

**Select Committee on Public School Accountability  
Dr. Richard Middleton Testimony, North East ISD  
August 20, 2008 (Lubbock, TX)**

Good morning/afternoon. I am Richard Middleton, superintendent of North East Independent School District in San Antonio. I am here representing the Texas School Alliance (TSA), which is composed of 33 of Texas' largest school districts. We are a large and diverse group, with a mix of Chapter 41 and 42 school districts. Of the 4.5 million Texas school children, Texas School Alliance districts represent 1.5 million of these children. Together, these 33 districts serve 36 percent of the state's public school students, 42 percent of the state's economically disadvantaged students, and nearly half of the state's English Language Learners (ELL).

Taking a broader look at public education in Texas, there are more than 1,000 public school districts that employ 615,000 staff to educate more than 4.5 million students each year, and the student body is growing by 70,000 to 80,000 per year. School districts range in size from fewer than 20 to more than 200,000 students, and property wealth varies from \$18,000 to \$2.8 million per student.

TSA districts recognize the important contribution that our accountability system has made on the overall effectiveness of Texas schools. Educators, parents and the public have access to timely and accurate information regarding student performance as well as school and district effectiveness. The disaggregation of performance data have helped shine a spot-light on students most in need of additional educational intervention.

The structure of the state accountability system has remained unchanged in over a decade, and we commend this committee for hosting numerous meetings to exchange ideas about what modifications are needed. It is encouraging that this committee is also considering proper rewards within the accountability system for districts and schools that effectively educate their students.

*To that end, TSA makes the following recommendations with regard to accountability incentives, rewards and sanctions.*

## CHANGE TO A GROWTH MODEL SYSTEM

Perhaps the most meaningful incentive for districts would be to modify the accountability system to account for student performance growth and to reward top performers among groups of comparable districts and campuses to ensure a fair system.

Moving to a growth model would create a system that more accurately represents student performance, which in turn would create greater incentive for districts and schools to perform better without fear of one student group, on one test, on one day causing an entire school or district to look bad undeservingly.

- We need a better picture of how schools are performing as a whole. Schools that are steadily improving should receive a rating that is reflective of that student progress.
  
- Large, diverse schools and districts should not be judged against more homogeneous schools and districts. Under the current system, diverse schools and districts are less likely than their counterparts to achieve high ratings. Texas is a diverse state. Why are we punishing diverse schools?
  
- Consider size, ethnicity and Social Economic Status (SES) driven comparison groups for ratings purposes.
  - In other words, districts should be rated against other like districts instead of against the entire state.

## REWARDS

TSA recognizes the importance of rewards in the context of accountability.

- Any rewards within the system should be made automatic, without a lengthy application process.
- Schools and districts that have shown significant improvement should not have to go through a long appeal process to receive rewards.
- State level rewards should be provided to all districts and campuses that demonstrate either substantial gains in academic performance or sustained high levels of improvement. Doing both ensures that all schools have a chance of receiving rewards.

One way to reward campuses and districts that are effectively educating their students would be to provide relief from sanctions, which I will be speaking about in a few moments.

But other rewards could be financially-based. We suggest monetary rewards for demonstrated improvements. (Note: H-E-B Excellence in Education Awards program as model.)

We'd also like your consideration for modifications to state incentive pay programs DATE and TEEG.

- TSA recognizes that financial award programs like TEEG and DATE have a place within the accountability system.
- TSA requests that these incentive pay programs allow and promote teamwork to be rewarded. In other words, permit campus group awards, such as allowing lower grades access to DATE part I funds since those teachers build the foundation of learning for the upper grade levels within a school.

- Modify DATE to allow greater local flexibility in determining the pay incentives and use of funds.
- Another possibility would be to roll TEEG into DATE to create a more robust funding program.

If districts are doing well on accountability, they have proven that they are spending money wisely on educational programs.

- TSA proposes that districts showing gains or sustaining high levels of achievement be given greater flexibility on their expenditures.
  - One way to provide that flexibility is to waive the TEA expenditure target requirements. (Note: state target of 65% on instruction.)
  - Greater flexibility in the use of state categorical funds to allow districts to shift money around without state approval.
- There are also requirements under the Financial Integrity Rating System of Texas (FIRST) that could be waived for high performing districts.
- FIRST indicators such as staffing ratios, decline in fund balance and debt service thresholds should not count against high performing districts. (Note: does not include the six Critical Indicators under FIRST.)

## RELIEF FROM SANCTIONS

TSA believes that the use of sanctions should be based on the best available research regarding what it takes to turn around low-performing districts and campuses. Most importantly, low performing districts and campuses need sufficient time to improve before they are faced with closure or reconstitution.

- Provide schools and districts with a warning year if performance slips before they are considered academically unacceptable.
- Under the current system, schools only have two years to make improvements, which may not be sufficient time. While we believe that significant growth takes time, school administrators do believe that some success should be seen within the first few years.
- Ed Fuller, associate director of the University Council for Educational Administration at UT, was quoted saying: “We know that school reform takes time – much more than one year’s time. If a principal leaves within three to five years, the principal’s vision for reform is left incomplete. Over time, teachers become jaded and simply ignore the reform effort ... Teachers believe the principal will leave and all of their efforts will be wasted.”
- Campuses and districts showing improvement in student performance should not face the same sanctions as those without growth. TSA recommends a diagnostic, rather than punitive, use of accountability indicators to determine the need for and level of sanctions.
  - For example, an outside evaluator who acts as a Master is assigned to a school after being rated unacceptable only once.
  - A low performing school that reaches the Recognized level should be automatically removed from state monitoring.

- In the Intervention Process, allow local district involvement. Right now, the intervention is done through an outside evaluator and all communication goes through that evaluator, shutting the district out of the process.

## Summary

- Schools and districts demonstrating substantial gains in academic performance or sustained high levels of improvement are proving that they can effectively educate their students. They should be rewarded for these efforts rather than penalized.
- Changing to an accountability growth model would both fairly represent student performance and motivate districts and schools to perform better.
- State level rewards should be provided to all districts and campuses that demonstrate either substantial gains in academic performance or sustained high levels of improvement.
- Campuses and districts showing improvement in student performance should not face the same sanctions as those without growth.
- TSA supports the Raise Your Hand Texas accountability proposal that covers rewards and interventions to compensate growth with a uniform and integrated approach, monetary rewards for demonstrated improvements, a system for identifying schools in need of early interventions, and a timeline that allows districts more than one year to bring performance up to standards before any further interventions take place.