

Texas Education Review

Legislative Update – 83rd Texas Legislature

Representative Jimmie Don Aycock, DVM

*Texas House of Representatives, Chair Public Education
Committee*

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The education questions before the 83rd Texas Legislature weren't really very complicated. Had our education system become mired in a testing nightmare? Obviously. Had our rigid focus on "College Prep" deprived these students not bound for college the necessary education to be employable? Most folks thought so. Had our accountability system become so focused on "one test on one day" that it failed to describe how schools were doing? A resounding "Yes!"

As I began my role as Public Education Committee Chairman, it became obvious what virtually every member of the Legislature had heard on the campaign trail - "Fix the testing, provide flexibility in career paths, and make the accountability system more fair and meaningful." Most issues before the Texas Legislature are notoriously divisive. It was almost surreal to realize that virtually every legislator had heard the same message and was headed in the same general direction.

It also became obvious that there were folks outside the legislature that had serious concerns about the changes proposed by the omnibus education bill – House Bill 5 ("HB 5"), which sought to amend Texas' accountability and assessment requirements as well as replace existing high school programs with a foundation curriculum. If HB 5 was to become law, those concerns had to be heard and addressed as much as possible.

These most vocal and influential in their concerns were the folks who had been instrumental in No Child Left Behind ("NCLB"). The general sense among them seemed to be that, if

standards were set high enough and curriculum and tests were rigorous enough, schools and students would rise to the occasion. After all, the National Assessment of Education Program (“NAPE”) gap was closing. College enrollment in minority cohorts was increasing. The thing the NCLB advocates had difficulty seeing was that large numbers of students were either dropping out or about to graduate on the “Minimum Plan” practically assuring them a future without college and without employable skills.

As the Education Committee began listening to employers, parents, and students it became obvious that vocational skills education was being neglected. Most resources and time were being expended on the college prep curriculum and the “TEST” that dictated the future of teachers, administrators and, indeed, entire communities. How had we come to the point that education was defined by a test? How had we come to the point that a student with a bachelor’s degree that didn’t lead to employment was a great outcome – but an x-ray technician, Computer Aided Design draftsman, or welder making a large salary was something “less?”

The other serious concerns were from members of the minority communities. It is no secret that in Texas, and across the country, the past is full of situations where minority students were relegated to lesser education and menial jobs. It is understandable that many wanted assurances that their kids would not repeat the tracking of the past. Legislators from both the Hispanic and Black communities put their shoulders to this task. They devised as many incentives and safeguards as possible to assure the flexibility needed for every child to achieve as much as possible. During the nine hours of debate on the House floor, numerous amendments on this issue were considered and passed.

One strange aspect of HB 5's passage was the split among business groups. Some wanted to stay with the present “Rigor and Test” system. Most businesses, however, expressed a need for more "hands on" education. Time and again we heard from businesses that it was essential for students to see relevance and applicability in their education.

All legislators think they have great ideas. Our Committee's problem was that if we attempted to pick and choose between the “great ideas” the larger objectives would simply get lost. In the end, much of the detail work was left to the State Board of Education and the Texas Education Agency.

Defining the changes to our system will be a monumental task for both the Board and Texas Education Agency. Will everyone be happy? Probably not. But through the hearing process there is room for educators, parents, workforce groups, and students to have input. There is flexibility to try something new and make changes if needed. Setting too much education policy by statute has proven to be too rigid. Opportunities to make changes come only every two years.

Much of the future of Texas education remains to be defined. If that future holds together, we will achieve the three big objectives of HB 5:

- reduce testing
- provide greater curriculum flexibility
- provide a clearer, fairer evaluation of schools

I am confident teachers, counselors, administrators, and students can build a brighter future for our children.

The legislature committed to these objectives by unanimous vote. It is now up to you – educators – to make this work.

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