

Gov. Perry Signs Landmark Education Reform Bill Into Law

By Mike Meroney, Jobs for Texas coalition

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Joined by jubilant students, parents, business representatives, lawmakers and officials who oversee the workforce and education in Texas, Gov. Rick Perry signed into law a high-profile public education bill on June 10th that overhauls graduation requirements and reduces high-stakes standardized testing.

After months of lengthy committee hearings and contentious behind-the-scenes negotiations, Perry signed House Bill 5 – what many lawmakers hailed as one of the 83rd Texas Legislature’s most important bills. Authored by House Public Education Chairman Jimmie Don Aycock (R-Killeen), the conference committee report passed both chambers unanimously.

Along side Aycock and Senate Education Chairman Dan Patrick (R-Houston) at the bill signing ceremony, Perry said the measure reflected an “appropriate balance between a need for rigorous academics and flexibility”. He added, “Texas refuses to dilute our academic standards in any way because they are working.”

Texas Education Commissioner Michael Williams said the legislation would help move Texas toward becoming a national leader in career and technology education (CTE).

Applauding Gov. Perry and the legislature, Texas Construction Association President and CEO Raymond Risk said, “By providing many more opportunities for high school students, the bill will have a profound effect preparing them for post-secondary educational or career pursuits.” Risk said that the law “continues high school academic rigor yet provides greater flexibility for students and their parents to craft a viable pathway to a diploma.”

Graduation Plans

Starting with the 2014-15 school year, high school students will take a “foundation” curriculum of 22 credits, including four English credits; three credits each in science, social studies and math; two foreign language credits; one fine arts and one P.E. credit; and five elective credits.

The law allows students to earn an additional “endorsement” in one of five areas: STEM (science, technology, engineering and math), Business and Industry, Public Services, Arts and Humanities and Multidisciplinary Studies. Each endorsement will require students to earn a total of 26 credits, which includes an additional flexible math credit, flexible science credit and two additional electives.

All students must select an endorsement but may opt for only completing the foundation plan after grade 10 with parental consent. The law requires all students to have a personal graduation plan developed with their parents and local educators that promotes college and workforce readiness. In addition, the State Board of Education (SBOE) must approve at least six advanced CTE courses by September of 2014 to count as a 4th year math credit.

HB 5 allows local school districts to partner with community colleges and industry to develop rigorous courses that address workforce needs, provide technical training and count towards math and science credits for graduation. And school districts are directed to partner with higher

education to provide developmental education courses during the senior year in math and English for college-bound students not demonstrating college readiness at the end of 11th grade.

The bill maintains a “distinguished” diploma for students. To earn the distinguished level, students must complete the requirements of the foundation program, an endorsement and earn an Algebra II credit. Students completing the distinguished level are eligible for college admission under the Top 10% automatic admissions provision. All high school graduates, regardless of diploma level, will now be eligible to: 1) apply for admission to Texas public four-year universities, and 2) receive a TEXAS Grant.

Assessments

HB 5 reduces the number of required end-of-course assessments from fifteen to five. Students will now meet their graduation assessment requirement by passing English Language Arts (ELA) I, ELA II, Algebra I, biology and US History. The ELA tests are combined into one assessment instead of separate reading and writing tests. School districts are allowed (at their discretion) to administer English III and Algebra II assessments for diagnostic purposes only.

Also eliminated: the requirement that end-of-course assessments determine fifteen percent of a student’s course grade. Clear graduation requirements are established for students and parents by eliminating the cumulative score requirement. HB 5 provides for transparency by requiring the STAAR exams to be released to the public, and allows satisfactory performance on Advanced Placement exams, SAT and ACT exams to satisfy graduation requirements. Under HB 5, testing vendors (retained counsel or employees) may not serve on any TEA panel or advisory committee (either formal or informal), and cannot participate in SBOE elections, or donate to candidates.

Accountability

Under the new law, school districts will get an A through F rating, while campuses will remain under the existing exemplary, recognized, acceptable and unacceptable labels. And schools are evaluated on more measures than just state standardized assessments by requiring at least three additional indicators of academic performance, like: percentage of students graduating with endorsements or distinguished level of performance; number of students earning college credit; and number of students earning workforce certificates.

HB 5 establishes a three-category rating system that evaluates schools on academic performance, financial performance and community and student engagement. And TEA is directed to release all three ratings at the same time to provide a clearer understanding of overall school performance. Local communities are allowed to engage in the accountability process by requiring districts to set goals and evaluate performance locally in addition to state ratings.

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During the 83rd Texas Legislature, Mike Meroney (www.MeroneyPublicAffairs.com) worked with Jobs for Texas – a broad-based business coalition of 22 industry trade organizations representing more than 300,000 Texas employers and over six million Texas jobs. The coalition’s mission was to advocate for meaningful education reforms that allow students to explore their individual talents and interests as they prepare for higher education and the workforce. The group supported the development of rigorous courses, programs and graduation plans that reflect the Texas economy and will keep all students engaged in school.