

# *The Quorum Report*

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## TESTIMONY CHALLENGES THE CONCEPT OF SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY

### Hearing on accountability system shifts focus from schools to students.

Monday's hearing of the *Select Committee on Public School Accountability* in Houston raised the toughest question Texas educators and lawmakers have to face: What exactly does it mean to leave no child behind, and what commitment is this state and its school districts willing to make to get every student to a diploma?

The committee's invited testimony focused on charter schools committed to dropout recovery. These are the schools that deal primarily with students who either dropped out or were pushed out of the system by their failure or the failure of their schools.

**Richard Marquez** was the *Department of Education's* first dropout czar. He's now the president of the *Texas CAN Academies*. If education is viewed as inputs and outputs, then Marquez's testimony focused on what a dropout recovery charter school may need to do for students that the traditional high school does not.

"I'm not saying we don't want to be held accountable, but maybe you should be giving more points for growth than you do at the present time," Marquez said. "Look at who you give me and check me on what I do with them. I keep them in the school and off the streets and out of people's homes, out of your homes. The alternative school system is intended to be the safety net for our children. There are no new ways of teaching, no new pedagogical approaches. I'm sorry. It just takes some good old-fashioned hard work, but it also takes time and effort."

The truth is the state's accountability system and the *No Child Left Behind Act* were not intended to guarantee student success. Instead, the system was created to measure – and, depending on your viewpoint, punish – schools or districts that are unable to meet a state standard for success. So it's not surprising that Co-Chair **Sen. Florence Shapiro** (R-Plano) would raise the question: Why should dropout recovery charter schools be given any more latitude on accountability than traditional schools if both schools are teaching similar populations and the dropout recovery charter school is unable to produce student achievement gains?

But the invited testimony of the dropout recovery charter schools – and the comments from community leaders with that *The Metropolitan Organization* – turn that theory on its head. What if the No Child Left Behind Act is actually about the child? What would it mean to pledge whatever resources and time it takes to make sure every child succeeds, no matter what the reason is for failure?

When you sign onto a dropout recovery charter, you understand it may take 1 adult for every 6 students or 1 counselor for every 90 students, Marquez said. You might spend as much time on personal challenges – poverty or pregnancy – as you do on class work. You might even agree to take a child back four, five or even six times after you kick them out of school, even though you know every single time that student leaves, he’s counted as a dropout against the school, Marquez said.

Dropout recovery charters simply want more time and more credit for the progress they make, Marquez said. Marquez said his schools would never meet *No Child Left Behind’s Adequate Yearly Progress*, but 932 students graduate from CAN Academies who ultimately passed the *Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills*.

“We have 932 kids whose whole lives have definitely changed because of what we’ve done. You can’t put a dollar figure on those kind of issues,” Marquez said. “On this alternative school issue, we know they have to exist. They must exist. We might have 10 percent gifted-and-talented in the system, and we have 1 teacher for every 10 children, but we’re unwilling to do that with the children who have the greatest needs, because they’re not pretty. They have pimples. A lot of people don’t like them. Their parents don’t like them. So they’re not worth that kind of expense.”

Dropout recovery charters face other challenges. For instance, students may be 18, 19 or 20 years old, but federal *Title I funding* does not recognize anyone over the age of 17 for purposes of funding, *Winfrey Academy* Founder **Melody Chalkley** said. Alternative charter schools take all the risks and sometimes fail to reap the benefits, either on the funding side or in the accountability rating system. And Chalkley agreed that many public schools also do the same.

The *Select Committee on Public School Accountability* has talked a lot about *growth models* to recognize a school’s gains in the face of tougher challenges. As one witness pointed out at Monday’s hearing, picking up three grade levels in reading in a year is still success, even if the student continues to fall another three grade levels behind his peers. In most cases, current testing will label that child and that child’s school a failure, which is one reason why lawmakers are looking at giving credit for incremental gains a school makes.

The difficulty of addressing that with the Texas accountability system is that school success always has been based on student performance. A school is rated acceptable – or better – when all students make a prescribed amount of progress within the span of a school year. To add into that equation the difficulty of the students being taught complicates, even more, a system based on layers upon layers of testing.

Is to say the students are difficult to teach an explanation or an excuse? In the minds of those who crafted the system, it’s often considered an excuse.

Testimony for *The Metropolitan Organization* also challenged assumptions about whether the current system works. A panel of TMO members, led by **Father Kevin Collins**, talked about the common concerns raised around the state's high-stakes testing: children turned into "stressed-out widgets;" teachers who narrow the curriculum to teach to the test and eventually choose to leave what becomes a joyless job altogether; and the use of a single test to judge the quality of both child and school. A Jeff Davis High School senior talked about the shame he and his sister felt when they passed their classes but still failed the test.

Commissioner of Higher Education **Raymund Paredes** and **Sandy Kress** both challenged TMO members on what they saw as a proposal to lower the standards for students. A test that doesn't measure competence has no usefulness, Paredes told the panel. That drew some angry responses from the community members.

"People send their children to school for testing which does not give an adequate indication of the value of that child or what that child is able to learn," Trinity United Methodist Church Senior Pastor **Robert McGee** told Paredes. "This testing process... it seems as though this test is driving education and what we are saying, 'If it's a high-stakes test, take a second look at how it's administered.'"

The TAKS administration is putting students, teachers and principals under tremendous stress, McGee said. Maybe it's time to look at how the test is administered and judge whether the state is getting the results it wants out of it.

Like the alternative charter schools, TMO members said they were not rejecting standards or accountability. Instead, they were asking the panel to think outside the box in terms of how tests were administered to students; whether the current format of the test narrowed school instruction; and what might be a better system that could be diagnostic and helpful rather than punitive and leading to dropouts.

The underlying message of both the community members and the alternative charter schools was that the state was leaving children behind and that it was the state's obligation to do more or do it differently. To make that point raises all sorts of potential questions about just how far and how committed the state is to seeing every child succeed. It's not just about setting a standard; it's about figuring out what it takes to make sure every child reaches that standard.

Teacher **Ina Watson**, a member of TMO and the last person to testify before the committee, questioned the bottom line on the state's testing regime. Testing should have a purpose and a reason and not simply be about ratings a child or a school. The TAKS measures minimum skills. That makes it pointless. It doesn't even guarantee the child is ready for college. Nor does it require enough higher-level thinking skills to benefit a student preparing for the SAT, a typical entrance requirement for college.

If that's the case, then what was the purpose of the test in the first place? Watson asked. "The students should be able to do something as a result of the test," she said.