

HB 500 Refines Accountability System to Enhance Student Learning

A lot of conflicting comments are being bantered about regarding HB 500, the end-of-course refinement bill introduced by State Representative Rob Eissler. Some business associations and so-called “education experts” say HB 500 threatens the positive progress in public education made when the Texas Legislature passed HB 3 last session. But many educators have contacted their representatives and senators saying we need to delay the implementation of the new assessment system created under HB 3.

Both sides have valid points. House Bill 500 attempts to find middle ground.

House Bill 500 maintains rigor and focus on college readiness. It does not lower standards, but focuses attention on English III and Algebra II, which are the only two courses that research consistently supports as indicators of college readiness. It leaves the more rigorous STAAR assessment system (grades 3-8 and end of course) to begin, as scheduled, in the 2011-2012 school year, with students taking all end-of-course exams for courses in which they are enrolled.

House Bill 500 focuses on teaching and learning. Parents and educators complain that schools today are more focused on testing than learning, and rightfully so. The current system for assessing student progress is a web of complex, convoluted requirements, and it’s about to get worse. If legislators fail to act, students will soon face 12 high-stakes graduation exams beginning in their freshmen years. House Bill 500 creates a clear, easily understandable path to graduation while maintaining a focus on college readiness. Students will still have to pass all their courses, and they will still have to pass multiple end-of-course exams. This bill will provide the highest graduation standard Texas has ever had.

House Bill 500 returns control to local educators, who would determine whether end-of-course assessment results are included in a student’s grade, instead of the state’s mandating a percentage. We do not require TAKS scores to be part of students’ grades, yet our students have continued to improve their performance year after year. Are teachers going to suddenly stop caring about learning? Determining grades is the responsibility of teachers, not the state.

House Bill 500 allows students the same transition time as schools. Under HB 3, schools are allowed a two-year transition period to the new, more rigorous assessment and accountability systems. Yet, under current law, students would be afforded no transition period and would be held accountable the first year of the new assessment. This legislation delays the high-stakes graduation requirements for only two years, during which time students can take exit-level TAKS if they don’t meet end-of-course requirements.

House Bill 3 was a large, complex bill that was years in the making. As often happens, several of its key provisions need to be tweaked. House Bill 500 strikes the appropriate balance among teaching, learning and accountability that we sought to accomplish with HB 3. We can’t afford to dig our heels in and resist appropriate changes to HB 3 – not when our children’s futures are at stake.