

Talk

about Today's Public Schools

Editor's Note:

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Texas school children deserve an accountability system that is fair, flexible, and understandable

The following is a copy of the comments that were submitted by NISD Superintendent John Folks to the Select Committee on Public School Accountability at the April 14 San Antonio meeting.

Good afternoon. I'm John Folks, superintendent of Northside Independent School District. Thank you for the opportunity to speak about what is one of the most pressing issues facing public education today, and thank you all for your commitment to Texas public education.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with my district, Northside ISD is the fourth largest school district in the state, and our enrollment, now at about 85,500, is growing by about 3,000 students a year. We are extremely proud of our diversity – about 63 percent of students are Hispanic, about 8 percent are African American and about 25 percent are white. About 46 percent of our students are classified as economically disadvantaged.

Our diversity and our growth certainly provide us with many challenges, but that just makes our accomplishments all the more gratifying. In 2005, Northside was the first district in the state to receive the HEB Excellence in Education Award. In 2006, Northside was the largest district in the state to receive a Recognized rating. And in 2007, Northside was named one of five finalists in the nation for the prestigious Broad Prize for Urban Education.

I am here today to implore you to help in the creation of an accountability system that is fair, flexible, and understandable.


Acknowledge large, diverse districts

You just heard me recount all of Northside's recent successes. So you can understand that there was great frustration and disappointment when NISD received an Academically Acceptable rating last year. Northside was judged on 34 out of 36 total indicators, and we missed the Recognized rating by one indicator – the economically disadvantaged subgroup in science. Juxtapose that with the fact that the state's 27 Exemplary districts enroll an average of 800 students and are judged on an average of just nine indicators because of their small size and homogenous demographics. To be Exemplary, Northside would have to hit the marks on four times as many indicators. Plain and simple, the current accountability system is discriminatory and unfair toward large, diverse districts. I fully support a proportional model that rates a district based on the number of indicators for which it is judged.

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Because, in reality, Northside's Academically Acceptable rating doesn't paint a representative picture of what is going on in the District. Though Northside didn't meet the Recognized standard, the district did make improvements at every grade level and every subject area that is subject to accountability. In addition, the indicator issue adds a great amount of complexity to the accountability system, and makes the ratings very difficult to explain to parents and community members. Many educators even have a hard time grasping it. Transparency is critical to the success of the accountability system and to those who must abide by it.

Recognize test score growth

To help make a rating system more representative of the level of success – or failure – that is occurring in districts and campuses, I urge you to develop an accountability system that gives credit for growth and improvement in student test scores. There are numerous campuses and districts across the state that haven't reached Recognized or Exemplary status but are making real and significant progress toward that mark. Instead, the majority of Texas school districts are lumped in the Academically Acceptable category, which doesn't differentiate between a borderline failure campus and a campus that just missed Recognized status based on the performance of one student. Schools and districts should be given credit for reaching specific benchmarks.

Make appropriate comparisons

In addition, campuses and districts should be compared with campuses and districts with similar demographics. It is impossible to make an apples-to-apples comparison between Northside, with 85,500 students, and Sweet Home ISD with 93 students, none of whom are enrolled in grades 9 through 12. Or what about a Highland Park, that has not one single economically disadvantaged student? Yet, the current accountability system makes it completely legitimate to draw comparisons – and ultimately false conclusions – between districts that have very little in common. The only way to truly gauge the success of a campus is to compare it with another campus that has a similar population and therefore faces similar challenges.

Give educators diagnostic tools for success

I also urge you to consider an accountability system that takes a diagnostic approach to school and student improvement. Instead of dinging campuses and districts for missing the mark, provide them with an analysis and inform them of the specific areas that need to be addressed. Some districts have the ability to make their own diagnoses, but those districts that don't have the funding, the staffing, or the capability to do so should not be further penalized. Let's develop a less punitive accountability system and instead tell districts where they need to focus their attention and require an action plan to be included in a School Improvement Plan.

In summary, I am making an appeal for an accountability system that is fair, flexible, and understandable. Though I am sometimes critical of the current accountability system, I take its consequences very seriously, and I challenge you to find a district more committed than Northside to attaining success under its requirements. I want, expect, and demand accountability.

However, just as you continually raise the bar of success for us, I ask you to do the same for the accountability system. State legislators already have acknowledged there is room for improvement and I urge you to set the bar high. Let's make a sincere effort to create a transparent accountability system that truly is committed to student achievement.

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