



## **Time to strengthen Texas accreditation standards**

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It is time to unleash teaching and learning by ending the unhealthy and unrewarding focus on the TAKS test as the main tool to accredit Texas public schools.

The Bush Education Reforms, signed into law ten years ago this year (SB 1), strengthened the system of accountability that is generally credited with improved academic achievement in Texas public schools. State accreditation is based on the accountability rating system, which relies on four indicators: TAKS passing rates, attendance, dropout rates, and graduation rates. Of these, TAKS results receive the greatest emphasis which creates a very simple measure by which, parents and school administrators can judge performance.

However, the current system overstates the importance of state testing and fails to present an overall view of district education operations and expenditures. Additionally, it sets no standards for quality in district management, curriculum, and business operations. Worse still, because the emphasis is on test results) the incentive is to teach to the test as opposed to educating children.

As a consequence, most teachers have done a good job of doing exactly what the State has told them to do: teach to the test. This has created a system that is unrewarding for teachers, students and taxpayers.

It could be reasonably argued that Texas schoolchildren are more successful at passing an exam but not better educated. Reports of alleged cheating on TAKS tests by teachers in as many as 400 districts, and the ongoing financial mismanagement in districts, such as the Wilmer-Hutchins District in Dallas, illustrate some of the inherent problems and risks associated with the current methods through which Texas schools are accredited and held accountable.

There is a better way to achieve the worthy goals of accreditation, and it would require two changes to Texas law.

First, update the “purpose of accreditation.” State law takes a very narrow view of what is necessary to achieve accreditation: “The purpose of school accreditation is to assure that school districts will be held accountable for excellence in student performance and equity for all segments of the student population.” Contrast that with the approach taken by the Association of Christian Schools International: “ACSI accreditation is a process -- a self-study and analysis, a comparison to established standards, an assessment of a school’s mission, a

commitment to quality education, and a willingness to be accountable.” The Department of Education sets forth a number of recommended standards for accreditation for colleges and universities. One of them states: “Creating goals for self-improvement of weaker programs and stimulating a general raising of standards among educational institutions.”

The purpose of accreditation of Texas public schools should take a broader view of campus and district operations to drive overall improvement. Testing is a vital tool. But the intense focus on one set of high-stakes exams undermines the professional and educational experience for teacher and student alike.

Second, legislators should expand the criteria for accreditation to include not only test results, attendance, dropout and graduation ratings but also procedures to examine how well a school is managed, how well its teachers are trained, if the students are well behaved, and if teachers have the supplies and equipment they need. That can be accomplished by holding entire all of a school district’s operations – both teaching and management – to an established and highly respected international standard known as ISO 9001.

ISO 9001 requires an organization-wide focus on customer service, continuous improvement, and accountability for performance. Becoming certified through the ISO 9001 program is a rigorous exercise that compares school district performance to objective and widely accepted international standards of quality management.

This improved accreditation system would involve ongoing improvement rather than invasive visits, which is better aligned with the Legislature’s commitment to administrative freedom. It would be built on local responsibility for a continuous focus, not only on TAKS results, but also on quality programs throughout the district. It would allow teachers to be educators not glorified TAKS proctors.

Because of the vast experience of private schools and institutions of public education in a more extensive accreditation process, amending the Education Code would propel Texas public schools to a new level of achievement, both academically and operationally. Given that public education is the paramount responsibility of the State, it is time that our measurement tools match our expectations and financial commitment.

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