

# Talk

## about Today's Public Schools

**Editor's Note:**

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### ***A one-size-fits-all graduation plan is not in the best interest of Texas***

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The Texas Legislature is currently engaged in an important debate about the requirements for graduation from high school and every Texas citizen, teacher, parent and student ought to pay attention.

Under the current Texas plan, students are offered three "levels" of diploma called minimum, recommended and distinguished. The recommended and distinguished plans allow for limited flexibility and both require the "4x4" curriculum of four courses each in math, science, social studies and language arts. These two plans also mandate at least two years of a language other than English and a minimum of 26 credits in order to graduate.

What we have seen as students strive to meet these plans is that many cannot get it done in the regular school year without sacrificing courses in areas where they have a particular interest. There are many examples of this kind of student such as:

- A musically talented student who wants to take marching band all four years of high school and be in the jazz band his/her junior and senior years likely does not have room in the schedule to meet the requirements of the recommended or distinguished diploma plan.
- A student who wants to be an HVAC technician after high school as a way to pay for college likely cannot take enough career and technology course work to achieve a certification and still graduate under the recommended plan.

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- A student who is gifted in journalism and language arts and likely can be successful in a college program of this type, might struggle in mathematics and cannot complete four years of math including Algebra 2 and a course beyond Algebra 2.

It is a shame that these talented students are unable to fully pursue their interests. The rationale behind the creation of these plans was to increase “rigor.” Many leaders in both politics and business have pushed for Texas to have more strict graduation standards.

Interestingly, while we have used the word “rigor” to describe a general rise of standards, the actual definition includes the phrases, “the quality of being unyielding or inflexible” and “a condition that makes life difficult, challenging or uncomfortable.”

**In other words, there is a fine line between raising standards for everyone and becoming inflexible to the point of harming students like those mentioned above.**

The minimum graduation plan requires a parent, student and school official to agree that the other two plans cannot be met. We have students graduating in our state every year on the minimum plan after taking difficult courses and earning high grades. They simply were not interested in four courses in each core academic area. This plan also guarantees that the student cannot be granted admission to a four-year college or university in the state upon graduation.

The Texas House recently approved House Bill 5 by a margin of 145-2. As currently written, HB 5 would serve to create a foundation diploma that all students would be expected to meet and offers several endorsements in areas such as business and industry; science, technology, engineering and math; public services; and the arts and humanities. The bill also allows a student to take and earn credit toward graduation for highly rigorous career and technology courses. The bill received widespread support among educators and several business groups that are experiencing a need for skilled labor as the Texas economy continues to grow and diversify.

However, despite all of the positives tied to the ideas in HB 5, there appears to be a battle brewing in the Texas Senate over these thoughts. Those who have and continue to argue for increased standards in the name of “rigor” are pushing back against the additional flexibility contained in the House bill.

**It is interesting to me that some of the individuals and businesses who now argue for keeping the rigidity of the 4x4 curriculum for all students stood by silently as over \$5 billion was cut from public education two years ago. These same people and groups now seem to have a keen interest in education in Texas.**

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Chief among those who say that HB 5 is a “step back from rigor” is the President of the Texas Association of Business, Bill Hammond. Mr. Hammond is a former legislator who evidently has the ear of some in state leadership and he regularly writes editorial pieces regarding public education.

Hammond wrote about this issue in the Express News on March 29 and bemoaned what he believes will be lost from the educational gains made in our state that are due, in his mind, to the 4x4 curriculum. Ironically, Mr. Hammond has spent much of his frequent newspaper space in the last few years telling anyone who will listen what a failure public education in Texas has become. Now that some flexibility might be offered to students and families in their high school course offerings, Hammond wants to point out the progress made in student achievement. This strikes me as situational ethics at best and, more likely, outright hypocrisy.

There has been a lot of talk about “choice” regarding education in our state during this legislative session. **The Senate now has the opportunity to provide choice to millions of students at little or no cost by allowing them to follow a sequence of courses that interests them.** What we have come to see in our state with the 4x4 curriculum is indeed rigorous; however, it is rigor narrowly defined.

We often hear about the need for critical thinking in our schools and I could not agree more with this desire. I also know that all of us are much more likely to think critically and deeply about something we care about than a topic around which we see no relevance. I do not believe that students should be able to design their entire course plan – even in high school. There is clearly some essential knowledge that is important to an informed citizenry.

However, I also believe that a one-size-fits-all graduation plan is not in the best interest of our students or, ultimately, of our state.

