Ready Texas

A Study of HB5 Implementation in Texas and Implications for College Readiness

Policy Brief and Recommendations

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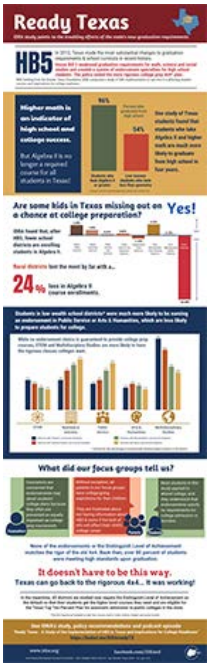

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Ready Texas – A Study of the Implementation of HB5 in Texas and Implications for College Readiness
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Policy Brief and Recommendations

In 2013, the 83rd Texas Legislature established the Foundation High School Program, which allows for significant local variation in graduation planning and represents one of the most substantial changes to Texas curricula in recent history. The new policy (HB5) lowered graduation requirements for mathematics, science and social studies; implemented a new graduation requirement for career readiness, called endorsements; and added a "Distinguished Level of Achievement" designation that closely resembles the previous graduation requirements.

Research conducted by the Intercultural Development Research Association on HB5, Texas' new graduation requirement policy, has concluded that the law has introduced new challenges to achieving greater rates of college access and success in Texas as a whole and for underrepresented populations in particular. Specifically, the loss of Algebra II as a requirement can have far-reaching effects at a time when the previous graduation system was reporting clear and definite gains for underrepresented students in college access and success. This downgrading of requirements is even more problematic considering that: (1) Algebra II is a bare minimum for most universities; and (2) the next course in the higher math sequence, pre-calculus, is correlated to higher achievement in college.

HB5's reforms concentrated around the idea of "choice." Yet the new policy itself is riddled with anti-choice problems. This is so because endorsements have the potential to confound what had been a straightforward college path. Texas endorsement's policy amounts to forcing students to choose a career path in eighth grade (at about 14 years of age) and making decisions that could limit their options later in life. The endorsements have many local variations within that include cosmetology, accounting principles, working in a franchise as well more "college-bound" options. While most student respondents in IDRA's research dismissed the relevance of endorsements, many remember heightened anxiety over having to make such a decision in eighth grade.

The most basic problem with the endorsement concept is that there is no real-life counterpart to this construct, and yet students are being informed that endorsements are like college majors. The language itself is confusing and hides the thinly-veiled misperception that not all students are "meant for college." Regardless of whether that is the case or not, the state of Texas previously succeeded in preparing 80 percent of students for college with four years of math, science, English and social studies (referred to as the "4x4"). Under the 4x4, students would be able to decide if college "was for them" as young adults with a diploma that gave them options, instead of forcing a choice in eighth grade. Curriculum for the 21st century student should prepare all students for an uncertain and possibly chaotic workforce future rather than forcing career choices in eighth grade that could have far ranging limitations on future educational opportunities.

Given this background, how has HB5 implementation affected Texas's students? The research

concluded the following.

- Rural districts lost 24 percent in Algebra II course enrollments in the latest year of HB5 implementation.
- Incremental losses in Algebra II course enrollment has occurred across all secondary grade levels, rather than being limited to 11th grade.
- Forty-five districts studied require the Distinguish Level of Achievement as part of their default graduation plan for their students, thereby mirroring the previous graduation requirements. Losses in Algebra II course enrollment are more pronounced when removing these 45 districts from the analysis.
- Earning endorsements as a graduation requirement is perceived by students and parents as lacking meaning. This is so even with increased, more clear or purposeful information about endorsements.
- Responses by students and parents pointed to a perception that there are no real-life counterparts to endorsements.
- Responses by students and parents pointed to an understanding that there are no real-life counterparts to endorsements.
- Most counselors were concerned that a focus on endorsements by schools may derail students' college plans because endorsements often are inaccurately presented as equally important to college preparatory coursework.
- Counselors reported having to consistently emphasize coursework over endorsements, especially for high-achieving students.
- Parents expressed frustration about not having information about the new law and worried that this lack of information could affect their student's college career.
- Parents understood "traditional" concepts about college requirements, such as good grades, college preparatory courses and SAT/ACT scores but felt there was little clarity around the purpose of endorsements.
- Most parents felt that the communication about this new complex plan was inadequate.
- Even parents who understood endorsements did not see the connection to college aspirations.

Policy Recommendations

- Schools can and should prepare all students to graduate with a rigorous curriculum that enables them to make informed choices about college rather than force eighth-grade students to make choices that will affect their entire educational career.
- At minimum, restoring and improving the 4x4 curriculum should be implemented with additional emphasis placed on increasing Algebra II access and success to eighth-grade students.
- The curriculum should at the very least resemble the minimum requirements for all students have the opportunity for college access and success at top tier colleges.
- Additional funding to support students who may struggle with Algebra II and pre-calculus must be part of restoring Texas' leadership in providing higher rates of mathematics access and success.
- Endorsements as an educational tool or practice should be revised to be career exploration electives rather than pathways. This could mean that all students are required to take electives where many career options are explored in depth throughout middle school and high school, rather than use the concept as a tracking device that limits rather than expands educational options.
- The counselor-to-student ratio needs to be improved so that more counselors can help students explore college options, serve as mentors to smaller groups of students and communicate with parents. Student respondents in one mid-size district described just such a situation where counselors were all aware of student's grades, career goals and even homework assignments. This is not an impossible goal if the state is willing to fund counselors at an appropriate level rather than changing graduation requirements so that fewer students are seen as "needing" college counseling.
- Create multilingual clear parent information resources concerning college and graduation requirements. Parents of all languages repeatedly expressed frustration at the lack of such materials. The quality and content of resources varies greatly by region and districts. The state of Texas needs to invest in this effort.
- Any transition period to restoring an improved 4x4 curriculum from the current situation should include district-level reporting on local choices. For example: Does a district require or recommend students to graduate with the Distinguished Level of Achievement? What are the exact types of courses being offered under each endorsement along with disaggregated enrollment data for such courses that includes race/ethnicity, gender and socio-economic status?

Research Implications

- Continue longitudinal cohort research efforts that study the relationship between student's high school curriculum and post-secondary success.
- Expand qualitative studies to be conducted yearly on a wider scale to understand the full impact of policy changes as schools adjust to the needs of students and parents.
- As part of data collection by TEA, report course success rates, such as for Algebra I, geometry, Algebra II, pre-calculus, and calculus in addition to college success rates. This will enable schools, parents and policymakers to gauge a school's success, provide additional supports and inform further research.
- Study the quality of curriculum available to students across schools, including those placed in alternative education settings and take appropriate action to ensure equity for all students.

The implications of research conducted on HB5 are far-reaching. Even as losses in Algebra II enrollment have been both pronounced and incremental, the long-term effects could be monumental. Before the adoption of HB5 in 2013, Texas's 4x4 plan prepared an increasing number of students for college. In 2013, approximately five out of every six students (83.5 percent) graduated under the Recommended HSP or the Distinguished Achievement Program, compared to just 68 percent nine years earlier (TEA 2013-14 Texas Academic Performance Report-Longitudinal Cohort). As educators, policymakers and communities consider the next steps surrounding this issue, we must take into account gains that took years to accomplish could disappear as we take away student's options and opportunities through the mischaracterized mantra of "choices."

House Bill 5 Background

Timeline

1997-98: Minimum HSP, Recommended HSP & DAP

Students entering the ninth grade in the 1997-98 school year were the first students required to graduate under the Texas' Minimum High School Program (HSP), Recommended HSP or Distinguished Achievement Plan (DAP) (Mellor, Stoker & Reese, 2015). The Recommended HSP and the DAP were designed to more closely align high school coursework with college admission requirements, better preparing all students with the knowledge and credits they would need to pursue college.

2004-05: Default Recommended HSP

The Recommended HSP was established as the standard graduation plan for public high school students (Mellor, Stoker & Reese, 2015).

2006: 4x4

To promote college and career readiness, Texas increased the overall number of credits required for graduation from 24 to 26 with the "4x4" curriculum. The 4x4 required all students to complete four credits each in English, mathematics, science and social studies. This new requirement was incorporated into the Recommended HSP and DAP for incoming freshmen in 2007-08.

Student outcomes under the established graduation plans improved over time in college readiness, high school graduation, college completion and earnings (Mellor, Stoker, & Reese, 2015; IDRA, 2016). Additionally, more students were taking and mastering higher level math courses under the 4x4 system. Schools also saw an overall reduction in the achievement gap between high and low-income students (Wiseman, et al., 2015; IDRA, 2016).

2009: Differentiated Curriculum Tracks

In the 2009 legislative session, a group of policymakers developed an accountability reform plan to go beyond adjusting rating and reporting requirements. Approved reforms included differentiated curriculum tracks, which were created for minimum, college bound, and career-technical students. Minimum, in this case, referred to students who had been retained at least once prior to the 10th grade, and who required parent approval to opt-out of the Recommended HSP. The "career-technical" track diverted students as early as the 11th grade and required fewer and less stringent math and science courses in the upper high school grades. Overall, these changes represented an incremental move toward a tracking system that risked placing minority and low-income students into vocational curricula, while affluent students would still access college prep (Cortez, 2009).

House Bill 5 Background

2013: House Bill 5

House Bill 5 was introduced in Texas' 83rd Legislative Session and in June of 2013, former Texas Governor Rick Perry signed HB5 into law. HB5 replaced the Minimum HSP, Recommended HSP and DAP with the Foundation HSP. Lawmakers stated that the sweeping changes were intended to maintain "rigorous standards" for students bound for college while allowing those not interested in pursuing a college education to focus on career and the technical skills needed for a job after graduation (Stutz, 2014). Additionally, the law reduced the number of state assessments required for graduation (Mellor, Stoker & Reese, 2015).

Under HB5, the commissioner of education was required to transition from the Minimum HSP, Recommended HSP and DAP to the Foundation HSP beginning with the 2014-15 school year. Under the transition plan, students in grades 9-11 in the 2013-14 school year could choose the Minimum HSP, Recommended HSP, DAP, or the new Foundation HSP as their degree plan (Mellor, Stoker & Reese, 2015).

The impetus to change the state's graduation requirements came from two different directions. Some proponents, including some school leaders, felt challenged and ill-equipped to meet accountability requirements that measure how many students graduate and how many are college ready. And some business manufacturing interests felt that too many Texas high school graduates were not sufficiently prepared to go directly into their workplaces. Despite objections by education advocates, communinity leaders and many school leaders, these interests succeeded in convincing the majority of Texas policymakers that schools should not be required to provide a high quality education to all students. (Cortez, 2013)

Side-by-Side Comparison

The Foundation HSP dramatically changed the minimum course requirements for all high schoolers from the former graduation plans available to Texas students (Minimum HSP, Recommended HSP and DAP). Notably, students were no longer required to take four credits in mathematics and science. Additional credits are reflected in the required "endorsements" under the Foundation HSP, for a total of four additional credits.

Exhibit 1: Texas Current and Former Graduation Plan Comparison

Courses	Recommended HSP	Distinguished Achievement Plan (DAP)	Foundation HSP (2013)
English/Language Arts	**4.0:** English I, II, III, IV	**4.0:** English I, II, III, IV	**4.0:** English I, II, III, and an Advanced English Course
Mathematics	**4.0:** Algebra I, Algebra II, Geometry, and a 4th course	**4.0:** Algebra I, Algebra II, Geometry, and a 4th course	**3.0:** Algebra I, Geometry, and an Advanced Mathematics Course
Science	**4.0:** Biology, Chemistry, Physics, and a lab-based course	**4.0**: Biology, Chemistry, Physics, and a lab-based course	**3.0:** Biology, AP Biology, or IB Biology IPC or advanced lab-based science course Advanced lab-based science course, subject to pre-requisites
Social Studies	**3.5:** World History, World Geography, U.S. History since Reconstruction, and U.S. Government (0.5)	**3.5:** World History, World Geography, U.S. History since Reconstruction, and U.S. Government (0.5)	**2.5:** World History or World Geography, U.S. History, U.S. Government (½ credit), economics (½ credit)
Economics	**0.5**	**0.5**	
Languages other than English	**2.0:** Any two levels in the same language	**3.0** Any three levels in the same language	**2.0:** Languages other than English or Computer Science I, II, III
Physical Education	**1.0**	**1.0**	**1.0**
Fine Arts	**1.0**	**1.0**	**1.0**
Electives	**5.5**	**4.5**	**5.0**
Total Credits	**26.0**	**26.0**	**22.0**

The Law: A Summary

Curriculum

The Foundation HSP replaced the Minimum HSP, Recommended HSP, and DAP, with a single, 22-credit school program (plus four endorsement credits). The State Board of Education (SBOE) adopted rules requiring the following:

- 4 credits in English: I, II, III and an advanced English course
- 3+1 credits in mathematics: Algebra I, geometry, and an advanced math course. Plus 1 credit for an endorsement. (Algebra II is required for the Distinguished Level of Achievement and eligibility for the Texas Top Ten Percent Plan.)
- 3+1 credits in science: biology, Integrated Physics & Chemistry or an advanced science course, plus an advanced science course. Plus 1 credit for an endorsement.
- 3 credits in social studies: World History or World Geography, U.S. History, U.S. Government (½ credit), economics (½ credit)
- 2 credits in languages other than English: 2 credits in the same language or 2 credits from Computer Science I, II, III
- 1 credit in physical education
- 1 credit in fine arts
- 5+2 credits in electives. Plus 2 credits for an endorsement.
- Demonstrated proficiency in speech

Courses that are no longer required are: English IV, Algebra II, chemistry, physics, speech, and world history or world geography (which as replaced with choice of either world history or world geography or a combination of the two). Chemistry was replaced with choice of Integrated Physics and Chemistry or other science.

Additionally, the SBOE adopted rules and approved various advanced courses that can be taken to comply with the program's requirements to prepare students to enter the workforce or post-secondary education without remediation. The law requires that the Texas Education Agency (TEA) commissioner adopt a transition plan for replacing the Minimum HSP, Recommended HSP and DAP beginning with the 2014-15 school year and to make allowances for students who were completing their fourth year of high school during the 2014-15 school year to graduate under the Foundation HSP if he or she meets its requirements.

The new curriculum also introduced endorsements: each student must choose one or more of

five endorsements, which require additional core content courses, depending on the endorsement's focus.

Endorsements

Endorsements are "pathways" for students to take in high school that require successfully completing 26 credits to include four math credits, four science credits, and two additional elective credits. Endorsement choices require parent approval and written notice from the student as he or she enters ninth grade.

Performance Acknowledgement

A student can earn a "performance acknowledgement" to be placed on his or her diploma and transcript if he or she:

- had an outstanding performance in a dual credits course, bilingualism and biliteracy, on a college AP test or IB exam, on the PSAT, the ACT-Plan, the SAT, or the ACT.
- earned a nationally- or internationally-recognized business or industry certification or license.

Distinguished Level of Achievement

A student may earn the Distinguished Level of Achievement designation if he or she has completed 26 credits, to include the Foundation HSP requirements plus Algebra II, credits for at least one endorsement, and a fourth advanced science credit.

Career and Technology Education Courses Developed through Local Partnerships

Districts can develop Career and Technology (CTE) courses in partnership with public/private institutions of higher education or local business, labor and community leaders. CTE courses allow students to obtain industry-recognized credentials or certificates.

College Preparatory Courses

TEA is no longer responsible for developing college preparatory courses, placing the responsibility on districts to partner with at least one institution of higher education to develop and provide college preparatory courses in English language arts and math. Credits earned with these courses can be applied to the foundation school program as an advanced credit.

High School Personal Graduation Plan

Essentially, this part of the law requires TEA to provide, in English and Spanish, information on

the advantages of the Distinguished Level of Achievement designation and each endorsement. Additionally, the school must review personal graduation plan options, to include providing information on endorsements and the Distinguished Level of Achievement designation with every student entering the ninth grade and his or her parent or guardian.

Automatic College Admission

HB5 requires that a student must earn the Distinguished Level of Achievement designation under the Foundation HSP to be eligible for automatic admission into a state university upon graduation from high school. HB5 maintains the option of allowing satisfactory performance on the ACT or SAT to meet automatic entry requirements.