

July 12, 2023

Texas House of Representatives  
1100 Congress Avenue  
Austin, Texas 78701

Dear Educational Opportunity and Enrichment Committee Members:

Given that part of your charge is “modernizing assessment and accountability measures for Texas schools educating K-12 students,” Good Reason Houston and the seven undersigned organizations wanted to offer some information regarding academic assessment and accountability for your consideration as you move forward with your work.

**TEXAS NEEDS TO MAINTAIN AN EFFECTIVE ACADEMIC ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM**

Our kids and our economy depend on schools that prepare Texas’ children for the future. Currently, Texas ranks 33rd in the nation for 4th grade reading and 41st in 8th grade reading.<sup>1</sup> Only 31% of Texas high school graduates receive a post-secondary credential within six years of graduation.<sup>2</sup> Not only does this set our students up for fewer post-secondary options and lower earnings after graduating, it is not meeting the needs of Texas employers, 46% of whom are unable to fill vital jobs.<sup>3</sup> **Our students, our communities, and our state deserve better.**

A rigorous, fair, and transparent academic accountability system is necessary to hold school systems accountable for student learning, improve student outcomes, illuminate where needs are not being met, and ensure there is a return on investment for the \$60B+ annually we spend on our public education system.

**ANY CHANGES TO THE ACADEMIC ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM MUST BE CAREFULLY CALCULATED AND STUDENT-FOCUSED**

The current A-F accountability system clearly differentiates school quality for academic outcomes. Students who attend an A- or B-rated school are 1.8 times more likely to be reading on grade level and 2.7 times more likely to be college ready by graduation than students attending D- and F-rated schools.<sup>4</sup>

Further, the A-F system was introduced in 2017, and given disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the

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<sup>1</sup> Texas Education Agency. “State of Education and the 88th Legislature,” 2023. National Assessment of Educational Progress. “State Profiles,” 2022. <https://bit.ly/3NiIVPE>

<sup>2</sup> Texas 2036. “36 Goals for the Future of Texas: Postsecondary Education.” <https://bit.ly/46ilEVm>

<sup>3</sup> Aim Hire Texas. “Workforce Issues,” 2021. <https://bit.ly/46iHOTG>

<sup>4</sup> Commit. Analysis of Texas Education Agency Accountability Report, 2022.

state only has one full year of usable data. More time is needed to effectively learn from and evaluate the system before large-scale change. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) is in the process of finalizing adjustments, which are designed to improve the quality of accountability measures and, as outlined in Texas Education Code 39.053(f), increase rigor in order to position our state as “a national leader in preparing students for postsecondary success.” These changes include sunseting career-readiness accountability credit for certain industry-based certifications (IBCs) that are not structured to prepare students for success in entering the workforce and aligning programs of study with IBCs to provide students a clear, coordinated path to postsecondary success.

Considering these circumstances, we respectfully urge you to decline further changes to the system. However, should the Committee consider changes to the system, modifications must, at minimum, be carefully crafted to ensure the process continues to:

- be an accurate reflection of how well schools are preparing students academically;
- spur continuous improvement to ensure our schools are providing students with increasingly meaningful educational opportunities, which will allow them to be competitive in the post-secondary market; and
- provide transparent information to the public so that parents, students, taxpayers, and communities are empowered to advocate for much needed resources and hold systems accountable for student learning.

To do so, the A-F accountability system must remain focused on academic student outcomes. Several bills were proposed in the regular session that would add non-academic measures to the academic accountability system, including HB 4402 and HB 4514, which would have unknown impact on letter grades, as no modeling was available at the time of consideration. Any attempt to conflate academic outcomes with nonacademic indicators, has great potential to mask student academic preparedness. Considering only 44% of students in Houston (52% in Texas) are reading on grade level by 3rd grade and 46% of Houston-area graduates (45% in Texas) are not college, career, or military ready, a focus on academic readiness in our accountability system must remain undiluted.<sup>5 6</sup>

## **OBJECTIVE STATEWIDE ASSESSMENTS ARE NECESSARY TO SUPPORT STUDENT LEARNING**

High-quality assessments are a necessary component of academic accountability. STAAR assessments are rigorous, valid, and aligned to the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). In order to compare campuses

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<sup>5</sup> Good Reason Houston. “Data Dashboard.” <https://bit.ly/3PrAK66>. For additional ways to look at data, visit our Data Dashboard landing page: <https://goodreasonhouston.org/data/>.

<sup>6</sup> Texas Education Agency. “State of Education and the 88th Legislature,” 2023.

and districts across the state to help illustrate the best approaches to student learning, measures must be objective and standardized.

Similar to the A-F accountability system, the TEA has just implemented the newly redesigned STAAR, which is based on research and educator feedback. One of the key components of the redesign is better integration for writing. Rather than an essay prompt, students will see new question types, which allow them to address writing prompts in response to a reading passage. Online testing could allow for quicker release of test results, and therefore actionable student outcome data, and improved testing accommodations for students. TEA is also piloting through-year assessments, which allows teachers to receive feedback on student performance within the school year that is directly aligned to state standards.

In the regular session, the House Public Education committee substitute for SB 8 proposed replacing STAAR with a new assessment system at the elementary and middle school levels and most STAAR End-of-Course Exams (EOCs) with the Texas Success Initiative Assessment for high school. Any assessments prescribed by the legislature in lieu of STAAR must continue to meet the standards outlined above so the state and local school districts have a clear gauge of student performance in order to effectively allocate limited, tax-funded resources to support student learning.

### **ASSESSMENTS MUST CONTINUE TO BE INCORPORATED INTO GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS**

Texas students are capable of high levels of achievement. Current law recognizes this by providing standards for graduation, including a requirement that students are able to pass EOCs. This requirement not only holds districts accountable for preparing students to graduate ready to pursue college, careers, and/or military enlistment, but also to equip our state with a skilled workforce capable of meeting the needs of Texas employers.

Regular session bills like the committee substitute for SB 8 proposed removing EOC passage as a criteria for graduation. High school EOCs ensure every Texas graduate has demonstrated the baseline knowledge and skills needed for whatever path they take after high school. This not only provides students with options for their post-secondary life, but also prevents them from having to take costly remedial coursework or skills training when they could have mastered the same for free in public school. Current law provides several options for students who do not meet EOC requirements, including alternative assessment substitutions and Individual Graduation Committees who can consider project-based substitutes, although as of the 2021-2022 school year, only 4% of graduates utilized this pathway to graduation.<sup>7</sup> Given that 71% of Texas jobs will require some kind of postsecondary credential by 2036, we should be focused on preparing our students

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<sup>7</sup> Commit. Analysis of TEA, Annual Individual Graduation Committee Data, Report Year 2021-2022.

academically, not lowering the standards for graduation.<sup>8</sup>

### ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

In addition to assessment and accountability, we want to highlight critical ways, if given the opportunity in a special session, the Legislature can revive great work from the regular session to address the concerns identified by the Teacher Vacancy Task Force and prioritize early learning.

- HB 11 and SB 9 were comprehensive bills to support teachers and address the shortage crisis. Both bills would have: implemented a teacher residency program where future educators could receive paid on-the-job training with a mentor teacher in pursuit of their teaching certification; expanded the Teacher Incentive Allotment to compensate highly-effective educators; and provided quality of life improvements like support for certification fees. As substituted, HB 100 incorporated several of these changes along with across-the-board increased compensation for teachers.
- HB 2162 would have required school districts to adopt an early literacy assessment that provided progress monitoring, diagnostic tools for teachers, and screening for dyslexia. Districts would then have been required to provide phonics-based early interventions for students in need using high-quality instructional materials.
- To better support pre-K partnerships and expand access, HB 1614 would have eliminated the disconnect in eligibility requirements for pre-K funding and child care scholarships to streamline partnerships between school districts and community-based childcare providers.

Thank you for your consideration and your continued commitment to Texas students.

Sincerely,

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#### Additional Supporters:



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<sup>8</sup> Aim Hire Texas. "Workforce Issues," 2021. <https://bit.ly/46iHOTG>