



Texas Association of School Boards  
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**To:** Member of the Joint Select Committee on Accountability  
**From:** Melinda Harrington, President of the Board, Gorman ISD  
**Date:** August 20, 2008  
**Subject:** Possible Incentives and Current Barriers in State Accountability System

This memo highlights the points made by Melinda Harrington in her testimony on behalf of the Texas Association of School Boards before the Joint Select Committee on Accountability on Wednesday, August 20, 2008. Ms. Harrington provided the following suggestions regarding incentives that may make the state accountability system more effective and barriers that may be impeding the effectiveness of the current state accountability system.

Possible Incentives:

- (1) **Measure progress:** The accountability rating should be based primarily on whether students made a year's worth of academic progress in the class, school and district. Achievement of a performance standard should be a factor but should not solely determine the accountability rating.

Part of the "progress" measurement should be a comparison of districts and schools that serve similar student populations, because a system that purports to rate the quality of a school without taking into account the challenges the students bring to the school simply lacks credibility.

- (2) **Exempt new campuses:** New school campuses should not be subject to an accountability rating for the first year of operation, just as new charter schools are exempt from a state rating during their first year of operation.
- (3) **Award rather than penalize:** Instead of penalizing schools and districts for low performance on any of 36 indicators, develop a "Consumer Reports" accountability system that gives schools and districts the opportunity to "earn points" for achieving certain metrics.

The metrics could be weighted differently (i.e., by assigning higher points values to emphasize the most important metrics), while still awarding credit for a wider variety of measures that provide a more complete picture of school effectiveness.

The system could assign schools and districts an overall numeric score, rather than a label. And, the State could establish standards for giving recognition (like the Consumer Reports "Best Buy" recognition) for schools that have done exceptionally well with a challenging student population.

Parents would find a Consumer Reports type system more understandable than the current labeling system, because they could "drill down" into the data to determine how

the school scored on the metrics that are most important to them (i.e., reading scores for economically disadvantaged students; special education passing rates, commended rates in science and math).

- (4) **Effective technical assistance:** Give TEA the resources needed to provide meaningful technical assistance in the early stages of low performance so that "closure or reconstitution of a campus" is not necessary.

Barriers:

The goal of state policymakers should be to establish *expectations* and provide support and/or remove barriers that are impeding teachers and administrators from achieving those high expectations. School boards have the same goal with regard to their districts. To that end, we would advocate for eliminating the following barriers to effective school performance:

- (1) **Eliminate the state-imposed start date.** School districts should be allowed to determine when to start school in order to help students meet achievement goals. For example, if a school board realizes the district's students need more instructional time prior to the administration of the TAKS tests, then the board should have the flexibility to start school earlier than the fourth Monday in August.
- (2) **Eliminate the 65 Percent Rule or make it more realistic.** Eliminate the 65 Percent rule or define "classroom instruction" broadly enough to include the costs necessary for student learning to occur, including:
- a. the salaries of counselors, librarians and nurses who ensure that students are prepared to learn;
  - b. utilities, attendance, security, and transportation costs, all of which are necessary in order to make sure students are in a school environment that is conducive to learning,
  - c. the costs of curriculum and instructional development to ensure that students have the resources to learn.

The academic accountability system provides a strong incentive for school boards to allocate as much money as possible to "classroom instruction." The 65 Percent rule is neither necessary or helpful in this pursuit. This rule sets an arbitrary spending target - "arbitrary" because has never been proven that spending at least 65 percent of a district's budget on classroom instruction correlates to higher student achievement. And, this arbitrary target is forcing districts to raid their fund balances and/or to raise property taxes, in light of rising operational costs (i.e., food, transportation, utilities). Neither result is good for the students or the taxpayers.

- (3) **Require coordination of federal and state technical assistance.** Require the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to coordinate the technical assistance sanctions

imposed on districts and campuses under the state and federal accountability systems. Currently, if a district or campus is subject to sanctions under both the state and federal systems, two technical assistance teams are assigned and often they provide conflicting guidance. Furthermore, the district has to pay the costs of two technical assistance teams.

