



Individual Graduation Committees create equitable options for graduation, especially for Black and Latino students

TLEEC Written Testimony For HB 999: Relating to Individual Graduation Committee Qualification Requirements for Certain Students

Submitted to the House Public Education Committee, March 23, 2021

Dear Chairman Dutton, Vice Chair Lozano, and Honorable Members of the Committee:

The Texas Legislative Education Equity Coalition (TLEEC) is a collaborative of over 20 organizations and individuals with the mission to improve the quality of public education for all children, with a focus on racial equity. We advocate at the local, state, and national levels for high-quality teaching, curriculum and instructional practices, and bilingual education for English learners, as well as fair funding and enhanced college access and success.

TLEEC supports House Bill 999 because it will permit high school students to utilize an individual graduation committee (IGC) without having to meet the performance assessment requirement of failing no more than two end-of-course STAAR exams for the 2020-21, 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years.

Individual graduation committees create equitable options for graduation, especially for Black students, Latino students, and students from households with low incomes for critical school years affected by the ongoing pandemic. Such options are a needed response to the disproportionate harm caused by our current high-stakes testing and accountability system.

Traditional graduation requirements that are tied to performance on standardized assessments, which contain implicit bias in their design, can exacerbate the negative effects of these assessments on Black students and Latino/a students. For example, research around stereotype threat – the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype – demonstrates some ways that Black males, students in high-poverty schools, and students of color bear the brunt of negative test pressure.¹

Moreover, researchers in New Jersey were able to accurately predict student standardized test scores using racial and demographic data.² A continued reliance on standardized tests as an accountability tool with the high-stakes consequence of being a graduation requirement creates and promotes the false racist narrative that students of color and low-income students do not measure up academically.

In fact, standardized tests that contain implicit biases are the problem – not the students. Our students deserve graduation options that go beyond racialized and classed instruments that continue to under-serve and harm them.

¹ Holme, J.J., Richards, M.P., Jimerson, J.B., & Cohen, R.W. (2010). Assessing the Effects of High School Exit Examinations. *Review of Educational Research*, 80(4), 476-526. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654310383147>

Steele, C.M. (1999, August 1). Thin ice: Stereotype threat and Black college students. *The Atlantic*.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1999/08/thin-ice-stereotype-threat-and-black-college-students/304663/>

² Tienken, C.H., Colella, A., Angelillo, C., Fox, M., McCahill, K.R., & Wolfe, A. (2017). Predicting middle level state standardized test results using family and community demographic data. *RMLE Online*, 40(1), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19404476.2016.1252304>

Although current systems of testing and accountability cause disproportionate harm to Black students, Latino students, and students from households with low incomes, all students are impacted by these policies. The pressure and cut-scores of tests with high-stakes accountability consequences have increased the dropout rate, as well as reports of stress-induced illness in children and educators, even as young as elementary school.³

In Texas, testing materials have been replete with errors⁴ and assessment questions misaligned with grade-level learning.⁵ Where standardized tests generally purport to provide information about student learning, they reveal more about other non-school factors.⁶ If the argument to maintain eligibility criteria as they are now rests on the validity of these assessments, research certainly points in the other direction.

For these reasons, TLEEC makes the following recommendations:

- Expand IGC eligibility criteria to include any students that have faced disruption to their studies or learning due to the global COVID-19 pandemic by passing HB 999;
- Eliminate any expiration dates for individual graduation committees by passing HB 1603; and
- Recognize the inequity perpetuated by testing with high stakes consequences on students of color and students from households with low incomes and seek to establish alternative, authentic modes of assessment.

The time is long overdue to provide equitable alternatives to traditional graduation requirements. The expansion of IGC eligibility criteria for the 2020-21, 2021-22, and 2022-23 addresses gaps in equity in current graduation requirements, as well as addresses an ever-growing body of students whose mental health is adversely affected under a high-stakes accountability paradigm, especially during a global pandemic. We urge the Committee to pass HB 999. Thank you for your time.

For questions, please contact TLEEC either through Ana Ramón (ana.ramon@idra.org) or Dr. Chloe Latham Sikes (chloe.sikes@idra.org) at IDRA, or Fátima Menéndez, J.D., at MALDEF (fmenendez@maldef.org).

³ Au, W. (2016). Meritocracy 2.0: High-stakes, standardized testing as a racial project of neoliberal multiculturalism. *Educational Policy*, 30(1), 39-62. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904815614916>

Counsell, S.L., & Wright, B.L. (2018). High-stakes accountability systems: Creating cultures of fear. *Global Education Review*, 5(2), 189-202.

Darling-Hammond, L. (2007). Race, inequality and educational accountability: The irony of 'No Child Left Behind.' *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 10(3), 245-260. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613320701503207>

Lobman, C. (2013). "I feel nervous... very nervous" Addressing test anxiety in inner city schools through play and performance. *Urban Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085913478621>

Nichols, S.L., Glass, G.V., & Berliner, D.C. (2006). High-stakes testing and student achievement: does accountability pressure increase student learning? *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 14(1), 1-172.

⁴ Ayala, E. (2016, April 27). STAAR test question with no right answer among dozens of complaints as Texas school chiefs say results can't be trusted. *The Dallas Morning News*. <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/2016/04/28/staar-test-question-with-no-right-answer-among-dozens-of-complaints-as-texas-school-chiefs-say-results-can-t-be-trusted/>

Chang, J. (2016, September 3). Texas districts document dozens of problems with 2016 STAAR testing. *Austin American-Statesman*. <https://www.statesman.com/NEWS/20160903/Texas-districts-document-dozens-of-problems-with-2016-STAAR-testing>

⁵ Szabo, S., & Sinclair, B. (2012). STAAR reading passages: The readability is too high. *Schooling*, 3(1), 14.

Szabo, S., & Sinclair, B. (2019). Readability of the STAAR test is still misaligned. *Schooling*, 10(1). <http://www.nationalforum.com/Electronic%20Journal%20Volumes/Szabo,%20Susan%20Readability%20of%20STARR%20is%20%20Misaligned%20Schooling%20V10%20N1.2019.pdf>

⁶ Amrein, A.L., & Berliner, D.C. (2002). High-stakes testing, uncertainty, and student learning. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 10(0), 18. <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v10n18.2002>

Au, W. (2016). Meritocracy 2.0: High-stakes, standardized testing as a racial project of neoliberal multiculturalism. *Educational Policy*, 30(1), 39-62. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904815614916>

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TLEEC Member Organizations

ARISE Adelante	Texas American Federation of Teachers
American GI Forum, Miguel Hernandez Jr. Memorial Chapter	Texas Association for Bilingual Education (TABE)
Breakthrough Central Texas	Texas Association for Chicanos in Higher Education (TACHE)
Coalition of Texans with Disabilities (CTD)	Texas Association of Mexican American Chambers of Commerce (TAMACC)
Easterseals Central Texas	Texas Center for Education Policy, University of Texas – Austin
Every Texan	Texas Hispanics Organized for Political Education (HOPE)
Houston Community Voices for Public Education	Texas League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC)
Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA)	Texas NAACP
McNeil Educational Foundation for Ecumenical Leadership	UnidosUS (formerly known as NCLR)
Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF)	
Mexican American School Board Members Association (MASBA)	
National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies (NACCS) – Tejas Foco	