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Considerations for Community Feedback on the Texas ESSA Plan

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Under the *Every Student Succeeds Act*, each state is developing its plan for carrying out the law. States are required to involve and consult with parents on the state education plans. These plans should lead to improved academic outcomes and ensure that low-income and minority children are being taught by qualified, experienced teachers and are not subject to disproportionate disciplinary measures.

An overview of the Texas strategic plan is online:

http://tea.texas.gov/About_TEA/Laws_and_Rules/ESSA/Every_Student_Succeeds_Act/.

Ideas and feedback should be submitted by email to: essa@tea.texas.gov.

The following are some considerations by IDRA.

Family Engagement

! Texas must have explicit family engagement activities in its plan that are documented within the accountability system.

The Texas plan makes minimal mention of parent involvement and none of family engagement in spite of the ESSA's call for parent outreach, school-parent compacts, family engagement funding and statewide family engagement centers. Texas recently removed family engagement as a performance indicator from the accountability system.

Recommendations: Texas must have explicit family engagement activities in its plan that are documented within the accountability system. Authentic family engagement must be required and documented, including personal communication with families; opportunities for families to partner with schools to achieve academic success for all students; and detailed reporting of school data and consultation with families about the status of the school's performance.

Student Achievement and College Preparation

! All students – including those who are economically disadvantaged, English learners, migrant, homeless, and those with special needs – must be given high standards and the resources to achieve those standards.

ESSA requires states to assure that they have in place challenging academic content and standards in math, reading and science. And the standards must be aligned with college entrance requirements for

credit-bearing coursework.

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's 60x30TX Plan emphasizes: "Given that the workforce will be more diverse in the future, the challenge is clear: Students of all backgrounds must complete certificates or degrees in larger numbers if the 25- to 34-year-old workforce of Texas is to be globally competitive in 2030."¹ Yet only 10 percent of the poorest eighth-graders in Texas earn a college degree or other post-secondary credential within 11 years. And the state of Texas weakened graduation requirements in 2013 through the passage of endorsement tracks under House Bill 5.

In addition, the state plan only sets our goal for students and subgroups at all grades to reach the 90 percent threshold at the "Approaches" level on STAAR, which means 90 percent of students will be doing well enough to be promoted to the next grade but will struggle without extra help (pág. 11). The plan does not have goals for reaching higher levels on the STAAR.

The state plan only sets a goal of 60 percent of students being on pace for likely success in a post-secondary setting, be it a trade school, community college or four-year university (pág. 10). In addition to concerns about the low goal of 60 percent, students of color and those who are economically disadvantaged are more likely to be steered away from college paths and into vocational (trade school) paths.

All students should be prepared to have options for college. Boys of color and economically disadvantaged students should not be easily diverted to military or low-skill job training. (ESSA makes no mention of schools serving in the role of preparing students for military service.) All fields are valued, but schools should open possibilities rather than deciding on behalf of children what their future should be.

Recommendations: All students – including those who are economically disadvantaged, English learners, migrant, homeless, and those with special needs – must be given high standards and the resources to achieve those standards. The timeline for achievement of the high standards must be accelerated rather than spread out over 10 or more years. And college options should not be denied to students, including by steering students away from college paths or by neglecting to provide high academic content and supports.

English Learner Education



All English learners should become fully proficient in English within four to seven years. The Texas plan talks about a limited percentage over a long span of years.

ESSA instructs states to describe "ambitious" goals for students learning English. But Texas is proposing the goal of only 46 percent of students making progress in achieving English language proficiency by the year 2032 (pg 14). That means in 15 years, the state will only expect to have fewer than half of our English learners (ELs) learning English.

English learners make up one of the fastest-growing segments of the student population, comprising almost one out of five students in the state of Texas. They are not being served well by schools in Texas, particularly in middle and high schools. Only one out of 10 English learners is prepared to go to college. IDRA's 2015 study found that no secondary schools in Texas were consistently exceeding academic benchmarks with ELs.² And Texas is significantly underfunding EL education.

ESSA also requires schools to communicate with parents of EL students, not just with notifications about their child's participation in a bilingual or ESL program, but also regular meetings to respond to recommendations from parents and ensure their child receives a "well-rounded education" and meet the "challenging state academic standards expected of all students." Texas plan does not address this at all.

Recommendations: The goal should be that 100 percent of English learners make progress

toward English proficiency each year and that 100 percent achieve full English proficiency within four to seven years of their initial assessment. And the state’s goals for their academic achievement should be as high and “ambitious” as those for other students. Resources, materials and qualified teachers should be allocated to ensure this progress. The state plan should include consultation and collaboration with parents of EL students regarding language programs, performance and support.

High School Graduation



The Texas plan should put in place strategies for effective dropout prevention and school supports to ensure 100 percent graduation.

ESSA requires states to establish long-term goals for high school graduation rates. The Texas draft plan outlines a long-term statewide goal for the four-year graduation rate at 96 percent to be reached by the year 2027 (pg 13).

ESSA also instructs states to describe how they will identify schools that are failing to graduate at least 67 percent of their students in order to provide comprehensive support. The Texas plan only states that a “trigger” will be established (pg 22) but does not describe what will happen to help these schools improve.

IDRA’s latest analysis indicates that without significant changes, Texas will not reach an attrition rate of zero until 2035-36. At this pace, the state will lose more than 2 million students.³

Among school policies and practices that lead to higher dropout rates are zero tolerance; in-grade retention; low funding and insufficient support for English learners; unfair and insufficient funding; watered-down, non-college prep curricula; and testing that is high-stakes.⁴ Yet some of these policies and practices are not addressed significantly or at all in the state plan.

State efforts to address high school graduation rates should recognize systemic issues that affect student graduation, including teaching quality, curriculum quality and access, student engagement, and parent and community engagement. Schools should incorporate pedagogical changes that enable them to better adapt to the needs and strengths of their students.

Recommendations: The Texas plan should put in place strategies for effective dropout prevention and school supports to ensure 100 percent graduation. Since low graduation rates disproportionately impact racial and ethnic minority students, accelerated efforts by the state to address the issue in these communities is essential. Schools that are failing to graduate most of their students need an intervention sooner than either the Texas plan or ESSA propose.

Discipline



Texas’ new support of restorative discipline practices is a good step. The Texas plan should ensure exclusionary discipline rates are reduced and that affected students are sufficiently supported to a path of high achievement.

ESSA instructs states to describe how they will support schools in reducing overuse of exclusionary discipline, which could include identifying schools with high rates of discipline, disaggregated by student group. The Texas plan outlines work the state is doing to train school personnel in the use of restorative discipline practices (pg 30).

This is a positive development, particularly after IDRA's analysis in 2016 showed disproportionately high disciplinary action rates for students of color and males in Texas. Also, "students as young as six years old were removed from their kindergarten classes and sent to DAEPs for 'discipline' problems."⁵

The Texas Education Agency already collects discipline data through the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS). But the Texas plan does not describe how it will monitor use or impact of restorative discipline practices. And it does not address how they may or may not affect disproportionate rates of exclusionary discipline or strategies for providing educational supports to students referred to disciplinary alternative education programs.

Recommendations: Schools should be carefully monitored to determine rates of exclusionary discipline and use of restorative discipline practices. The state should establish mechanisms for identifying schools with high rates of student discipline, disaggregated by student group (race, ethnicity/national origin, gender, socioeconomic status and language proficiency) and for providing asset-based supports for redirection when necessary.

¹Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (July 23, 2015) *60x30TX – Texas Higher Education Strategic Plan: 2015-2030* (Austin, Texas: THECB). <http://www.theccb.state.tx.us/index.cfm?objectid=5033056A-A8AF-0900-DE0514355F026A7F>

²IDRA. (June 2015). *IDRA José A. Cárdenas School Finance Fellows Program 2015 Symposium Proceedings – New Research on Securing Educational Equity & Excellence for English Language Learners in Texas Secondary Schools* (San Antonio, Texas: IDRA). <http://budurl.com/IDRAellBK15p>

³Johnson, R.L. (October 2016). "Texas' Overall Attrition Rate Inches Up – School Holding Power Improvement Slowed," *Texas Public School Attrition Study, 2015-16* (San Antonio, Texas: IDRA). <http://budurl.com/IDRAatn16p>

⁴IDRA. (November 2016). Infographic: 6 School Policies that Lead to Higher Dropout Rates (San Antonio, Texas: IDRA). <http://budurl.com/IDRA6policies>

⁵Johnson, R.L. (October 2016). "Zero Tolerance Policies Likely Contribute to High Attrition Rates of Black Students and Hispanic Students," *Texas Public School Attrition Study, 2015-16* (San Antonio, Texas: IDRA). <http://budurl.com/IDRAzeroW>