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HOLDING DISTRICTS ACCOUNTABLE THROUGH CRAIGSLIST?

By now, many Texans are familiar with the backlash against the over-testing of our students in public schools. Most of this backlash has focused on the amount of tests being given and the amount of time, energy and resources being spent on "teaching to the test" as opposed to our students mastering and retaining the information.

Another issue has just surfaced that has caused significant concern about our testing and accountability system. Of all places, this concern arose on craigslist.org. If you aren't familiar with craigslist, it is an online classified advertising service where you can buy and sell almost anything. But, that's not the troubling part.

On November 29, 2012, Pearson Testing ran an advertisement in Austin looking for people to help grade the written portion of the Texas standardized tests. The ad offers to pay college graduates $12/hour. The qualifications? According to the Craigslist ad, "*Bachelor degree required – any field welcome.*"

Prior to seeing this ad, we have heard concerns from across the state about the state's standardized testing system, the rigidity of the state's accountability system, the quality of the people grading the written portion of the state's test and the consistency of the results. Now we have a better idea why.

To be fair, Pearson and the Texas Education Agency have developed "rubrics" to help train these people to grade our student's tests. These rubrics can be found at http://www.tea.state.tx.us/student.assessment/staar/writing/. So, in addition to the concern that teachers are "teaching to the test", now our test graders are being "taught how to grade the test".

This highlights what we think is another weak link in the accountability chain. This type of training results in grading based on static formulas by people who aren't truly qualified to grade the quality of a student's writing skills. This results in teachers teaching students to "write for the test", not write well. We can do better.

We are asking the Texas Legislature and the Texas Education Agency to work with our state's English teachers across the state to grade these tests. These professionals live and work in the state's English standards every day and are much better prepared to accurately grade a student's written test.

To avoid any potential concerns about cheating or inflated grading, these tests could be sent to schools without any way to identify the school or student.

We view this as a win/win/win for Texas Public Education. The parents and taxpayers win because they have more confidence in the grading process. TEA and Pearson win because they get a higher quality grader that provides better data to evaluate our student's performance. The teachers win because they have more confidence in the grading system and they have a potential to earn a little extra money.