

The Quorum Report

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TEXAS AT A CROSSROADS ON ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

Lawmakers faced with either scrapping or revamping the system.

The Texas Legislature has passed the 10-year mark on the current school accountability system, and it appears lawmakers will be faced this session with two paths: overhaul the use of data in the current system or toss out the system's cornerstone high school exit test in favor of end-of-course exams.

Both strategies are a reaction to the growing discontent among lawmakers, parents, school administrators and even students that the current accountability system, which relies heavily on high-stakes testing, has outgrown its useful purpose. After 10 years of layering test upon test, school districts are now measured against an unwieldy metric of 36 different academic indicators, with the lowest indicator among those 36 measures being the final judgment of a school and district's performance.

Discontent with the system – and what it measures – is growing. **Former Education Commissioner Mike Moses** even has suggested that it might be time to sunset the accountability system altogether until 2009. He told the *Texas Public Education Reform Foundation's* legislative briefing yesterday that it makes sense to take two years and reconstitute an accountability system after the reauthorization of *No Child Left Behind* that is more predictable and less demoralizing for school districts.

The Senate, and specifically Senate Education Chair **Sen. Florence Shapiro** (R-Plano), has suggested part of the answer is to replace the high school exit test -- passage of which falls short of a measure of college readiness -- with end-of-course exams in the core subject areas. This is a way to better serve students, Shapiro told the audience at yesterday's briefing.

"I think that replacing the TAKS is not a code word for eliminating accountability. That's not the direction I'm going," Shapiro said. "Accountability is one of the most important elements that we have in education, and I have no intention of doing anything to diminish it as the driving force behind the improvements in our educational system."

Shapiro has suggested that a combination of end-of-course exams and national criterion referenced tests such as the *ACT* or *SAT* would give a better measure of student achievement in high school. This idea, intended to give a fairer picture of student performance, is not new. Nationally, end-of-course exams is a trend with both supporters and detractors, but like most education legislation filed by Republicans in the last two sessions, this proposal returns to the well of the research out of the conservative *Koret Task Force*. The Koret Task Force provided much of the source material behind the original *House Bill 1*, and **Hoover Institute Fellow Caroline Hoxby** sat on the first school finance task force.

Ironically, the *Texas Education Reform Caucus*, which is tied to the *Texas Public Education Reform Foundation*, issued a statement [opposing end-of-course exams](#) when the idea was first proposed back in 2004. During its initial debut, it was the conservative *Texas Public Policy Foundation* that supported the proposal during the [2005 session](#).

Given that the *House Education Committee* is unlikely to file any kind of interim report this session, it might be assumed that the passage of end-of-course exams would be a foregone conclusion. But the interim in the *Senate Education Committee* was a lonely time for Shapiro, who frequently commenced hearings during the last six months without her colleagues, and Democrats **Royce West**, **Leticia Van de Putte** and **Judith Zaffirini** all signed the interim report but [filed letters](#) opposing the addition of more tests and the value-added nature of tests.

End-of-course exams is one approach to the growth pains in the Texas accountability system. Yesterday **Rep. Rob Eissler** (R-The Woodlands), the heir apparent to the chair of the *House Education Committee*, suggested another option: an overhaul in the way the state uses its current data. Eissler, who also is the key supporter of expanding and updating data collection on students and school districts, said the key to improving the state's accountability system is to convert performance data into knowledge.

"Those informed assumptions and generalizations can guide what corrective actions we need to take," Eissler said. "It can be a measure of what is best practices in the district, on the campus and in the classroom. What gets measured gets managed."

To prove his point, Eissler charted the data of the academic and financial performance of the 200 biggest school districts in the state. When combined, only eight districts would rise to the top as "best practice" in both academic performance and operating efficiency, Eissler said. All eight of those districts carry a state academic rating of simply "Acceptable."

"A system that is viewed as unfair by its participants is not going to change behavior or improve performance. The same applies to finance," Eissler said. "Let's figure out where our spending is going to do the most good, find the practices that have measurable results. What we're trying to do is drive our performance forward."

Both Shapiro and Eissler's suggestions would require additional work from the *Texas Education Agency* which already is strapped with the implementation of *House Bill 1*. Since the agency was downsized three years ago, analysis of testing or teacher data -- as well as on-site monitoring -- has been reduced significantly.

Presentations and speeches are expected to be up on the [Texas Public Education Reform Foundation website](#) in the next week.

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