

The Accountability Experiment Has Failed: It's Time to End the Test-Based System in Texas Education

By A. Patrick Huff, Ph.D.

Prior to 1992 public schools in Texas were not graded, and their worthiness was not assessed based on one state mandated standardized test. The notion of school failure due to testing outcomes did not exist. What was the impetus behind moving the education system, where students were held accountable, to an education system where teachers, schools and school districts were held accountable?

In 1983 President Reagan commissioned a report to judge what the threats were to the United States in terms of the nation's public education system. That report was titled *A Nation at Risk*.

A Nation at Risk (1983) is a report that had far-reaching consequences for U.S. public education. It famously declared that the nation was "at risk" due to a "rising tide of mediocrity" in schools, spurring a movement toward standards-based reforms, increased testing, and eventually high-stakes accountability systems.

The key issue from the report was, who is to be held accountable? Rather than focusing on student responsibility, the reforms emphasized performance metrics for teachers, schools, and districts—primarily measured through standardized testing. Ten years later, Texas embarked on a grand experiment: an "Accountability System" that would evaluate schools based primarily on standardized test scores. Promoted to ensure educational quality and close achievement gaps, this model has now dominated Texas education for over three decades. It is time to admit the obvious truth — the system has failed. Outcomes Based Education has been a tragic failure. It has not improved overall academic outcomes, it has distorted educational priorities, and it has demoralized educators and students alike. Texas must abandon the Accountability System as the primary measure of a school's effectiveness if the education system is to return to a well-respected institution. The teacher must be put back in charge of their classroom, and the students must take responsibility for their learning.

Grading schools based on student outcomes on the state assessment led to several unintended consequences, that will be listed later in this article. The key question for this article, however, is has the Accountability System produced the kind of results it was hoped to have achieved? Even more important to ask is, should the Accountability System continue as the primary standard on which the public schools of Texas are measured?

It should be noted that the Accountability System in Texas is now in its 33rd year. By all accounts schools in Texas should be thriving, if we were judging this model for school accountability by any measure of success that one might apply to business. The statistics should prove that through a series of iterations of testing models, the system has emerged as the envy of the world and

Texas students should be leading the way in industry, business, and technology. Sadly, this is not the case. Would any business continue with the same model for steady growth if the outcomes for the company were flat, or worse, declining? I think not.

In looking at student progress through the years, a closer look at how Texas students are performing when compared with other students in other states is needed. One of the gold standards for judging student success, from a national perspective, is the NAEP, (National Assessment of Educational Progress). The statistics are damning. Despite decades of high-stakes testing and accountability, Texas students' performance on national benchmarks like the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), SAT, and ACT has remained flat — or, in some cases, declined. In 1992, before the Accountability System was in full force, 4th-grade students in Texas scored an average of 213 on the NAEP reading test. In 2022, they scored an average of 216 — a minuscule three-point gain over 30 years, despite billions of dollars spent on test preparation, "interventions," and punitive accountability measures. For 8th-grade reading, scores have stagnated around 260 since the early 2000s'.

SAT and ACT scores tell a similar story. In 1995, Texas students' average SAT score was 993 (on the old 1600 scale). In 2023, after adjusting for the recentered scale, Texas students' average SAT score was 1002 — effectively no meaningful change after decades of intense test-driven schooling. The ACT paints an even bleaker picture: the average composite ACT score for Texas students fell to 19.8 in 2023, down from 20.7 a decade earlier. Rather than lifting student performance, the system has coincided with a long, slow decline.

While the intention behind shifting accountability away from the student and more toward the teacher and school in general, was to improve outcomes, the result has been mixed at best. Some gains in basic proficiency occurred, especially in younger grades, but overall long-term educational outcomes, like critical thinking, college readiness, or equity, have not improved as dramatically as hoped.

The question of equity is important. If students, teachers, and schools are to be graded by a one-size fits all standardized test, the playing field is far from equitable. Stating the obvious is needed here to drive home the point that the people's tax dollars are supporting a highly inequitable and discriminatory system. Our politicians who support this system, that gives letter grades to schools based primarily on how the students performed on the state test, are supporting inequity and discrimination. It's a well-known fact that students who come from poverty have a much more difficult time performing well on the state test than students who grow up in affluent neighborhoods. Both sets of students take the same test. The differences are profound. Can we call this discrimination? I think we can.

There is a favorite expression that politicians and bureaucrats who push this inequitable system like to use to put opponents off guard. They say, "Never give in to the soft bigotry of lowered expectations." The first person who used that expression, that I'm aware of, was George W. Bush as he was promoting his No Child Left Behind education bill. It has later been used by Mike Morath, Commissioner of Education in Texas, as he was bringing in his A-F grading system for the schools. Plain and simple, the system discriminates against schools located in neighborhoods of poverty and our politicians in Austin continue to keep this system intact. Why?

Could it be the billions of dollars that flow through the state coffers from lobbyist and corporations who stand to benefit financially from the system? That would be a good place to look if one was trying to understand why the current education agenda continues. It's time, however, to admit the failure. How many more students are going to be forced to endure this system of endless benchmark testing and high stakes pressure? How many more teachers are going to be forced to teach to the test so their evaluation can reflect a higher percentage of their students passing? How many more neighborhoods are going to be shamed due to their local school not being perceived as good as another school located in a different neighborhood?

Circling back to the unintended consequences of high stakes testing that was mentioned earlier, the stakes are even higher for the teaching profession and the health and wellness of the children. Here are four of the most prominent consequences for choosing to remain in this toxic education system:

1. **Teaching to the Test:** The curriculum is narrowed. Enrichment is out. Teaching just to those elements that will be seen on the test is the primary focus. As the testing date approaches, teachers are forced to concentrate on what is termed "the bubble kids." These are students who are close to passing the test but need extra time from the teacher. Those students who have no chance of passing are given busy work. Students who the teacher knows will have no problem passing the test are given enrichment activities. Yes, this happens, and it happens every year.
2. **Lowered Standards:** In some cases, standards and tests were simplified to avoid sanctions, which can lead to a system that prioritizes minimum proficiency over academic excellence. This is demonstrated with Algebra I. The passing cut score had to be lowered to 37 to not have massive failure.
3. **Stress and Burnout:** Educators are under constant pressure to raise scores, often without the resources or support needed to address deep-rooted inequities. This has led to a teacher shortage of immense numbers. Teachers are quitting the profession and colleges of education at universities are not seeing the usual high numbers of students wanting to go into the teaching profession.
4. **Student Disengagement:** With the focus shifted away from students as active participants in their own education, motivation, and the drive to excel can diminish in the older students. The mental health of the younger students must be constantly monitored. The stress placed on our littles is un-conscionable and borders on child abuse. It is proven that the abundance of screen time is detrimental to a child's mind and mental well-being. Get rid of the electronic tablets.

What needs to happen to begin to save the public education system. First those in positions of influence must admit the Accountability Experiment embarked on in 1992 has been a huge failure. After that, several corrective measures must occur.

1. A system of grading and measuring schools based on state testing outcomes must be outlawed.
2. A new curriculum is needed built around classical learning that is horizontally and vertically aligned.
3. Classroom authority over how the curriculum is taught must return to the teacher.

4. Teachers need to be supported by administrators so that order and proper decorum can be regained, and the classroom environment is once again conducive for learning.
5. Technology being used as a replacement for the teacher must cease. Textbook, paper, pen, and pencil is once again needed.
6. A new type of candidate is needed for high office. Men and women who will stand up for what is right must come forward. The Republican Party has failed our children. This does not mean that Democrats would do any better. The education system has been devastated by both parties. New thinking is needed. Courage to face the old guard is needed and to say *no more*. Those politicians that caved into Governor Abbott with his threats, must now be seen as mere puppets of the Governor. They will continue the same education agenda that is now cemented into the current Republican platform. Candidates who run must pledge to strive to remove the Accountability System. They must understand its failure.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the lack of substantial progress in Texas public schools over the past 33 years points to a huge failure in policy and practice. Since the introduction of The Accountability System in 1992, and 42 years after *A Nation at Risk*, this grand experiment must come to an end. Despite decades of standardized testing, performance metrics, and punitive measures, the system has failed to deliver equitable educational outcomes or meaningful academic improvement across diverse student populations. Instead, it has perpetuated a culture of teaching to the test, narrowed curricula, and disproportionately penalized under-resourced schools and communities. The persistent achievement gaps, stagnant performance indicators, and rising teacher attrition are clear evidence that the current system is not only ineffective but also detrimental to the broader goals of public education. To truly support student learning and empower educators, Texas must turn to tried and true models of effective learning strategies. Abolishing The Accountability System is not just a policy shift—it is a necessary step toward a more just and effective educational future.

Texas' education system is at a turning point, especially with the recent approval of education vouchers. This policy shift has the potential to reshape public education, and take Outcomes Based Education, and teaching to the test into the private and home schools. For this reason, lawmakers who support the current thinking in Austin must be voted out of office. If the current political establishment lacks the courage to challenge entrenched interests, then new leadership is not just desirable; it's essential.

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His awareness and insight into the domination of testing in today's public schools and the unrealistic mandates of No Child Left Behind law, led him to write The Takeover of the Public School System in America: The Agenda to Control Information and Knowledge Through the Accountability System, 2015.

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