



Texas AFT Testimony AGAINST HB 8

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On behalf of our 66,000 members, we appreciate the bill author's attempt to address the longstanding problems in the statewide testing system. Unfortunately, the substantial changes to the accountability system and the consolidation of decision-making authority with the commissioner of education within that system make this untenable. As much as our members oppose STAAR, the status quo is preferred to the proposed changes in HB 8.

Texas AFT strongly opposes the bill as introduced.

Assessment

This bill does not “get rid of STAAR” as has been messaged. Rather, it simply reinvents the statewide testing system and does not reduce the number or scope of the assessments. Texas students will still be required to take more tests than are federally required and be required to do so in a through-year model that, by the commissioner's own testimony, has had mixed results and negative feedback from school districts.

The bill calls for the beginning-of-year and middle-of-year tests for grades 3-8 to be adaptive, without first field testing this delivery mechanism. This represents a major shift from “standardized” test where all students see the same items. Not only does adaptive testing require more items, making it more expensive, but the data returned to the teacher could be different for every student in their classroom. This will severely hinder a teacher's ability to accurately assess gaps and effectively augment instruction. Texas still has high numbers of undertrained and uncertified teachers. If the state proposes to change assessment in this way, then TEA must also be required to provide professional development on interpreting and creating meaning from adaptive assessments and modifying instruction to meet the needs of students.

The bill would require the writing assessment to be administered separately but would still allow for machine scoring. Multiple school districts have tested the validity of this method

and found that in many cases, student scores are improved upon a requested rescore¹. The writing assessments should be holistically rated by human scorers as has been done in years passed.

To assist in restoring trust in the statewide assessment system, the commissioner's advisory committees for assessment instruments (TEC 39.02302) should be expanded to include parents and classroom teachers. These committees should meet at least twice a year and should be subject to all requirements of the Texas Open Meetings Act.

The agency should be required to further field test or pilot these reforms and report to the Legislature on key findings before they become a part of the accountability system to rate schools.

There can be no faith in the accountability system if there is no faith in the testing instrument. Before taking further statewide action on accountability, the Legislature should first work to ensure the proposed testing changes can be implemented without additional state costs and additional monetary and time burdens on districts and teachers.

Accountability

Texas AFT cannot support the broad authority given to the office of the commissioner nor the lack of agency for districts to participate in or challenge the system by which they are judged.

We support the requirement to further study the indicators for college, career, and military readiness for their relation to student outcomes. However, parents and districts alike have repeatedly called for the mandatory inclusion of other factors besides the state assessment in rating campuses and districts. The optional local indicators contemplated in the bill should be included as part of the statewide accountability system, not just one district from every regional education service center. The agency has previously done much of the work necessary to include student engagement indicators in their December 2022 [Extracurricular and Cocurricular \(ECC\) Student Activities Report](#)², which confirmed the additional benefits of ECC participation to student outcomes, which are not easily captured through quantitative research. Local indicators like ECC activities must be a part of a true testing reform bill.

The bill gives the commissioner unilateral authority to remove an indicator from the accountability system if the commissioner deems it not “valid or reliable.” The bill allows

¹ https://thetexan.news/issues/education/dallas-isd-averages-40-percent-increases-in-staar-test-rescores/article_057b7a8b-6e22-45c1-ab30-8bd25576df88.html

² <https://tea.texas.gov/reports-and-data/legislative-reports>

the commissioner to annually modify the standards for each indicator, without notice to districts, and requires the commissioner to increase the rigor of the performance ratings. These have the effect of continually moving the goal post for districts, creating an unsustainable system in which failure seems inevitable.

The proposed accountability advisory committee in Sec. 2.003 of the bill provides only the thinnest veneer of stakeholder engagement. While we support representation from the Legislature, the requirement to include only one representative from each of “educators, parents, and business and industry” is wholly insufficient to the task of advising the agency and commissioner on accountability matters. The committee composition should be expanded to include a broader swath of stakeholders. This committee should be required to meet at least twice a year and be subject to all requirements of the Texas open meetings act.

The bill would significantly limit the recourse that school districts currently have to challenge the rules established by the commissioner even though the state takeover of authority of an elected board is at stake. Since accountability indicators are determined by a single state appointee whose actions could result in the takeover of an elected board, thereby overriding the will of Texas voters, school districts and their elected boards must have the ability to challenge commissioner decisions in court.

Essentially, HB 8 fails to address the many problems that teachers, students, and parents continue to point out about the state accountability system— accountability and the punitive measures that come with it is based primarily on high-stakes tests rather than meaningful indicators determined at the local level and testing takes up way too much of instructional and learning time. Without these basic concerns addressed and without robust input from educators, HB 8 falls short of being the testing reform bill that Texans demand.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. Please contact Kelsey Kling, kkling@texasaft.org, with any questions.