



Brooke Dollens Terry: Failure shouldn't be accepted

Accountability system needs to be redesigned

08:43 AM CST on Wednesday, February 13, 2008

As Texas homeowners feel the pinch on their wallets from high property taxes, 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 as "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.

Residents across the state may be shocked to discover that many of their local schools are not doing a good job teaching the basics, especially in math and science. For example, in Dallas ISD, only 46 percent of students passed science and only 49 percent of students passed math at Thomas Jefferson High School. Students at Umphrey Elementary school did not fare much better with a scant 42 percent passing science and a mere 55 percent passing math.

In Arlington, a mere 53 percent of Morton Elementary School students passed science; 45 percent of Roquemore Elementary students passed science while 56 percent passed math; and only 49 percent of Sam Houston High School students passed science while 57 percent passed math.

Even suburbs are not immune to low student performance. In the Dallas suburb of Duncanville, only 54 percent of high school students passed science and 56 percent of students passed math. In Garland, only 53 percent of students passed science at Hickman Elementary, while only 57 percent of students passed science and only 59 percent of students passed math at Garland High School. Residents of Mesquite might be surprised to learn that only 57 percent of students passed math and only 61 percent of students passed science at West Mesquite High School.

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."

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 ensure that the accountability system measures are meaningful.

Schools also need to be measured and rewarded for student improvement and growth over the school year for every student. Changing the way schools and students are measured in this regard would allow schools to focus on the needs of every child and not encourage them to focus on struggling students at the expense of gifted students.

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, transparent to parents and the community, and drives higher student achievement.

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