standard teachers can look to is the test. If we adopt the current draft, we are propagating the very “drill and kill” test preparation that we say we want to avoid. Instead, if we adopt the standards and curricula that outline the material we expect our students to know, the test results will take care of themselves.

Many states and organizations are recognizing the value of strong, specific standards. In their publication, *Sizing up State Standards 2008*, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) sets out the following criteria for coherent and successful standards:

- *Be detailed and explicit with little or no repetition, and rooted firmly enough in the content of the subject area to lead to a common, knowledge-rich curriculum.*
- *Contain particular content:*
 - *English standards must cover reading basics (e.g., word attack skills, vocabulary), reading comprehension (e.g., exposure to a variety of literary genres), writing conventions (e.g. spelling, writing mechanics) and writing forms (e.g., narrative, persuasive, expository) . . .*
- *Provide attention to both content and skills.*
- *Be articulated for every grade from K-8 and by grade or course at the high school level.*

The publication goes on to list specific examples of strong and weak content standards. They cite the following example as a strong English standard:

Distinguish between cause and effect and between fact and opinion in informational text. Example: In reading an article about how Snowshoe rabbits change color, distinguish facts (such as Snowshoe rabbits change color from brown to white in the winter) from opinions (such as Snowshoe rabbits are very pretty animals because they can change colors).

In contrast, they identify the following as a weak standard:

Demonstrate the understanding that the purposes of experiencing literary works include personal satisfaction and development of lifelong literature appreciation.

In reviewing the draft TEKS, it appears that many of our proposed standards could be improved by following the AFT's suggestions.

The AFT also ranks states by the strength of their standards. Texas is not cited as a leader in English standards and currently ranks in the middle of the pack when it comes to overall standards in all core subject areas. It is not surprising that students in states with strong English standards—such as Indiana and Virginia—outperform Texas students on the National Assessment of Education Progress tests in reading and writing.

You have an opportunity to reestablish Texas as the leader in public education by adopting strong, specific, and proven curriculum standards. Please support the incorporation of standards such as Virginia's and Indiana's into our ELAR TEKS.

Sincerely,

Andrew Erben
President