

# *Barriers* TO IMPLEMENTING *College AND Workforce Readiness* INITIATIVES IN TEXAS

TEXAS ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL BOARDS



## Summary Document March 2009

### Background

In 2007, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation awarded a grant to the Texas Association of School Boards (TASB) to conduct a study of the legal, regulatory, and practical barriers to college and workforce readiness in Texas and prepare a report to guide state and district policymakers in improving educational services for all students.

TASB compiled and reviewed legal, regulatory, and policy documents bearing on preparation for college and the workforce in Texas high schools. The Texas Center for Educational Research conducted more than 40 interviews of policymakers, practitioners, and education leaders in the state to learn how implementation of law and policy in Texas schools supports or thwarts students as they prepare for college or the workforce.

The final report combines the findings from the legal and policy review and the observations and experiences of policymakers and practitioners. It focuses on key barriers that now present themselves and offers constructive ideas about overcoming those barriers.

### Introduction

For many years, Texas has focused on improving the preparation of high school students by raising the standards for graduation and course completion and also increasing rigor in courses. Efforts are currently under way to incorporate college-ready standards into the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), the state's K–12 curriculum standards. What has driven these efforts is a set of alarming statistics about the number of students who graduate from high school poorly prepared for postsecondary education and in need of remediation or developmental education when they reach college. Statistics of particular interest include the following:

- Half of all college freshmen are likely to struggle with the reading demands of their college courses.
- Only 35 percent of Texas high school graduates in 2007 met the new college readiness standards for both English language arts and mathematics.
- More than half of the students entering Texas public colleges and universities require some academic remediation.



Texas employers and Texas Workforce Commission officials report that young employees are not well prepared for the workplace in terms of their skills and knowledge. This and other evidence makes it clear that Texas must do more to prepare students for college and the workforce. One step in that process is to assess the barriers to strong preparation and consider practical solutions to lower or eliminate them.

### **Laws to Improve the Preparation of Texas High School Students**

In many ways, Texas is a leading state in terms of improving the rigor of high school education and measuring student performance as a spur to further improvements. Legislators have enacted a number of new programs, assessments, collaborative leadership efforts, accountability measures, and grant programs aimed at improving postsecondary readiness.

***P–16 Council (2003).*** This state council was created to ensure that long-range plans and educational programs complement the entire system of public education from pre-kindergarten (P) through four-year college programs (16). The commissioner of higher education and the commissioner of education co-chair the P–16 Council, which meets quarterly.

***Texas High School Project (THSP, 2003).*** This \$216 million public-private initiative is aimed at improving Texas high schools in order to increase graduation rates, as well as the number of students prepared for college and career success. The multi-part THSP strategy includes high school redesign, development of new models for high schools, capacity-building for regional education service centers, new approaches to educator recruitment, school board leadership development, classroom programs, educator certification, and professional development.

***House Bill 1 (2006).*** This legislation, known for its sweeping tax relief and school finance provisions, also included an ambitious effort to improve high school success and college readiness. The law required the commissioners of education and higher education to establish vertical teams of educators to evaluate current high school requirements and establish college readiness standards in the core subjects (language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies).

The bill also required school districts to offer students the opportunity to earn at least 12 semester hours of college credit in high school through dual-credit, Advanced Placement (AP), or International Baccalaureate (IB) courses, and increased the number of math and science course credits required for graduation on the Recommended High School Program (RHSP) and the Distinguished Achievement Program (DAP). The RHSP, currently the default high school graduation program for Texas students, required four years of science and four years of math (referred to as “4x4”). In recognition of the additional responsibilities these laws imposed on high schools, the Legislature provided a \$275-per-student “High School Allotment” for each student in grades 9 through 12.

***House Bill 2237 (2007).*** Existing law was amended to require personal graduation plans for all students who fail a portion of the state tests or are judged not likely to graduate from high school within a five-year period. The bill provided resources to help schools address the dropout problem, including an online Best Practices Clearinghouse for dropout prevention and numerous grant programs intended to support dropout prevention and recovery programs.

This legislation also created the High School Completion and Success Initiative Council (HSCSI Council), composed of nine members that include the commissioners of education and higher education to improve the effectiveness, coordination, and alignment of high school completion and college and workforce readiness efforts.

**House Bill 3826 (2007).** This legislation made requirements for admission to public higher education institutions more uniform as well as more challenging. High school students were required to graduate on the RHSP or DAP, earn 1,500 out of 2,400 on the SAT, or meet the “benchmark” scores on the ACT exams in order to gain admission into a Texas public university.

**Commission for a College Ready Texas (CCRT, 2007).** Governor Rick Perry created this commission to provide expert resources and support for the vertical teams and State Board of Education (SBOE). The culmination of the commission’s efforts was a report issued November 2007 that established a definition of college and workforce readiness in Texas.

### **Defining College and Workforce Readiness**

Texas does not have an official definition of “readiness.” In its November 2007 report, the CCRT defined college readiness as “the attainment of the core knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in the first year of education after high school without the need for remedial/developmental education.” The report added that “the essential knowledge and skills required for postsecondary readiness, no matter what option is chosen, are the same,” thus folding workforce readiness and other options into the definition.

The HSCSI Council defined “postsecondary success” as “the range of academic, workforce, and social proficiency that high school students should acquire to successfully transition into: skilled employment, advanced training in the military, an associate’s degree, a bachelor’s degree, or technical certification.”

While all stakeholders agree that every student should receive rigorous preparation for what comes after high school, opinions differ about whether preparation for college and preparation for the workforce should be differentiated. By the end of 2008, however, state leaders had chosen a policy direction that equated college preparation with workforce preparation in terms of fundamental knowledge and skills, as well as rigor of coursework.

### **Impact of Recent Laws to Improve College Readiness**

Because the Texas legislative initiatives to improve academic standards and graduation rates are relatively new, there is little evidence by which to judge their success at this time. Statewide, student scores on the TAKS exit-level test have generally improved in recent years, though there was a decline in the results between 2006 and 2007. Students taking the exit-level test in 2007 were not recipients of many of the improvements implemented in recent years, so their test results may be indicators of past problems rather than recent changes.

Additionally, as a result of HB 1 (2006) establishing the RHSP as the default high school program, course enrollments are changing. More students are enrolling in Algebra 2 and other courses that are good predictors of readiness for college, but the ultimate results—college enrollment and preparation for college-level courses—cannot be analyzed for several years.

Furthermore, to measure the effectiveness of our public schools in preparing students for college or the workforce, the state will need to modernize and align the public and higher education data systems to track information about high school course-taking and completion, high school test scores, college enrollment, and college course success.

## **Barriers to College and Workforce Readiness**

### ***Barriers to Teaching and Learning***

- **Lack of Qualified Math and Science Teachers:** To fulfill the new RHSP requirements, school districts need to hire additional math and science teachers. Most states, including Texas, are struggling to recruit and retain well-qualified mathematics and science teachers for middle and high school.

**Solution:** Improvements in pre-service preparation (in traditional and alternative certification programs), as well as professional development for certified teachers, will help ease the shortage. The Legislature should make state funding available for these purposes. Institutions of higher education should increase the number of faculty with relevant public school experience who work in teacher preparation programs, and teacher preparation courses should be included as a component of content-area choice options. The state should analyze data showing the impact of stipends for hard-to-reach schools and stipends for teachers working in shortage areas. Also, districts should have resources available to give teachers time to support struggling students and to plan and implement new models for structuring both teacher and student time.

- **Disparate Access to Advanced and Dual-credit Courses:** Schools can infuse rigor into the curriculum through partnerships with higher education institutions to offer dual-credit courses. However, schools without a college nearby are at a disadvantage with respect to offering dual-credit courses. Even those with a potential partner institution struggle with the mechanics of enrollment and course scheduling, particularly if institutions are not close by.

**Solution:** Implementation of the Texas virtual school network will make it easier for many school districts to offer more rigorous courses and dual-credit opportunities. The 81<sup>st</sup> Legislature should appropriate sufficient funding to allow TEA to implement the virtual school network beginning with the 2009–10 school year.

- **Limited Course Options for Graduation:** The revised RHSP, with its requirement of four years of math, science, English language arts, and social studies coursework, imposes a single college preparatory curriculum on all students instead of offering multiple options. The requirements may make it difficult for students to schedule desired elective courses such as fine arts and career and technology education (CTE) in a crowded course schedule.

**Solution:** The Texas Legislature, SBOE, and school districts should make CTE courses more accessible to students within the RHSP. Implementing revised courses that simultaneously meet academic and CTE requirements may necessitate increased teacher professional development and more flexibility in teacher certification standards. TEA should spotlight academically rigorous workforce and P–16 aligned CTE programs. Also, policymakers may want to study expansion of the RHSP to include additional routes to graduation.

### ***P-16 Alignment Barriers***

- **Variable College Admission and Placement Standards:** Community colleges and universities require different college placement exams and are free to set the scores required for admission on those placement exams. Many more students could avoid having to take remedial courses in college if they had a clear understanding of what they need to learn in high school to enroll directly in credit-bearing college courses.

**Solution:** Higher education institutions should communicate clear, uniform policies about high school course prerequisites to students who plan to enter and succeed in credit-bearing freshman courses. A single college placement examination should be created for use in Texas colleges and degree-granting institutions. A uniform college placement exam and admission score would allow high school students to more appropriately plan their high school course schedules and avoid the expense and time lost to remedial coursework in college.

- **Lack of Uniformity in Awarding Dual Credit:** There are too many circumstances in which students who earn dual credit are served well only if they attend the college that awarded the dual credit. Students may be unable to transfer dual credit earned at a local community college to another community college or a Texas public four-year institution. Additional concerns are lack of standardization in articulation agreements, course content, risks associated with student failure, and use of calculators.

**Solution:** The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) should create a list of courses for which all community colleges and public universities in Texas will award college credit, and the list should be included in a standard articulation agreement that colleges and school districts can use when offering dual-credit courses. High schools should counsel students and parents about the consequences of dropping out of or failing a dual-credit course, and the SBOE and THECB should decide whether students will be permitted to use calculators in math end-of-course exams in high school and Texas Success Initiative placement tests in college.

### ***Student Support Barriers***

- **Insufficient Counseling:** High school students typically believe that meeting high school graduation requirements will prepare them for college, but higher education faculty and officials identify this as a misconception. Many students lack information on course requirements, placement examinations, admission criteria, workforce requirements and opportunities, and tuition costs. One of the major reasons for this lack of knowledge is that middle and high school students lack sufficient access to appropriately trained college and career counselors.

Counselors themselves report they are so busy with scheduling and test administration duties that they have insufficient time to guide students in course selection, much less through the quagmire of college admission and financial aid requirements. The 65 Percent Rule impedes districts from hiring additional guidance counselors, since the salaries of and expenditures on counselors are not included within the federal definition of “instruction.”

**Solution:** School district administrators should ensure that counselors obtain regular training in college admission and financial aid requirements so they can effectively help students prepare for higher education. Policymakers should revise the 65 Percent Rule to allow district expenditures on counselors to be included within the definition of “instructional expenditures.” In this way, districts

would have greater budgetary flexibility to hire more counselors. Also, districts should implement strategies aimed to increase the accessibility of guidance counselors, including: reducing the administrative burdens on guidance counselors; training middle and high school teachers to provide some college and career guidance; and partnering with community colleges to provide students with greater access to knowledgeable college and financial aid counselors.

- **Insufficient Support for Low-income and Minority Students:** The lack of available, appropriately trained guidance counselors is a particularly acute problem for students who have been historically underrepresented in higher education. These students may not know what questions to ask and seem to be more reluctant than other students to seek the assistance of busy guidance counselors. Additionally, parents of these students are less familiar with college admissions and financial aid processes, and thus need guidance and support as well.

**Solution:** The state can gain an understanding of what support programs work to increase the college-going rates of underserved students by examining results of the federal Gear-Up program, successful school models such as the KIPP Academy, and other programs with the goal of increasing college admission and completion for minority and low-income students. Schools should develop a culture of high expectations, early awareness of college goals, and a “whatever-it-takes” attitude.

#### ***Governance Barriers***

- **Separate Public and Higher Education Systems:** The separate governance structures for public and higher education contribute to the lack of curricular alignment, inefficient flow of information, and incomplete and incompatible data systems. Typically, policymakers’ efforts to align the two systems have focused on improving high schools. This may be a practical approach because high school curricula and graduation standards are within legislative reach, but such initiatives address only half of the alignment process and foster systemic mistrust between public and higher education faculty.

**Solution:** The state P–16 Council as well as the vertical teams and the CCRT have set the stage for better alignment between the public and higher education systems. More collaborative staff activity through dual-credit courses, regular information sharing, and more accurate and timely feedback will help ameliorate existing problems. State development of an accountability system for the transition from high school to college will help Texas policymakers identify the initiatives that are working to promote college and workforce readiness.

- **Absence of a Longitudinal P–16 Database to Track Students:** Once students graduate from high school, school personnel lack the means to track individual students’ postsecondary outcomes. Some school administrators have been able to determine through relationships with regional institutions of higher education which of their graduates have enrolled, which require remedial education, and what programs of study students choose; however, such data are not available to most districts. Policymakers also have difficulty in assessing policy or program effectiveness when it is not possible to track individual students as they move from high school into higher education or the workforce.

**Solution:** TEA and THECB have extensive data on the educational characteristics, choices, and outcomes of individual students, which, if linked, would enable districts to track graduates into public colleges and universities and allow evaluators to assess the effectiveness of policies designed to improve students’ college readiness. Texas Workforce Commission data could provide

information on students' workforce outcomes and help measure program effectiveness if linked to THECB and TEA databases. Also, the Texas Legislature should encourage TEA and THECB to work with the U.S. Department of Education to address data issues that create problems under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act.

- **Lack of Workforce's Involvement in Education Reforms:** At the core of efforts to improve academic preparedness of Texas students is the understanding that the state's economic health depends on the ability of young workers to meet labor market demands. Workforce representatives worry that public and higher education systems are not adequately preparing students with the knowledge and skills required for important jobs in the trades and in manufacturing.

**Solution:** TEA should involve industry representatives early in the development of TEKS for courses designed to teach students workforce skills. Policymakers have made strides to include workforce representatives on councils to address P–16 alignment issues; however, their involvement to date has been tertiary. Also, school districts, community colleges, and universities should align their course offerings more closely with the needs of the local workforce.

### **Conclusion**

While differences of opinion persist, most stakeholders interviewed for this project agree that Texas has made great strides in improving academic preparation of its students. Many efforts are still unfolding, and more improvement is expected. The state has introduced a more rigorous high school curriculum and made it the standard for all students. It has expanded access to college-level coursework for high school students and has begun to align high school curricula with college expectations. Also, policymakers have begun to identify career and technical education programs that are as rigorous as the traditional high school curriculum.

But to achieve the goal of “college and workforce readiness,” educators and policymakers must do more. Research consistently shows that teacher quality has the greatest impact on student learning. Therefore, the state should ensure that traditional and alternative teacher certification programs are preparing teachers with the knowledge and skills they need to help students meet the demands of higher education and the workforce. College and career counseling must be more readily available to students, especially in schools with high populations of students who are historically underrepresented in higher education. Additionally, the state must invest in the creation of a longitudinal data system to help educators in public and higher education understand the relationship between teaching, learning, outcomes, and postsecondary preparedness. Finally, labor market representatives should be involved earlier in the process of developing curricula standards for public and higher education courses, and course offerings should be aligned with workforce needs.

## Resources

Barriers to Implementing College and Workforce Readiness Initiatives in Texas:

[http://www.tasb.org/issues/resource\\_center/college\\_readiness/documents/college\\_readiness.pdf](http://www.tasb.org/issues/resource_center/college_readiness/documents/college_readiness.pdf).

Crisis at the Core: Preparing All Students for College and Work (Ames, IA: ACT, 2006):

<http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/reports/crisis.html>.

Go-to-College Guidebook, prepared by Ready by 21 Coalition's Go-to-College Team:

<http://www.readyby21austin.org/documents/GTCManual.pdf>.

P-16 Council, College Readiness and Success Strategic Action Plan:

<http://www.thecb.state.tx.us/CollegeReadiness/StrategicActionPlan.pdf>.

Report of the Commission for a College Ready Texas, November 2007:

<http://www.collegereadytexas.org/>.

Texas College and Career Readiness Standards, adopted by the THECB, January 24, 2008:

<http://www.thecb.state.tx.us/collegereadiness/TCRS.cfm>.

Texas High School Completion and Success Initiative Strategic Plan of March 2008:

[http://www.tea.state.tx.us/ed\\_init/thscsic/StrategicPlan\\_ApprovedFINAL.pdf](http://www.tea.state.tx.us/ed_init/thscsic/StrategicPlan_ApprovedFINAL.pdf).

TexasWorks 2008: Training and Education for All Texans, Report of the Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts: <http://www.window.state.tx.us/specialrpt/workforce/>.

