



From the office of Texas Workforce Commission

Commissioner Tom Pauken

Testimony

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**Testimony for Commissioner Tom Pauken
House Committee on Economic and Small Business Development
June 28, 2012**

Thank you Chairman Davis, Vice Chairman Vo, and committee members for inviting me here today.

This is the second time I've had the privilege of appearing before this committee in the last six months.

When I was here in January, I pointed out the consequences of the de-emphasis on, and neglect of, the importance of vocational education, beginning at the secondary school level. As a consequence we have choked off the pipeline of skilled workers that we badly need to meet the requirements of our business sector. As the Texas Workforce Commissioner Representing Employers, I hear from business leaders across the state who tell me that this is a serious and growing problem. In my previous testimony, I provided information showing the significant demand for skilled workers nationally and here in Texas.

But, it's not just the businesses with unfilled positions that are hurt by this policy. The students suffer the most. Many young Texans who don't excel at college prep courses and aren't given the opportunity to develop a skill through technical training in high school, often wind up being dropouts and throwaways.

I have found widespread agreement from a wide range of Texans – business and labor leaders, teachers, school district officials, as well as community college representatives – that we face serious problems associated with an excessive emphasis on “teaching to the test” designed to make all our students college ready. The current system is broken and is badly in need of fixing.

That is why I was surprised to learn of a press conference held yesterday by representatives of various organizations defending the existing testing system and implying that business leaders, educational reformers, and conservative groups all support their position. As a businessman myself, a representative of employers, a strong proponent of quality education, and a longtime conservative, let me make clear my strong disagreement with the sentiments expressed at the news conference, as reported by the *Texas Tribune* and the *Austin-American Statesman*.

Today, I want to lay out specific action that the Legislature can take in the upcoming session to give

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more students the opportunity to receive training in the skilled trades, beginning at the secondary school level, so that they leave school equipped to begin a career in a high demand field and to meet the workforce needs of Texas' businesses.

The most important thing we can do to increase the prominence of skills training is to end the "teaching to the test" syndrome which has come to pervade every facet of how we run our public schools in Texas. While we hear a lot about the goal of producing college- and career-ready graduates, the unfortunate consequence of the existing testing system is that "real learning" has been replaced by "test learning."

In the wake of the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, the National Academy of Science (NAS) established a committee to examine the effect of the tests that were adopted by many states as a result of that legislation. After nearly ten years of research, they produced their findings in a report issued last year. They discovered that testing regimens, like those implemented in Texas, were not having the desired results.

For one, they discovered that even though schools and states may experience improved performance on the mandated test, when the same students took other "low stakes" tests like the ACT, SAT or the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) they showed little or no improvement, and sometimes even saw their scores drop. In other words, kids were getting good at taking a single test, not increasing their knowledge or improving their academic performance.

Carolyn Heinrich, a professor at The University of Texas at Austin and one of the members of the NAS committee that authored the report, wrote an op-ed for the *Austin-American Statesman* that appeared in March. Dr. Heinrich's excellent summary of the NAS' findings provides a sobering account of what the testing system is doing to students. "There are little to no positive effects of these systems overall on student learning and educational progress," she writes, "and there is widespread teaching to the test and gaming of the systems that reflects a wasteful use of resources and leads to inaccurate or inflated measures of performance." Later on she writes that the current testing system leads to behavior "which narrows the focus of classroom education and frequently diverts time and resources from more innovative and interactive approaches to testing."

That's why superintendents, parents, and students came to the capitol last week and expressed their frustration with the STAAR test. Among the complaints, many superintendents feared that poor performance on the test was going to result in a sharp increase in dropouts. They believe that students already at risk of giving up may be pushed over the edge by failing yet another test. Rob Schroder, superintendent of the

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Amarillo ISD, said, "Those kids start dropping out sophomore, junior year" and "decide they just can't do it."

Unfortunately, the superintendents are right to be concerned. It turns out that one of the main findings of the NAS report was that high school exit tests, like the STAAR, actually result in lower graduation rates "without increasing achievement." Research suggests that the high school graduation rate drops by 2 percentage points because of the tests. In Texas that means that more than 27,000 of our current Texas high schoolers may not receive their diploma as a result of the TAKS and STAAR system. It should not be the policy of Texas – or any other state for that matter – to use devices like these tests which have the unintended consequences of accelerating the dropout rate of students.

Many of these would-be dropouts would thrive if given the choice to pursue a different pathway; a pathway that lets them work with their hands, a pathway that gave them a chance to attend a class where the subject matter was relevant and had a tangible connection to the real world, and a pathway that would give them the training and credentials they need to obtain a good job. But, as long as a school's performance is evaluated by the TAKS and STAAR, there are few incentives to make such pathways a priority for the students that need them the most. Moreover the resources – in time, personnel, and money – devoted to making sure students pass these tests, are resources that can't be used for more robust career and technical programs.

Yesterday, the group that I referenced at the opening of my remarks, declared that the STAAR test must remain in place. One member of the group defended the test saying, "If we are going to remain competitive in the world's market, we are going to have to have an educated workforce. We do not have one today." What should that tell us about the current approach to testing – an approach that has been in effect for a decade? It should tell us that it's not working.

The next priority for the next legislative session ought to be changing the curriculum and diploma requirements. We need to make substantial reforms to the recommended graduation plan, which has become the de facto standard for most high school students. That plan allows students to take only 10 electives over four years – 16 of the 26 required credits are named. This makes it very difficult for a student to complete an entire Career and Technical Education (CTE) sequence – especially if they wish to be involved in any extracurricular activities. The course work required by the recommended plan actually exceeds the admission requirements of every university in Texas. Why are we requiring high schoolers take classes that even the universities don't see as necessary? For

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some, passing Algebra II or Physics poses a tremendous challenge and such classes are simply not where their talents lie.

Many Texas high schoolers take at least one CTE class during their time in school. But the problem is that very few take enough so that upon graduation they are trained for a career in a specific field. Rather than the one size fits all approach, we should change the graduation requirements so that students have several options to choose from. After completing a smaller number of required credits, students interested in a higher level math and science education could pursue that path. Those interested in a traditional, liberal arts curriculum would take those classes. And those interested in classes that would lead to training in a career, along with an industry recognized certificate or professional license, would be able to do so. All students would graduate with a Texas high school diploma and all would be welcome to apply for, and pursue, an education at any post-secondary institution.

I want to be clear that I am not advocating a system in which one set of students are treated as college material and another set are discouraged from pursuing post-secondary education. In fact, research from TWC's Labor Market and Career Information division has found that students who take a coherent sequence of CTE courses do better academically, have higher graduation rates, lower dropout rates, and better college attendance. Alumni from the Alamo Academies who, upon graduation, take jobs with companies like Toyota or Boeing while also taking classes at a four-year university (often paid for by their employer), are a great example of how vocational and technical education can enhance post-secondary options for young Texans.

I also want to be clear that I fully support holding schools accountable. But the current system does not hold schools accountable for successfully educating and preparing students – rather it makes them beholden to performance on a single test. Success and accountability could be measured in a variety of ways. For those on the career path, certification or licensure in their field is the best way to show whether or not their education was successful. And for those going to a university, there is no reason we can't use the same test that universities use in determining admission, like the SAT or ACT (tests, by the way, which are much harder to game). Performance measures ought to be tied to the actual outcomes that we seek for these students.

We also should do more to take advantage of the skills training capacity available at many of our community colleges by better leveraging the various dual credit programs. Currently there are a number of barriers students face if they wish to take continuing education classes at community colleges for credit. But

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the continuing ed programs are where training is provided for many of the skilled trades and other careers. Legislation which made it explicit that continuing ed classes could be taken for dual credit would help to provide secondary students greater access to skill training at a lower cost to the school district.

Too often, educational opportunities are driven more by turf wars than they are by what is in the best interest of the students. Some districts have set up dedicated career school campuses. But neighboring districts may be reluctant to do anything to encourage their students to take advantage of the opportunities offered at these schools. That's because they'd lose funding under the current interdistrict transfer rules. Funding formulas should be revised so as to encourage collaboration and sharing of resources between school districts. For example, the superintendent of schools in Garland, Texas has suggested there could be greater collaboration between and among neighboring school districts. While Garland has strong automotive programs, Richardson offers excellent high tech programs. We need to think in terms of consolidation of services to allow us to get the most bang for our educational dollar in the vocational and technical fields.

One way to do this is to provide financial incentives for the establishment of regional centers for career and technical training. Such centers would serve regions beyond traditional districts, similar to the Craft Training Center which draws students from 14 ISDs in the Corpus Christi area, and the Alamo Area Academies which has representatives from 24 ISDs in the San Antonio area. This fall, the Killeen ISD will open its new career center school; and, already, 950 students from the district have signed up to attend. Let's make it easier for adjoining districts to work together to provide skills training through regional centers.

We should also be doing more to encourage collaboration among community colleges. Thankfully some schools are taking the initiative such as Amarillo College, Clarendon College and Frank Phillips College. These three Panhandle colleges came together last November and formed a partnership in which they agreed to leverage their resources so that there was better integration of services between the three schools. Texas State Technical College and Temple College are cooperating on a skills training initiative in Hutto, Texas.

The reality of tight state budgets means that we will have to be creative when it comes to funding career training. This month, Texas State Technical College announced an entirely new model in which their funding would be based on the number of graduates who successfully find jobs. The better TSTC's students do in getting employed after their training, the better TSTC does in terms of funding.

Community colleges should be given the chance to fund their career training programs using a similar

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system. Colleges that can provide students with skills training in fields of demand, an industry-recognized credential or licensure, and a job in a related-field, should be rewarded. We are too much into a “seats in a chair” approach that rewards enrolling students, rather than preparing them for life – and work – after finishing high school and/or their post-secondary education.

Expanding access to career and technical training at the secondary and post-secondary school levels should be a priority for the Texas Legislature. There are so many opportunities in our state for careers that do not require a college degree but too few of our high school students know about these careers and are given opportunities to receive training. That can change – but only if we are bold enough to challenge the status quo and summon the courage to make true, fundamental reforms to how we educate young Texans.

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The Texas Workforce Commission is a state agency dedicated to helping Texas employers, workers and communities prosper economically. For details on TWC and the programs it offers in coordination with its network of local workforce development boards, call (512) 463-8556 or visit www.texasworkforce.org.