Preparing Students for College and Workforce Readiness
TASB Eggs & Issues
October 17, 2008

For nearly ten years, Texas has focused on improving the preparation of high school students by raising the standards for graduation and course completion, increasing rigor in courses, and incorporating college-ready standards into the essential knowledge and skills. 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:

- Only half of high school students meet the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board’s (THECB) college readiness standard in mathematics and language arts;
- About half of the students entering a two-year college require some academic remediation; and,
- Over 20 percent of freshmen at four-year institutions take at least one remedial course.

Texas employers 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.

Legislative Initiatives to Improve Preparation of Texas High School Students
In the past five years, Texas has undertaken several major initiatives to improve high school education and prepare students more effectively for college and the workforce.

P-16 Council (1998 and 2003). This state Council was created to assure that long-range plans and education programs complement the entire system of public education from pre-kindergarten (P) through undergraduate education (16). The state P-16 Council also advises the State Board of Education (SBOE) regarding the coordination of post-secondary career and technical activities and teacher preparation programs for career and technical education teachers.

The Texas High School Program (2003). This $261 million public-private partnership is aimed at increasing graduation rates, as well as the number of students prepared for college and career success by improving high schools. The partnership supports the redesign of low-performing high schools and the creation of innovative new schools, provides grants to enhance student support services such as tutoring and counseling, expands the availability of accelerated courses, and creates early and middle college high schools through partnerships with institutions of higher education.
**House Bill 1 (2006).** Article 5 of this bill addressed high school success and college readiness by requiring the commissioners of public and higher education to establish “vertical teams” to evaluate college readiness standards in the core curriculum. The bill also required school districts to offer at least 12 semester hours of college credit for high school students, increased math and science requirements for the Recommended High School Program (RHSP) and Distinguished Achievement Program (DAP) diplomas to four years of course work in each subject. In recognition of these additional curricular responsibilities, the legislature provided school districts with a $275 per student High School Allotment for each student in grades 9 through 12. The bill also required colleges to use end-of-course tests (when developed) for college placement.

**House Bill 2237 (2007).** The State Board of Education must incorporate college readiness standards into the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). School districts must develop personal graduation plans for all students who fail a portion of the state TAKS test or who are judged not likely to graduate from high school within five years. Numerous grant programs intended to support dropout prevention programs were made available to school districts. This legislation also created the Texas High School Completion and Success Initiative Council, composed of the commissioners of education and higher education and educators and industry representatives who have experience implementing high school reform and workforce readiness strategies. The Council is responsible for improving the effectiveness, coordination, and alignment of standards for high school completion and college and workforce readiness.

**House Bill 3826 (2007).** This legislation made certain higher education admissions requirements more uniform and rigorous. High school students must 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 four year public universities.

**Commission for a College Ready Texas (2007).** By Executive Order, Governor Rick Perry established the Commission for a College Ready Texas to provide expert resources and support to the vertical teams and the SBOE. The Commission’s report was completed in late 2007 and is available online at [www.collegereadytexas.org](http://www.collegereadytexas.org).

**Defining “Readiness”**

Texas does not have an official definition of “college and workforce readiness.”

However, the Commission for a College Ready Texas defined it 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 Commission also equated workforce readiness with college readiness, stating that “the essential knowledge and skills required for postsecondary readiness, not what option is chosen, are the same.”

The High School Completion and Success Initiative Council reinforced the parity of the two concepts, defining 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. During the 81st legislative session, legislators may want to evaluate
whether Texas law and policy should equate preparation for college with preparation for the workforce, in terms of curricular standards and required courses.

**Implementing Change**
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 declined three percentage points between 2006 and 2007, but Hispanic and Native American subgroups showed increased performance.

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. As a result of HB 1 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.

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.

**Challenges to College and Workforce Readiness**
Over the past several months, the Texas Association of School Boards has attempted to identify the laws and policies that are impeding Texas public schools from successfully preparing all students for college and workforce success. TASB staff and consultants reviewed laws, policies and reports to identify possible barriers to college and workforce readiness. We then interviewed over 40 educators and policymakers who have first-hand knowledge of high schools and their challenges to determine the validity of the identified legal and policy barriers. The preliminary results, summarized below, highlight issues in the implementation of state laws and policies designed to promote college and workforce readiness, as well as offer suggestions for improvement and further progress.

**Barriers to Teaching and Learning.**

- **Lack of Qualified Math and Science Teachers:** The new 4x4 curriculum requirements are forcing many high schools 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, as well as professional development for certified teachers will help ease the shortage. Data showing the impact of stipends for hard-to-teach schools and for teachers who work in shortage areas are critical to expanding the pool of highly qualified math and science teachers.

- **Disparate access to advanced and dual credit courses:** Schools can infuse rigor into the curriculum through higher standards in existing classes, implementation of Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate curricula, and 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, and even those with a potential partner institution struggle with the mechanics of enrollment and course scheduling.
**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. Additionally, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and THECB should consider creating a model articulation agreement so that school districts and community colleges do not have to create a unique agreement for each dual credit course.

- **Limited course options for graduation:** The RHSP specifies 26 course credits students must have in order to graduate. The 26-credit requirement for the RHSP generally fills a student’s high school schedule, potentially pushing career and technology education out of the curriculum for many students.

  **Solution:** The TEA should identify and/or develop curricula for career and technology education (CTE) courses that simultaneously satisfy the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) for core curriculum courses and meet the state’s workforce needs. Implementing these courses successfully may necessitate an investment in additional teacher professional development and an adjustment in the certification rules for CTE teachers. Districts should consider offering “blended” courses that fulfill the TEKS of two core courses simultaneously, thus allowing students more time in their schedule to take additional courses.

**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 would be able to avoid having to take remedial courses in college if they had a clear understanding about what they need to learn in high school to enroll directly into credit-bearing college courses.

  **Solution:** Higher education needs to create clear, uniform policies about course requirements and the knowledge needed to enter and succeed in credit-bearing freshman courses. A uniform college placement exam and required admission score on that exam would allow high school students to more appropriately plan their high school course schedules and avoid the expense and time lost to remedial course work in college.

- **Lack of Uniformity in Awarding College Credit:** In too many circumstances, students who earn dual credit (credit for a high school course and credit for a college course simultaneously) 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.

  **Solution:** THECB should create a list of courses for which all community colleges and public universities in Texas will award college credit.

**Student Support Barriers.**

- **Insufficient College 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, the role of extracurricular activities, 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 are so busy with scheduling and test administration duties that they have insufficient time to guide students in course selection and through the quagmire of college admission and financial aid requirements. Furthermore, the 65 Percent Rule impedes school districts from hiring additional guidance counselors, since counselors’ salaries are not included in the calculation of districts’ “instructional expenditures.” Lastly, teachers who do not teach honors or advanced classes are ill-prepared to help their students learn about college requirements.

**Solution:** High school counselors should 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 districts’ expenditures on counselors to be included within the calculation of “instructional expenditures,” so that districts have greater budgetary flexibility to hire more counselors. And, 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 Minority Students:** The lack of available, appropriately trained guidance counselors is a particularly acute problem for students who have been historically under-represented 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, the 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 works to increase the college-going rates of under-served students by examining results of the federal Gear-Up program and other programs with the goal of increasing college admission and completion for minority and low-income students. Such information should be publicized to school districts through the TEA’s Best Practices Clearinghouse.

**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 politically expedient since 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 Commission for a College Ready Texas 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. Development of a higher education accountability system that is detailed, transparent and aligned with the public education accountability systems will help Texas policymakers identify the initiatives that are working to promote college and workforce readiness.
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 our 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. Policymakers have made strides to include workforce representatives on councils to address P-16 alignment issues. But, their involvement to date has generally been tertiary.

Solution: The TEA should involve industry representatives early in the development of TEKS for courses designed to teach students workforce skills. Also, school districts, community colleges and universities should align their course offerings more closely with the needs of the local workforce.

Most stakeholders interviewed for TASB’s project agree that Texas has made great strides in improving academic preparation of 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 begun to align high school curricula with college expectations. And, 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,” more work must be done. 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 made more readily available to students, especially in schools with high populations of students who are historically underrepresented in higher education. And, 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


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)

Texas College Readiness Standards: [http://www.thecb.state.tx.us/collegereadiness/TCRS.cfm](http://www.thecb.state.tx.us/collegereadiness/TCRS.cfm)
