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Schools can't back down

Students in Texas' public schools just put their pencils to the state's new test that will determine whether third-graders qualify for promotion. But as soon as the testing began, flaws were found that raise concern about the test, giving opponents of our state's accountability system another excuse to fight high standards.

It is unfortunate that some versions of the reading portion of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills were botched, because now is the time to be sure we do the right thing for students — teach high standards and then use an accurate, challenging test that holds students and schools accountable for learning.

Experience should reassure Texans that students can and will meet the higher expectations posed by new assessments. Over the last decade, students in elementary and middle school have shown dramatic gains on state assessments (such as the old Texas Assessment of Academic Skills), as well as the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Those academic gains were the result of explicit curriculum standards, focused classroom instruction, carefully designed assessments and strong accountability requirements.

There is no excuse for poorly designed tests and especially not for the errors found in some of the reading tests that were just administered.

More than a year ago, the Texas Public Policy Foundation called for an audit to ensure that the TAKS would be sufficiently accurate for high-stakes decisions. Our concerns about the validity of the test are as strong today as they were then, when we first suggested an independent review. We again suggest that the Texas Education Agency move quickly to impanel an independent body of experts who can review, evaluate and fix the test.

Every aspect of our public schools must be focused to ensure that students have the resources to be successful. There simply is no excuse for inadequately prepared students.

Schools have known what was expected of them since 1997, when new state curriculum standards were adopted.

Schools have known what would be tested on the TAKS since 2001, when the TEA distributed new assessment objectives.

And schools were given sample questions for the TAKS in early 2002.

Extra resources have been given to schools for the express purpose of making the transition to the higher academic standards and preparing for more challenging tests. Over the last seven years, schools have received \$558 million to improve reading in the early grades.

Schools will receive more than \$630 million in the 2002-2003 academic year to supplement regular classroom instruction. Every parent and taxpayer should demand to know where and how the time and money are spent.

While Texas' public schools have gained ground, too many students still graduate without acquiring even the most basic of skills in reading and arithmetic. Texas' children can do, and deserve, much better.

Too many students are dropping out because they lack the academic foundation to progress through high school. Of those who do graduate, too few are equipped with the academic skills to succeed in higher education or skilled vocational training.

It is time to do the right things. We must stand behind high educational expectations and not back down for one moment. We must focus every aspect of our schools on academic achievement. We must reallocate resources to programs that have been proved to be effective. And, finally, we must require high-reaching results from students and schools.

We can't give up the fight for high standards. Our children are counting on us.

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