

San Antonio Express-News

Comment: School accountability system lacking

BROOKE DOLLENS TERRY
Special to the Express-News

As Texas homeowners write their checks for property taxes this month, most assume that the local public schools they fund are doing a good job educating students. After all, parents looking to the state accountability system for answers on the quality of their local school find that only 3.4 percent of public schools were rated "unacceptable" last year.

What parents and taxpayers don't realize is that the academic standards used to rate schools are ridiculously low.

In 2007, a school could be rated "Academically Acceptable" with only 40 percent of students passing science and 45 percent of students passing math. Surely, parents and taxpayers would not consider more than half of Texas school children failing core subjects like math and science "acceptable."

Yet, more than half of Texas public schools and three-fourths of Texas school districts were rated "academically acceptable," according to the Texas Education Agency.

San Antonio residents may be shocked to discover that many local students are not learning the basics, especially in math and science. For example, in the South San Antonio Independent School District, a mere 41 percent of Athens Elementary School students passed science; 46 percent of Alan B. Shepard Middle School students passed math; and

only 48 percent of South San Antonio High School students passed science, while 51 percent passed math.

At San Antonio ISD's Pershing Elementary, only 45 percent of students passed science while 58 percent of students passed math. Bare majorities of Brackenridge High School students passed science or math, while only 44 percent of Houston High School students passed science and a scant 41 percent passed math. Astonishingly, the state deemed all of these schools "academically acceptable."

Texas cannot afford to have large numbers of students ignorant in core subject areas, and taxpayers should not tolerate it. State lawmakers must make significant changes to the state accountability system, including raising the rigor and academic expectations for both schools and students.

The conventional grading scale for students sets a score of 70 percent as the bottom end of the acceptable range. Schools should be held to a similar standard, with at least 70 percent of students passing reading, writing, history, math and science to be rated as "acceptable."

Another way to raise the rigor of the system is to reduce the large numbers of students exempted from testing. Last year, almost 70,000 students were exempted from the TAKS or other state tests. The accountability system needs to hold teachers and schools responsible for every child's performance by closing these loopholes.

The system also needs to be simplified. Schools and districts must track and report performance on as many as 36 measures. Today's accountability system focuses too much on inputs and not enough on outcomes and results. To move in this direction, state lawmakers should decrease the overall number of indicators used to evaluate schools and districts and make sure the system gives schools and districts credit for student improvement and growth over the year.

Other helpful changes to the state accountability system include aligning the state and federal systems by using common definitions where possible and making the system more transparent to parents and the community.

The purpose of a state accountability system is to evaluate school performance and provide that information to parents and the public so they can determine the quality of a particular school or district. The current accountability system fails in this regard and needs to be redesigned.

With tens of billions of dollars spent on public schools, Texas taxpayers deserve a better and more accurate accountability system, one that is easy to understand, useful and actually holds schools accountable.

Brooke Dollens Terry is an education policy analyst at the Texas Public Policy Foundation in Austin. E-mail her at bterry@texaspolicy.com.