
House Public Education Committee



Invited Testimony on Commission on Public School Finance Recommendations

Dr. Mike Waldrip, Superintendent

Cost of Education Index

The Commission on Public School Finance recommends the elimination of the Cost of Education Index (CEI). The CEI was a measure designed to account for differences between districts regarding the costs associated with educating students in a particular area. Much of the CEI was originally based on the teacher salary market. This measure was last updated in 1991. In the 1990 census, Frisco's total population was just 6,138, meaning Frisco ISD's student enrollment today is almost 10 times the total population of the City of Frisco the last time this index was updated. Because of the rapid growth in Texas, it is not feasible to maintain the accuracy of a measure like the CEI. Eliminating the CEI helps to prevent the underfunding of fast-growth or high-growth school districts, like Frisco ISD, and improves equity in the school finance system. However, it is important that all funds related to the CEI be rolled into the basic allotment to ensure school districts continue to receive the funding they need.

Key Outcomes-Based Funding

The Commission also recommends providing funding based on the achievement of key outcomes: third grade reading and college, career, or military readiness (CCMR). This increased weight would provide significantly more funding to schools with high concentrations of economically disadvantaged students who meet these goals than for non-economically disadvantaged students. The CCMR key outcome would be based on a combination of performance on the SAT, ACT, TSIA, or other nationally recognized assessment and enrollment in a post-secondary institution, achievement of a industry-accepted certificate, or enlistment in the military. However, the third-grade reading outcome would be measured by performance on the third grade reading STAAR. Providing funding based on student performance on

an already high stakes standardized test only serves to further increase the stakes of that test. Additionally, the STAAR does not provide a holistic view of student performance and is an inadequate measure of whether a third-grade student can read at grade level. As a result, any outcomes-based funding should be based not only on standardized tests, such as the STAAR, but on a combination of measures, including performance-based assessments.

Assessments

Current state assessments are largely high-stakes, standardized tests. These tests represent a single data-point that fails to provide a holistic picture of student performance. Frisco ISD is one of the highest performing school districts in the state. Frisco ISD is one of only two districts with over 50,000 students to receive an “A” in the state’s accountability system and it is the highest performing district with over 50,000 students, having received a 96. Yet, this system is based on standardized test scores and is failing Texas students. Current assessments do not allow for students who are poor test-takers, who have a non-educational emotional or social struggle on the day of the exam, or for students who may be missing a single, but related piece of knowledge. As a result, many students score below their actual mastery level on standardized testing. However, the STAAR also fails to fully assess student performance and can lead to a student scoring above their mastery level on standardized tests and masking a problem that needs to be addressed.

Performance-based assessments provide additional data points and a more holistic review of the student’s mastery of content. For example, the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA)¹ allows teachers to assess a student’s progress in reading mastery by measuring specific skills related to the three components of reading: reading engagement, oral reading fluency, and comprehension. This assessment uses student performance (a student reading to the evaluator) to determine mastery, rather than a multiple-choice, standardized test. This assessment provides significantly more data that allows teachers to focus instruction on specific weaknesses.

Although a broader conversation about changing assessments is necessary, any discussion of outcomes-based funding must include a discussion of the assessments used to measure that outcome. The current measure of third-grade reading level does not accurately represent student achievement and providing outcomes-based funding on such a measure only serve to prop up a flawed assessment. As a result, outcomes-based funding should be paired with changes to the underlying assessments.

¹ The Developmental Reading Assessment is an assessment tool created by Pearson Education.

Conclusion

The Commission on Public Education School Finance made over thirty recommendations. As has been noted, these recommendations all work together and it is impossible to determine the overall impact to a school district without looking at the complete package. However, given the substantial additional funding provided for public education this session, Frisco ISD believes it is important that there be no “winners and losers” with regard to school finance reform. The legislature has sufficient funds to ensure that all districts receive more funding under simplified formulas that provide meaningful relief for local property taxpayers.