

TAMSA Testimony Finance Commission

My name is Theresa Treviño and I am President of TAMSA (Texans Advocating for Meaningful Student Assessment). Members of the Finance Commission, thank you for inviting TAMSA to testify today. It is a privilege to speak before you and share our concerns with assessment and finance.

Talking point #1: Texas needs to allocate more of its public education budget to teaching and less to state standardized tests.

TAMSA has witnessed the confluence to two disastrous trends in Texas public education: the increase in the number and costs for state standardized tests and the decrease of public funds allocated to public education. This means that while our public schools are getting less funds from the state, the testing companies are getting more. This is a dire misallocation that this Commission can fix. We need to ensure that our scarce public dollars are first and foremost allocated to teaching our children.

TAMSA believes that the State has been blinded by testing companies that have promised to design and implement Texas-specific standardized tests to show how schools are performing. After a thorough review of these state-specific standardized tests, I can tell you that they are greatly flawed in their design and that their implementation has resulted in classrooms being turned into testing pods. The State keeps giving enormous amounts of money to testing companies while decreasing the amount of money that it gives to schools. From 2000-2015, the State spent around \$1.1 billion on state-designed standardized tests. That amount of money could have been used to hire 1277 teachers every year across the state over that same period.

Moreover, all school districts are forced to spend their limited resources just on the administration of these state standardized tests. Campuses are on lock-down for days, additional classroom monitors are hired, and students will need to attend remediation classes if they don't perform well enough.

Districts pay for these services, if they can, because they are under tremendous pressure from the legislature and TEA to show high test scores. We have a school accountability system that puts schools at risk of being closed if their students don't reach a certain score on these state tests. Too much emphasis is placed on these state tests.

TAMSA is here to request a re-allocation of public education dollars. Let's look at practical measures to reduce the state dollars that are going to testing companies. For example, there are national standardized tests that could be used. Also, Texas still imposes more tests than are required by federal law; we can cut costs by

reducing the number of standardized tests. Less public funds to testing companies; more funds for teachers and real learning.

Talking Point #2: TAMSA strongly opposes any finance system based on performance on standardized testing.

Parents support reasonable assessments that are used as intended - to check where students are in their academic achievement, to aid instruction, and to highlight a student's strengths and weaknesses. Standardized tests are being used to do a wide variety of things they were not designed to do. They are the basis and constitute almost all of our accountability system. They determine whether students will pass to the next grade or graduate from high school. They determine the "grade" a school and a school district get. Now, you want to fund or further limit funds based on these scores?

Here are just a few reasons why we oppose that plan:

- 1) These tests aren't measuring what students know. They are designed to "sort" students. If a test question is answered correctly or incorrectly by most students, it is thrown out because it limits that question's ability to "sort." We are forcing a curve on these tests rather than truly measuring what students have learned. For Texas to base "ratings" and funding on a misused assessment is a travesty.
- 2) The arbitrary setting of cut scores also complicates the issue. With the new accountability system, the Commissioner will be setting higher cut scores to meet the new performance standards. The cut scores are made after the test is taken and the Commissioner has reviewed of the results. This mechanism gives much power to the Commissioner to fund schools in an outcomes-based finance system.
- 3) Students and schools that struggle most on the state assessments are often those in greatest need of additional funding to compensate for students from families living in poverty, learning a new language, or who have a learning difference. Are we seriously going to fund a school less because it is in greater need?

As a child psychiatrist, I am intimately aware that children develop at their own pace. The three common cognitive measures psychologists assess to understand brain development are processing speed, working memory, and fluid reasoning. A child has no control over how quickly these measures are developed, just as a child cannot control how quickly they will reach their adult height. There is variation among the human population. We assert that tying funding to outcome measures such as test scores would make about as much sense as tying funding of education to height achievement by students.

However, just as one can eat a nutritious diet to achieve his or her full height, interventions do exist to help foster cognitive development from an early age.

One study (Finn, et. al.) found that education practices that try to influence test scores, such as test prep, have limited effect on development of cognitive skills. Improvement on standardized tests scores instead reflect crystallized knowledge, knowledge that comes from prior learning or past experiences. They do not reflect fluid knowledge, the ability to think and reason abstractly and solve problems. The nutritious diet that Texas students need is one of project-based learning and other hands-on relevant learning. That would be a far better investment than pouring money into standardized tests and funding schools based on how they do on these faulty tests.

A free and public education is a constitutional right for all Texans and the finance of it should not be subject to the whims of a test score or the setting of that score. We urge the Texas legislature to utilize the dollars allocated to education more prudently by limiting testing to the minimum level required under federal law and utilize more meaningful, age-appropriate tests, lessening the burdens surrounding testing such as high stakes, and not tie funding to any metric utilizing standardized test scores.

References:

1. Cost of STAAR/EOC: document prepared by TAMSA
2. "Independent Evaluation of the Validity and Reliability of STAAR Grades 3-8 Assessment Scores: Part 1." *Human Resources Research Organization*, 2016.
3. Finn, Amy S. "Cognitive Skills, Student Achievement Tests, and Schools." *Association for Psychological Science*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2014, pp. 736-744.