

“HB 5: EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNG TEXANS”

By Rep. Jimmie Don Aycock

The time has come for Texas students to focus on learning instead of preparing for state-mandated standardized tests. That's why I have filed House Bill 5 and am honored that the bill has broad support from parents, educators, and the business community.

This bill improves education in three important ways. It gives students more flexibility to explore their individual interests as they prepare for higher education and the workforce. It reduces the burden of state tests that play too large a role in our education system. And it provides new measures to make our schools more accountable.

Legislation approved in 2007 required students to pass 15 end-of-course exams in 12 high school courses, starting with the class of students who are now sophomores. The 2007 law was written to ensure that high school students learn the material needed for graduation. However, the new testing requirements have hampered local control of education and imposed a constant, inflexible regime of testing that interferes with teaching.

House Bill 5 reduces the number of end-of-course assessments from 15 to 5: English II (reading and writing), Algebra I, Biology, and U.S. History. The bill also eliminates intrusive state mandates, such as the requirement that the exams affect a student's grade and the confusing-to-calculate cumulative score that serves as a “gotcha” to graduation.

Students, parents and business leaders also want our high schools to offer a broader selection of rigorous courses and academic pathways to keep students engaged in school and focused on preparing for their future. The current one-size-fits all model for high school does not fit anyone, which is a problem for our students and our economy. Texas is a great place to do business, but our workforce is aging, and our schools aren't producing nearly enough qualified skilled workers to fill the gap.

My bill provides flexibility for students to develop their individual talents and pursue jobs that match those talents. It creates one diploma that gives all students a variety of opportunities after high school. Students could earn endorsements in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math), Business and Industry, Public Service, Arts and Humanities or multi-disciplinary studies after passing challenging courses customized to those areas. Research shows that young people stay engaged in education when they believe it is relevant to their lives, and this bill gives students more opportunities to explore the subjects that interest and motivate them.

All graduates would be able to apply to a Texas four-year university and have the opportunity to obtain financial aid with a Texas Grant. Both of these changes are a departure from current law and better serve the needs of our diverse student population.

Just as the legislation would allow more flexibility for students to pursue their interests, it would also allow school ratings to better reflect local values. My bill would broaden school ratings beyond state standardized tests and allow communities to set goals and evaluate performance locally.

Also, a new state rating system would measure schools on academic performance, financial performance, and community and student engagement. All three ratings would be released at the same time to provide a clearer understanding of a school's overall track record. It would use understandable labels of A, B, C and F.

Our one-test-fits-all laws are problematic, as are our one-rating-fits-all laws. It is time for us to make school more relevant for students while maintaining rigor. As we do so, we can better prepare students to succeed in higher education and in the jobs that will continue to power the growth of our economy.

Rep. Aycock (R – Killeen) is the Chairman of the Public Education Committee in the Texas House of Representatives. He has previously served on the Board of Trustees of the Central Texas College and is also a former board member of the Killeen Independent School District.