



Your Ally. Your Voice.

## Comments on the Draft Legislation of the Every Child Ready for College or Career Act of 2015

January 30, 2015

*The Association of Texas Professional Educators (ATPE) is the preeminent educator association in Texas and makes a positive difference in the lives of educators and schoolchildren. ATPE is a member-owned, member-governed professional association with more than 100,000 members, making it the leading educators' association in Texas and the largest independent association for public school educators in the nation. ATPE submits this testimony in support of limiting the federal government's role in administering an accountability system for K-12 public education.*

At its core, public school accountability should be used to provide local information to parents whose children are being educated in local schools, as well as to provide accountability to local taxpayers, including those same parents, whose tax dollars overwhelmingly account for public education funding. In the current fiscal environment, the federal government should limit its direct role in K-12 education to providing formula funding aimed at creating greater equity between schools with higher-wealth and lower-wealth tax bases and populations. Decisions about accountability should be made at the state level and, where possible, the district level, not as part of a one-size-fits-all national system.

In many ways, the Texas accountability model gave birth to the nationwide accountability system of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. However, in the decade since NCLB was passed, Texas law has continued to evolve, while the federal law has essentially remained static. For example, in 2009, the 81st Texas Legislature passed comprehensive legislation reforming the public school accountability system. The legislation resulted in new college-readiness standards, high school end-of-course exams, a growth-based performance measurement system for students and schools, and greater flexibility and increased rigor in high school graduation plans so as to allow for more options, such as career and technology education. Again, in 2013, the 83rd Texas Legislature made significant changes to the Texas accountability and assessment systems, primarily by reducing the number of state-mandated tests for secondary school students and creating high school diploma endorsements to enable students to pursue areas of special interest within the required state curriculum.

As the state and federal accountability systems have grown and diverged, incompatibilities have begun to plague school districts striving to succeed under a dual system that frequently produces inconsistent results. A school district might succeed under Texas's significantly more nuanced system yet fail under the federal system. Such conflicting results put undue strain on school districts, confuse parents and taxpayers, and will only become more prevalent if the federal system is not reformed to allow state systems the priority they deserve in the arena of school accountability. ATPE supports language in the Every Child Ready for College or Career Act of 2015 draft that gives states and school districts the authority to develop their own methods of accountability.

In addition to issues of inconsistency, many education researchers are beginning to call into serious question the validity of accountability systems and related reforms (e.g., prescriptive teacher evaluation designs) that rely heavily on the results of standardized tests. This comes after years of discord from

parents and teachers about the negatives associated with standardized testing and the unavoidable practice of “teaching to the test.” ATPE opposes the use of high-stakes tests as the primary measure of student achievement or of teacher quality. State and federal accountability systems should cease overemphasizing and relying on standardized test scores for high-stakes decisions, such as student retention in elementary grades, high school graduation, and teacher compensation. At the same time, ATPE supports development of a testing system designed to maximize student learning and give teachers and parents diagnostic results. Both testing and accountability systems should be restructured and redeveloped at the state and local levels with educator and parent input. ATPE supports the first testing option in the draft bill that gives states optimal flexibility to develop and implement a testing system at both the state and local levels.

As technology continues to develop and the backlash against the current cohort of standardized tests grows, many states have sought to move to alternative models of testing. Models such as computer-adaptive testing, growth measures, or the testing of scientifically valid population samples are all alternative testing models worth exploring. Although we are highly skeptical of the validity of value-added modeling for use in high-stakes decisions, we do feel that growth measures and computer-adaptive testing both offer promise as diagnostic tools educators could use to more accurately assess student learning. Testing only a sample of the student population rather than all students could also provide significant cost savings without any significant reduction in the accuracy of the population-wide results necessary for accountability. These are only a few examples of the possible beneficial testing/accountability evolutions the current federal system hinders. The federal government should offer assistance to states that develop innovative testing systems while also helping to ensure that the methodologies adopted by states are scientifically valid.

States’ accountability systems should also evolve to include inputs relative to teacher quality. Teacher characteristics and qualifications are useful measures of teacher quality that should no longer be ignored. Critics argue that effectiveness must be measured exclusively through outcomes rather than through inputs. We disagree. Although it’s difficult to come up with a simple definition of what constitutes an effective teacher, we know through our research that there is a positive association between measures of teacher quality and student achievement on state standardized tests, and that certain characteristics of high-quality teachers translate to higher levels of student achievement. ATPE has commissioned research, in fact, that supports the potential use of teacher quality indexes to target resources and interventions for schools that are struggling, such as schools with lower teacher quality measures caused by high turnover rates. This is not to suggest that educators in schools with a lower score on a teacher quality index, which our research also suggests is more often our poorest schools and those with the highest minority populations, are bad educators. Primarily, they are inexperienced and might not have been trained for the assignments they’ve been given. Retention of experienced teachers and principals at a school over several years promotes growth in student achievement. Regrettably, our accountability systems are not designed to foster longevity, and we end up with a revolving door at schools with the highest numbers of poor and minority students. The ironic result is the opposite of what NCLB was intended to curtail: inequitable distribution of high-quality teachers. ATPE believes we must correct our course on accountability by paying as much attention to the characteristics of our teaching workforce as we do to the results they produce. ATPE supports language in the bill that gives states significant authority on teacher quality but maintains language ensuring states require educators to adhere to state licensing requirements.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide you with input. Again, during the ESEA reauthorization, ATPE strongly urges you to focus on creating maximum equity in formula funding and dramatically reducing or eliminating the federal government’s role in K-12 accountability and testing. A focus on local control has and will always be the best way to foster positive outcomes in education.

---