

# COMMUNITY-BASED ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS

*A White Paper Developed by Leaders of the Texas High Performance Schools Consortium*

## **Statement of Principle from *Creating a New Vision for Public Education in Texas*, Article III:**

### **Assessments for Learning--**

*Appropriate and varied types of assessments are essential for informing students about their level of success in ways that affirm and stimulate their efforts and for informing their teachers so that more customized learning experiences may be provided in a timely way. Well-conceived and well-designed assessments should also be used to reveal to parents, the school, the district, and society at large the extent to which the desired learning is occurring and what schools are doing to continuously improve.*

## **Statement of Principle from *Creating a New Vision for Public Education in Texas*, Article IV:**

### **Accountability for Learning--**

*Comprehensive accountability systems are essential to achieving minimal personal and organizational performance only. They are essential for weeding out the incompetent and reconstituting unproductive schools, but such systems serve to create compliance and mediocrity at best. Excellence and sustained organizational performance come from a commitment to shared values and a clear vision that encourages collaboration and teamwork. Creating organizations that foster commitment requires superior moral leadership and a responsible use of authority.*

*A community-based assessment and accountability system (CBAAS) is an essential component of the transformed PK-12 educational system needed for Texas children and families. Such a system restores balance to the local community schools and the state educational partnership by empowering students, parents, and educators to build a learning community that honors and supports the work of students, teachers, and parents.*

*Such a system recognizes the state's responsibility and role in promoting an educated citizenry capable of self-governance and economic sufficiency as expressed through the state's goal of college and career readiness. It recognizes the need for local communities, through their locally governed school districts, to have meaningful discretion in how those goals are achieved.*

### **Why community-based accountability?**

A CBAAS empowers local school districts to design their own internal systems of assessment and accountability that, while meeting general state standards, allow districts to innovate and customize curriculum and instruction to meet the unique needs and interest of their communities.

### **Proposed System of Accountability**

The foundation of CBAAS is a four-part system consisting of:

- student and classroom-centered evidence of learning,
- strategic use of standardized testing,
- performance reviews and validation of learning by highly trained visiting teams, and
- rigorous descriptive reporting to parents and communities.

It requires a transformation of the state’s highly prescriptive and restrictive approach to curricular standards, multiple-choice testing, and ranking. It requires state policy makers to establish meaningful goals related to post-secondary educational attainment and workforce preparation. This framework builds on an earlier model (Coalition for Authentic Reform in Education, 2007) that proposed a comprehensive decentralized alternative to a bureaucratically structured state and federal standardized assessment and accountability systems. This framework also directly incorporates the recommendations for assessment and accountability from the Public Education Visioning Institute that are found in *Creating a New Vision for Public Education in Texas* (2008).

## **1. Student-centered evidence of student learning**

### **Supporting premises:**

*Assessments used by teachers are the most critical for improving instruction and student learning, and to be effective must reflect certain characteristics, be interpreted properly in context, and reported clearly. Conducting good assessments is a part of the art and science of teaching that results from teacher experiences and formal professional development opportunities.*

*Assessments should be used primarily for obtaining student feedback and informing the student and teacher about the level of student conceptual understanding or skill development so that the teacher has accurate information to consider for designing additional or different learning experiences.*

*Assessments should be continuous and comprehensive, using multiple tools, rubrics, and processes, and should incorporate teacher judgments about student work and performance, as well as the judgment of others, when needed.*

**The best way to determine what students have learned is to examine the body of work they create.**

Digital instructional management systems and portfolios support the collection and maintenance of robust evidence that documents students’ performance on the high-priority learning standards established by the state. Writing samples, project-based learning demonstrations, teacher-developed tests, lab journals, science projects, essays, reading response logs, research papers, rubric assessments, and other student work products provide better evidence on a wider range of student knowledge, skills, and progress than do standardized tests. The state’s current writing assessments examine students’ first-draft samples in an artificial, formulaic context graded by a contracted, minimally trained, hourly worker. Deeper and more meaningful measures of a child’s writing skills are reflected by a portfolio that includes varied examples of writing, progressions from drafts to final products, responses to feedback from teachers and peers, and other measures of authentic learning. By going beyond the first draft, teachers can thoroughly measure a student’s mastery of meaningful learning standards. Congruently, a project-based learning portfolio allows each student to demonstrate his or her own incorporation of critical thinking, effective presentation skills, and deep content knowledge on a topic of consequence.

## **2. Strategic standardized testing and customized adaptive assessment**

### **Supporting premises:**

*Assessments should not be limited to, nor even rely substantially on standardized tests that are primarily multiple-choice, paper/pencil or similar online instruments that can be machine-scored.*

*Sampling techniques (the full range of examinations, evaluation of student work products, and performances, as well as teacher tests and standardized tests) should be used in lieu of testing every child every year.*

*Standardized tests to which high stakes are attached can become substitutes for the learning standards themselves and result in “teaching to the test,” rather than teaching for attainment of the standard.*

A standardized test administered once a year with results received at or near the end of a school year offers limited feedback for instruction. By design, it does not track student progress throughout the weeks and months of a school year. That is the job of the classroom teacher, who is responsible for developing the formative assessments that guide and measure learning progress and the summative assessments that reflect mastery of high-priority learning standards. By allowing local districts to collect and maintain student portfolios and use locally developed assessments, the state can more effectively and economically use standardized testing for its intended purpose: to provide a snapshot based on a single test. Correctly used, that standardized testing snapshot provides a broad measure of how a student population is progressing as a whole, rather than assuming to accurately measure the progress of each individual student. The state should pursue changes in federal policy that would allow it to use stratified random sampling in grades prior to high school, limit the scope of standardized testing in those grades to high-priority learning standards in reading, math, and science, and limit testing of grade-level populations to gateway transition years. For example, the state could choose to coincide with the U.S. Department of Education, which tests grades 4 and 8 using the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

The state has taken important steps to restoring balance to high school end of course standardized testing. Further improvement will be realized by accelerating options for substitution of ACT, SAT, and Advanced Placement assessments for state tests, and by redesigning state tests to focus on high-priority learning standards.

The need for the state to limit its testing to high-priority learning standards is important because the present design of state standardized STAAR tests does not provide meaningful or timely feedback for instruction. The state curriculum is categorized into learning standards that are either “readiness” or “supporting.” The state testing blueprints call for 60% to 70% of items to address the readiness standards, which are considered the grade curricular standards of greatest importance. That leaves 30% to 40% of state tests to address supporting standards, being those standards that contribute to understanding, but may have been emphasized in the previous year’s instruction or may become a readiness standard in a future year.

The efficacy of the tests is sabotaged by the desire to test too many standards. For example, the reading portion of the state’s English I end-of-course exam tests 31 standards with 38 multiple-choice items and two short-answer written responses. Thus, some supporting standards are tested by one multiple-choice item. Teachers are appropriately reluctant to draw any conclusions about a student’s learning from one question. Let’s use the example of the following supporting standard for English I: “Explain the role of irony, sarcasm, and paradox in literary works.” In the English I end-of-course exam, this standard may receive zero, one or two questions designed to measure students’ abilities to explain the author’s

use of one or more of the rhetorical devices. Without being able to see the test, it is impossible for an English teacher to surmise which of the three rhetorical devices the student understands. And since, according to the state's blueprint, zero to three questions are included, it is possible that standard isn't covered at all. Under the best of circumstances, the teacher would not know if the standard was even tested until after the school year was over.

In order to be of instructional use to a student or teacher, test results must be known in a timely manner. This allows teachers to adjust instruction to ensure that the student masters the material. For example, if a test reveals that a student is struggling with a certain algebraic concept, the sooner that deficiency is known and corrected, the better. State standardized test results received after a student has completed a course do not provide individualized, diagnostic feedback to teachers or students.

Given the inherent limitations of state standardized tests, the state's legitimate interest in assuring college and career readiness is better met by using existing, validated measures of college readiness. Such measures also satisfy the need to monitor the academic progress of all students, including those who are economically and educationally disadvantaged. One example, among several, of such college readiness is the EXPLORE, PLAN, and ACT sequence (EPACT), which guides progression towards college readiness from grade 8 to 10 to exit level. Exams such as EPCAT draw on national surveys of high schools and universities to identify the learning standards that are crucial to college success. In addition, College Board Advanced Placement courses and corresponding exams offer students the opportunity to demonstrate college level competencies and receive college credit. Demonstrated competency should be valued over readiness.

With fewer days of standardized testing, schools would have greater flexibility to use customized assessments. In those cases when standardized testing makes sense, the state could cut the lag time in order to provide valuable feedback to teachers and students. One approach could include computer adaptive testing, which by its very design presents students with items of different levels of difficulty adapting in real time to student responses. Adaptive testing provides an individualized assessment that more accurately measures student academic readiness, performance, and progress over time.

### **3. External review, validation of learning, and quality assurances**

#### **Supporting premise:**

*A multi-year cycle for periodic district and campus performance reviews should be established, using highly trained visiting teams to analyze a predetermined set of student performance information.*

A third foundation of community-based assessment and accountability is the use of external review and validation of student learning. A state-centric approach would study and adapt successful practices such as the British Inspectorate model of highly trained professional visiting teams or the use of external scoring validation used by the International Baccalaureate Programme. In addition, the state could draw on its own extensive experience with performance-based monitoring. Such teams would examine the evidence maintained by schools that demonstrate academic performance and progress, and examine important components of school operations not addressed in the current accountability system. External review teams would examine the quality of services provided to diverse student populations served within the schools. The state would use its extensive annual collection of data that informs the current monitoring system to provide its visiting review teams insight into areas where close

examination is needed. A community-centric approach would allow local districts and campuses to establish, within a state defined framework, a system of inter-district peer visitation and review on a multi-year cycle. Developed in collaboration with the P-16 Council already supported by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, peer review would include K-12 educators, higher education professors, parents, and community stakeholders.

In addition to the formative and summative programmatic feedback derived from either or both types of external review teams, the state, as previously described, could administer standardized tests through stratified random sampling for the purpose of verifying academic performance on both the high-priority readiness standards and the supporting standards, with the caveat that the tests have been redesigned to be instructionally sensitive; that is, they include enough items to adequately inform if a standard has been met.

A third level of quality assurance would model the highly successful introduction by the state of the reading Student Success Initiative. Prior to the introduction of the state requirement that all third-graders pass a state reading test for promotion to the fourth grade, the state provided high quality training for all primary teachers responsible for reading. A similar approach would be for the state to assure through both pre-service and in-service training that all teachers have access to evidence-based practices in both formative and summative assessments.

#### **4. Rigorous descriptive reporting to parents and communities**

##### **Supporting premises:**

*Accountability systems should be carefully designed on a theoretical base that honors what teachers and students actually do, that empowers and builds integrity, trust, and commitment to the values that define the school.*

*As single measures, standardized norm-referenced tests, criterion-referenced state tests, aptitude tests, end of course tests, other oral and written examinations, student performances/projects/portfolios, regular teacher assessments, and grades each give a piece of the picture; and used in combination, can provide a more holistic view. However, if a high-stakes standardized test is given a preponderance of weight, it will become the assessment that really counts, others notwithstanding.*

*Accountability systems are guided by the fact that to attach any matter highly valued by students, teachers, school leaders, or schools/districts to any single measure such as a standardized test, corrupts the test and the integrity of what it measures, as well as the accountability it was intended to provide.*

The fourth pillar of a community-based assessment and accountability system envisions a revitalized and transformed system of learning in which school accountability is communicated to students, parents, and community.

To the extent that the state articulates clearer goals for future levels of desired educational attainment and workforce development, districts would have a clearer context for establishing community-based goals. The present state accountability system of reporting drives districts to respond to comparative indices devoid of context or meaning. Districts would articulate the broad inspirational goals held for

students, whether traditionally stated or expressed as learner/graduate profiles, the results and outcomes held for students that flow from their goals, and establish performance indicators to help determine progress towards and attainment of desired results.

CBAAS reporting would draw from the collections of classroom evidence, strategic and customized testing, and the results of external reviews and validation of student learning. Districts would show evidence of community involvement and engagement in the setting of goals, results, and performance indicators. These indicators could include general measures of academic performance, academic progress on high-priority learning standards, progress toward post-secondary readiness, participation in advanced curriculum, graduation rates, enrollment and retention in post-secondary education, and measures that describe unique community goals, such as workforce preparations, creativity and innovation, citizenship preparation, student and parent engagement, climate measures, parent satisfaction, and service learning. While the emphasis of CBAAS is on descriptive reporting of progress toward community established milestones, the reporting would include comparisons to statewide averages and to comparable communities.

In conclusion, the purpose of establishing a community-based assessment and accountability system would be to engage the community in the education of its youth by establishing rigorous standards that meet the unique needs of that community. This locally designed accountability system would be more rigorous than the standards currently determined by the state and would eliminate an overreliance on standardized testing. Within a state designed framework of accreditation, including accountability reporting standards and key common performance indicators, local districts would be accountable to their communities for student learning. In the end, this would result in better public schools, reinvigorate the voices of local communities in the education of their youth, and promote an ethos of customization for students that will better prepare them for responsible citizenship.