TLEC Urges Texas Senate to Continue to Measure Graduation Requirements in More Holistic Manner
Testimony on Alternative Assessment for High School Graduation
Presented by David Hinojosa, J.D., IDRA National Director of Policy, before the Texas Senate Education Committee, September 13, 2016

Chairman Taylor and Members of the Senate Education Committee:

Thank you for allowing the Texas Latino Education Coalition (TLEC) the opportunity to provide written and oral testimony on the implementation of legislation authorizing alternative assessment of high school students for graduation. TLEC is a collaborative of organizations and individuals who advocate for the rights of Latino students at the local, state and national levels. The coalition was organized to focus specifically on critical educational issues in Texas and to improve the state of education for Latino students in public schools.

Our testimony today focuses on how the State of Texas can improve its public education system through more equitable high school graduation requirements and by examining additional information that the legislature can consider in evaluating the current alternate assessment for graduation. In summary, we recommend that the State of Texas do the following.

- Eliminate the graduation requirement that students must pass high school exit exams. Instead, use limited, valid, reliable and formative standardized testing for diagnostic purposes to improve learning.

or

- Alternatively, continue to require that schools use individual graduation committees (IGCs) to more holistically evaluate students’ readiness to graduate college- and career-ready; but

- Modify requirements so that a majority of the persons comprising the IGCs may recommend graduation for qualifying students under the alternative assessment, rather than requiring unanimity of the IGC.

In addition, we recommend that the state:

- Reconstruct the state’s testing system to require formative (as opposed to summative) testing that is valid and reliable for all learners and designed for the purpose of providing teachers and school leaders diagnostic data to improve student learning;
• Limit testing to the subjects required under the *Every Student Succeeds Act*; and
• To the extent permissible, administer testing through a randomized sampling of students capable of capturing the performance of students by race, national origin, sex/gender, socioeconomic status, language, disability, and other student group characteristics identified for educational purposes across Texas.

**National and State Trends in Testing and Opportunities to Improve Efficiency under the Every Student Succeeds Act**

Texas currently requires students to pass five exit STAAR exams to graduate high school. While some believe that the extensive number of high school exit exams is required under federal law, that is not true. Federal law sets a minimum. Under the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), which was signed into law in December 2015 and replaced the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB), states are merely required to test students in reading, math and science in high school as shown below. The federal government does not require that Texas mandate passage of these tests for graduation (high-stakes testing), nor does federal law require the additional tests noted below with an asterisk (*) below. Texas, itself, chooses to go beyond minimal federal requirements, expending significant state resources in the process and creating a far less efficient public school system.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High School Exit Exams in Texas as Required by Federal Government and the State of Texas</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Required by the Federal ESSA</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reading and math (Grades 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and high school)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Science (once at each level)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Required by the State of Texas</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reading and math (Grades 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Writing</strong> (Grades 4, 7)*</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Science (Grades 5, 8)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• <strong>Soc Studies</strong> (Grades 8)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• EOC: Biology, Algebra I, English I &amp; II*</td>
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<tr>
<td>• <strong>U.S. History</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Required at the Local Level</strong></td>
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<td>• Benchmark</td>
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<td>• Weekly</td>
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* not required by federal law

Source: IDRA, 2016

In fact, several states have reconsidered the high-stakes consequences attached to state-mandated high school tests. Currently, only 15 states reportedly require students to pass state standardized high school exit exams, the lowest since the 1980s (FairTest, 2016). Public opinion polls also show a growing disenchantment with the obsessive testing era, with 67 percent of parents stating that there is too much emphasis on testing (Gallup, Phi Delta Kappa Poll, 2015).
To be clear, TLEC does not support the elimination of standardized testing. TLEC understands that standardized testing, when valid and reliable, provides important information for students, parents, teachers, administrators, the public and policymakers. Texas, however, has relied too extensively on a flawed testing strategy that wastes tax dollars. Previously, under the NCLB, the state was required to administer summative assessments, but under the ESSA, Texas can choose to move to more formative assessments. TLEC urges the state to do so to help improve learning, especially for low-income and English learner students.

TEA data for 2014-15 school year show that the vast majority of IGC graduates failed the two end-of-course exams (EOCs) that are not required for testing by the federal government: English II and U.S. History. Of the 3,684 IGC graduates failing one high school exit exam, the English II and U.S. History exams account for 83 percent of all IGC graduates. The following chart shows the results for IGC students failing one exam.

In addition, of the 1,991 students failing two EOC exams, fewer than 1 percent failed a combination of exams that did not include either the English II or U.S. History exam.

The state expends significant costs of time and resources for the preparation and administration of these tests and could avoid wasting precious tax dollars on these tests. Eliminating the two additional tests, and eliminating the high-stakes testing component of the EOCs, would greatly improve the efficiency of the education system by reducing costs, test retakes, and the number of IGC committees required to be formed.

Recent Disaggregated IGC Results in Texas
Alternative assessments for high school graduation authorized pursuant to SB149 (2015) greatly improved opportunities to graduate, particularly for students of color and lower income students. According to the latest TEA data released for the 2014-15 school year, there were 12,077 students assigned an IGC. Of these, 52 percent (6,279) were recommended for graduation. The table below shows the breakdown of the total number and percentage of IGC graduates and disaggregated data by race/national origin and socioeconomic status (SES) (percentages rounded).

**Percent of IGC Graduates Failing One Exam, by Subject, 2014-15**

- Failed English II only: 61%
- Failed US History only: 22%
- Failed English I only: 9%
- Failed Algebra I only: 7%
- Failed Biology only: 1%

*Data source: Texas Education Agency*
These data show that IGC graduates account for 2 percent of all graduates in Texas. Of these, economically disadvantaged, Latino students and African American students seem to benefit mostly as a result of SB149’s newly designed alternative graduation assessments.

### TLEC Research Recommendations

There are still many opportunities to improve upon SB149. However, additional data are needed to examine the impact of the law. Therefore, TLEC recommends that the Texas Legislature research the following:

- The number and percentage of students by race, ethnicity, language proficiency and socioeconomic status denied graduation by IGCs and the underlying reasons thereof;
- The number and percentage of schools that did not create IGCs, despite having qualifying students and the underlying reasons thereof;
- The number and percentage of students by race, ethnicity, language proficiency and socioeconomic status who failed at least one high school exit exam and either dropped out or was identified as a “leaver” pursuant to state law and regulation; and
- The number and percentage of students by race, ethnicity, language proficiency and socioeconomic status denied graduation by IGCs as the result of only one member of the IGC recommending against graduation and any patterns in schools and school districts.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on this important issue. For questions, please contact David Hinojosa at david.hinojosa@idra.org or 210-444-1710, ext. 1739, or Celina Moreno at celina.moreno@maldef.org or 210-224-5476, ext. 212.

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