



From: Dr. Angela Valenzuela, Director, Texas Center for Education Policy and Patricia D. Lopez, M.A., Research Associate, Texas Center for Education Policy.

To: the Honorable Dan Branch, Joaquin Castro, Roberto R. Alonzo, Dennis Bonnen, Fred Brown, Donna Howard, Eric Johnson, Tryon D. Lewis, and Diane Patrick.

Re: Written Testimony to the House Higher Education Committee of the 82nd session of the Texas State Legislature on House Bill 9: Student success-based funding for public institutions of higher education.

Date: March 1, 2011

On behalf of the Texas Center for Education Policy (TCEP), we respectfully submit the following written testimony in response to your hearing regarding Texas student financial aid. TCEP is a nonpartisan education research and policy center within the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin. Building on the University of Texas tradition of distinguished scholarship, the Texas Center for Education Policy is committed to research on equity and excellence in PK-16 education. TCEP promotes interdisciplinary and collaborative research, analysis, and dissemination of information to impact the development of educational policy by bringing together university entities in partnership with local, state, national, and international education communities.

During the 81st Session of the Texas State Legislature, our center monitored and responded to the many iterations of House Bill 3 (HB 3) from a research-based perspective. Specifically, the Center brought to light the complexities and consequences of accountability policies regarding high-stakes testing, end-of-course exams, college readiness, growth models, interventions and sanctions, school capacity and resources, limited English proficient youth, and curricular tracking.

Attached is an overview of relevant research on public school standards-based reform, accountability, and assessment policies, followed by policy concerns and considerations. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Angela Valenzuela or Patricia D. Lopez by phone (512) 471-7055 or e-mail tcep@austin.utexas.edu. Thank you for your consideration.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Angela Valenzuela".

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Relating to Student Success-based Funding for Public Institutions of Higher Education

Introduction

House Bill 9 proposes a dramatic shift in approach to state funding of institutions of higher education in the state of Texas. While we unequivocally support efforts to increase the number of degree holders in math, science, and engineering, the “success-based” funding approach proposed in HB 9 is concerned with ensuring that institutions of higher education “produce student outcomes that are directly aligned with the state’s education goals and economic development needs” (HB 9, p. 2). To achieve this goal, HB 9 provides outcomes-based indicators for both two- and four-year public institutions that will inform the ways in which these institutions are provided state appropriations.

In general, this approach mirrors the beginnings of a K-12-like accountability system for higher education that a decade of research has shown produces harmful effects for students, educators, and curricula. HB 9 represents a significant departure from equity as a principle in school funding by proposing a reductive assessment approach that places all institutions, regardless of their respective missions, on a standardized metric (see Valencia, 2004). It also undervalues already struggling areas such as liberal arts, humanities, communications, foreign language, education, and some social sciences by prioritizing disciplinary areas that have been pre-determined by proponents of HB 9 as “critical.” We refer, in particular, to research that demonstrates the importance of other areas not deemed “critical” in HB 9 to broader education goals and that contributes to a high-quality, diverse educational experience for all students (Gurin, Nagda, Lopez, 2004) and fostering leadership development of the state’s young people (Valenzuela, 2007, 2005; Delgado-Bernal, Aleman, Garavito, 2009; Hurtado, 2009). Only a broad, public discussion comprised of diverse stakeholders could adequately determine that which the state of Texas should prioritize.

Research

Standards-based reform has been the predominant approach in public school education since the early nineties. A central premise of this model is that schools will be driven to improve educational quality as a consequence of the rewards and punishment attached to meeting the goals that have been set for them (Valenzuela, 2004; Honig, 2006).

What research at the public school level has shown is that, in practice, accountability and assessment policies have led to a narrowing of classroom instruction (McNeil, 2000; McNeil and Valenzuela, 2001; Valenzuela, 2005; Sloan, 2004), curricular tracking (Callahan, 2005; Callahan, Wilkinson, Muller, & Frisco, 2009), and they position students as liabilities

whenever the students become “threats” to institutions meeting their goals, leading, for example, to grade retention (Valencia and Villarreal, 2004), and dropping out (Haney, 2000; Valenzuela, Fuller & Vásquez Heilig, 2006; McNeil, Coppola, Radigan & Vásquez Heilig, 2008). These realities are further exacerbated for language minority youth and English language learners (Ruiz de Velasco, 2004; Sloan, 2007). Rather than addressing the inequities that exist across institutions, investing in improving issues of capacity, and reconsidering the inadequacy of one-size-fits-all assessments, standards-based accountability policies have been associated with “widening the gap” (McNeil, 2000, p. 130) between the education of poor and privileged children (also see Cross, 2004 for a national perspective).

Points of consideration

- The proposed system may lead to changes in higher education institutions’ admissions policies that prevent those students who, under HB 9, may be viewed as liabilities or “threats” to them securing state funding, thereby structuring out certain students from access to higher education.
- The proposed system may lead to a further decrease in support for liberal arts, area studies, humanities, and some of the social sciences that are not regarded in HB 9 as “critical” areas for the economy, especially in an institutional context where priorities for these areas may be already low.
- HB 9 institutionalizes a prejudice against disciplines and fields of study that foster innovation, creativity, higher-order thinking, and leadership in favor of those that foster linear, logical, formalistic, and deductive forms of reasoning. This may hinder the capacities of citizens in our state to be insightful and sophisticated decision makers, potentially compromising the stated goal of economic productivity.
- Once admitted, the proposed system may not only alienate, but may also curtail the leadership potential and development of many college students whose interests fail to align with the fields and disciplines favored by this legislation.
- The proposed system would allow a single board the authority to determine those areas of study that are “most critically necessary for serving the needs of the state,” as well as devise student success measures that will be used to appropriate state funding to public colleges and universities. Such top-down policies should consider the limited voice and diminished authority that the public may experience in this process.

Policy considerations

Proponents of House Bill 9 are calling for changes to state funding without consideration to the fact that communities also pay a local tax to public higher education institutions. We must consider the ways in which HB 9 is, in effect, a “tax” on the public interest to have a voice in the broader discussion of the role that higher education plays in the development of our state’s economy. This means that changes in institutional policies that respond to HB 9 may incur particular burdens on higher education institutions by compromising their

local missions, goals, and the expectations and interests of larger state and local communities.

With regard to defining the function and purpose of higher education, we cannot afford to be narrowly circumscribed and narrowing students' access to knowledge at a time when information is exploding at a staggering pace. Through the bill's proposed funding model, it endorses an unwitting setting of limits on the quality and effectiveness of sensemaking that our citizens need today in order to harness the multiplicity of demands that the information explosion has created. Never in the history of humankind, have such sensemaking capacities been needed.

In a similar vein, not providing students with access to curricula and instruction that allows them to become socially conscious and culturally aware limits their capacities to navigate our increasingly complex, global world. Stated positively, social and cultural awareness is critical to their leadership development of all students.

It is important to be critical and refrain from approaches that place public institutions of higher education on the same detrimental path that Texas' public schools have taken. To let this bill advance may set our state's public university on a track to mirror the growing number of public schools that no longer provide arts and music programs. It may also contribute to an even greater stratification that already exists across disciplines through a systemic devaluing of area studies.

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