

September 18, 2024

Texas Senate
1100 Congress Avenue
Austin, Texas 78701

RE: Interim Charge #2: Testing Reform

Dear Chairman Creighton and honorable members of the Education Committee:

Good Reason Houston and the organizations undersigned thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony regarding the Committee's interim charge reflecting the strides Texas has made in high-quality testing and recommendations for continued testing improvements to meet the educational needs of Texas students. Accurate and comparable assessments play a vital role in public education and we appreciate the Committee's commitment to continuous improvement and academic rigor.

Valid and reliable, annual summative assessments aligned to state grade-level standards in core subjects provide decision-makers (parents, educators, school leaders, and policymakers) individual and systemic information on educational progress. Specifically, summative assessments act as a flashlight to herald bright spots and identify opportunities for further support and instructional focus. Annual academic snapshots are an essential part of improving educational outcomes over time and across student groups.

The Legislature made important reforms to the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) in HB 3906 (86R), which provided the framework for **the 2022–2023 STAAR Redesign**. This process implemented vital improvements based on robust stakeholder feedback, including:

- **Establishment of an Educator Advisory Committee:** The Committee is charged with providing feedback and recommendations on the state's assessment program, ensuring on-the-ground classroom experience is incorporated into the development of our state assessments.
- **Integration of writing and introduction of new question types:** Writing has been blended into the English Language Arts (ELA) assessments, eliminating the need for independent writing assessments. Additionally, the test includes cross-curricular passages and multiple choice questions are now restricted to 75% of the exam, introducing new types of questions that allow students more ways to demonstrate their knowledge and skills and better align with high-quality classroom instruction.
- **Online testing:** Assessments are administered online, reducing the turnaround time for results and therefore actionable student outcome data. The new online format allows for additional and more comprehensive

accommodations to meet the needs of students with specific learning needs. With the passage of HB 1225 (88R), paper-based assessments remain available to students where appropriate.

HB 3906 also commissioned the forward-thinking **Texas Through Year Assessment Pilot (TTAP)** to explore opportunities for shorter, adaptive tests administered throughout the year. Through-year assessments have the potential to make improvements to our current system, including maximizing instructional time, providing educators with data throughout the year to support student learning, replacing third-party interim assessments that are not aligned to the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), and offering multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate mastery.

TEA's recent report regarding the first year of the pilot (which included over 120+ school systems and 60,000+ students largely mirroring the broader geographic and demographic representation of the state) offers **promising initial results and feedback** from participating districts, teachers, and students. In addition, **the preliminary findings also indicate the potential for the state to explore an alternative model and evolutions in testing to apply more broadly** that still address much of HB 3906's legislative intent: a valid summative assessment that reduces testing time by 30 minutes per exam and a more robust system for interim assessments to allow for through-year progress monitoring.¹

While these results are cause for optimism, there is still more work to be done to ensure TTAP is a valid and reliable alternative to STAAR. As the Committee considers the progress of the multi-year pilot and monitors the remainder of the program, we respectfully urge consideration of the following:

- **Cumulative Scoring Exploration:** Developing a method to sum the results of multiple adaptive assessments that each cover the full range of TEKS for the tested grade and subject is a complex process. Incorporating multiple assessments into summative scoring has great promise to allow students multiple opportunities throughout the year to demonstrate mastery, but before the state can consider this type of innovative through-year assessment model at scale, the scoring method will need to be rigorously evaluated across multiple years to guarantee validity, fairness, and comparability.
- **Student, Subject, and Grade Level Inclusivity:** As TEA reported, the initial years of TTAP were designed with a relatively narrow scope in terms of subjects covered and testing accommodations with plans to expand as the pilot continues. In future years, the pilot will need to evaluate accommodations for more student groups, including students with disabilities and emergent bilingual students. Similarly, ELA will need to be integrated into the pilot program. This is critical because ELA tests incorporate more complex question types than other subjects, especially for TTAP to retain recent innovations developed through the STAAR Refresh process that integrate writing and allow students different ways to demonstrate knowledge. Time is needed to develop and review pilot assessments for these additional subjects and student groups.

¹ Texas Education Agency. Texas Through-Year Assessment Pilot (TTAP) Year 1 Pilot Report: 2022–2023 School Year (Aug. 2024). <https://tea.texas.gov/student-assessment/assessment-initiatives/ttap-year-1-pilot-report.pdf>

- **Technical Support and Data Literacy:** With any change to state-wide assessments, work must be done to provide school system leaders and educators with the technical support they need to not only implement the changes but also interpret the results to use as actionable data to drive instruction. Assessment training has been a core part of the initial piloting process. Lessons learned about how to effectively communicate with students and families about the shift in assessments and the resulting reporting, how to internalize the data provided, and how to inform instruction in real time will all need to be incorporated in future iterations to ensure mid-year tests are applicable and able to achieve intended results.

The STAAR is a valid, standards-aligned assessment to measure and compare academic progress across the state and we look forward to Texas continuing to pursue innovative assessments and becoming a national leader on quality testing reform. The Legislature has already taken strides to improve our states' assessment system and respond to ongoing stakeholder input with a model that holds enormous promise. We appreciate the Committee taking time to see these impactful changes through to ensure Texas's assessment system remains a foundational tool for transparency, accountability, and improvement in education outcomes.

Sincerely,

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