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Leadership Focus
Moving from Vision to Mission: Student-Centered Schools, Future-Ready Students
by Jenny LaCoste-Caputo
Shares how Coppell ISD has been moving from vision to mission, changing the system from within to create student-centered schools and future-ready students

The Truth about TRS: Strong, Stable, and Essential to Texas’ Future
by Amy Beneski and Beaman Floyd
Gives an overview of the Teacher Retirement System of Texas, clears up confusion and misinformation, and covers the current condition of the TRS Pension Fund

The Texas Public Schools Research Network—A TASA/CREATE Partnership: A Study of Teacher Selection and Assignment in Texas Public Schools
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Describes the desired professional and personal teaching attributes principals list as essential when looking at potential hires for their campuses and the correspondence with district employment artifacts

Finding the Goldilocks Solution to Curriculum and Instruction in the Era of Standardized Testing
by Denise Collier
Emphasizes the importance of enriching the curriculum, instruction, and assessment diet so that we expect our schools to run and win the race to excellence

Become a Messenger for Change
by Mary Ann Whiteker
Encourages all stakeholders to show support for student-centered schools and future-ready students, not test-driven classrooms and test-driven accountability systems

TSPRA Voice
A Little Sunscreen for the Sunshine
by Ian M. Halperin
Deals with the proper use of the Texas Public Information Act (TPIA) and Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) to protect the private information of students and staff

Front cover: In Kelly Coleman’s fifth grade classroom in Coppell ISD, students have been reading a story in language arts about a family whose grandmother was trapped on the other side of a swollen river. So, for science, the kids are constructing a TarPul (a wire bridge system where someone can cross in a basket by pulley).
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For the first time, our visioning work is attracting attention from media statewide. That’s due in large part to Texas Commissioner of Education Robert Scott’s comments at TASA’s Midwinter Conference in January.

The commissioner boldly criticized the emphasis placed on standardized testing in our schools and called our state’s assessment system a “perversion of the original intent.” He also said he believes we’re on the brink of change, and talked about Senate Bill 1557—a tangible result of TASA’s visioning work that we hope will result in a new assessment system that gives a more holistic look at what’s going on in the classroom. The commissioner drew some fire for his comments, most of which came from Bill Hammond, president and CEO of the Texas Association of Business.

Despite the criticism, as school district leaders we know this is a battle we must fight for our students and for the future of public education in Texas. We know that the focus on high-stakes testing is strangling our schools, extinguishing creativity and innovation, and undermining our opportunity to transform the way we educate our kids.

We also know that our parents, teachers, and communities stand behind us in this effort and that to prepare our children to live successfully and be competitive on a global stage they need a different education than the one we’re providing today. Students need a broad range of learning experiences that engage them on a deep and meaningful level—not the superficial learning that happens when the primary driver is preparation for a test.

Now is not the time to back down. Rodger Jones, an editorial writer for the *Dallas Morning News*, wrote in his blog: “One thing is clear—the momentum belongs to those who object to the way tests have come to dominate school life.”

That’s right. The momentum is ours. We need to rally around the commissioner and support him for standing up for what he believes. We need to continue to fight for a system of “Student-Centered Schools, Future-Ready Students.”

It has been an honor to serve as your president over the past year. I am proud of this organization and the work its members do for public education every day. If there is anything that I, or anyone at TASA, can do for you, please don’t hesitate to call.
The importance of the 2012 primary and general elections for the future of Texas can’t be overstated. The people we elect will chart the course for our state, navigating difficult challenges in an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty. Primary elections in Texas are especially important because they can often determine the final election outcomes.

Yet Texas voter turnout rates are historically dismal. In the 2010 general election, Texas had the lowest voter turnout rate in the entire country, with just 32 percent of registered voters showing up at the polls.

We also trail the rest of the nation in voter registration. We need Texans to be involved and engaged in the election process and to stake their claim in our state’s future.

It’s your vote. It’s your voice. Use it.

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Download a voter registration form from the Texas Secretary of State
http://www.sos.state.tx.us/elections/index.shtml

or call Toll Free
1-800-252-VOTE (8683)
Texas needs lawmakers who understand and care about public education—people who will listen to school leaders, teachers, parents, and students. And, if Texans care about their future, they need to show up at the polls.

If we didn’t know already, the 82nd Legislative Session certainly taught us the importance of carefully choosing who we send to Austin to represent us and make decisions for Texas and our children’s future. Those we elect this year will chart the course for our state, and right now that course takes us through tumultuous waters. Last year’s session ended in historical cuts to education. Lawmakers eliminated $4 billion from the Foundation School Program and an additional $1.4 billion in education funding outside the FSP.

Yet, coming off a session that was historically devastating to public education, there are politically powerful groups already saying that cuts need to be deeper next year. These groups claim there is still fat in district budgets and that funding for public schools should be further reduced. School leaders know better. They know what students need and that investing in children is the best economic decision Texans can make.

In an otherwise discouraging session, there were also bright spots that remind us of the positive difference legislators can make for public education. Senate Bill 1557 passed with overwhelming support and will lead to the creation of the Texas High Performance Schools Consortium. Consortium members—to be named by Commissioner Robert Scott this summer—will have the opportunity to help design the next generation of Texas’ learning standards, assessments, and accountability system. The goal is to move away from the over-reliance on standardized high-stakes testing and embrace high-priority learning standards and the use of multiple assessments in classrooms powered by digital technologies.

Texas needs lawmakers who understand and care about public education—people who will listen to school leaders, teachers, parents, and students. And, if Texans care about their future, they need to show up at the polls. Unfortunately, Texas has some of the lowest voter turnout rates in the country. This year, legal wrangling over redistricting has pushed election dates back, potentially causing confusion that could lead to an even lower voter turnout.

In Clear Creek ISD, district leaders have launched a campaign called “It’s My Future” to promote public awareness about the importance of voting. Clear Creek’s campaign is part of a statewide effort led by TASA to increase voter registration in local communities. Part of the strategy is to provide voter registration cards at all Clear Creek campuses.

Visit tasanet.org for information on our campaign Your Vote, Your Voice, where you can find information about hosting voter registration drives in your district and learn what other school leaders are doing to promote higher voter turnout.

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- Transform the student learning experience and environment
- Create next-generation assessment and accountability systems
- Build stakeholder support for organizational transformation

**Student-Centered Schools**

**Future-Ready Students**
“We’re creating great little test-takers, but are we really preparing kids to be successful in the future?” Turner asked while encouraging school leaders from across the state to join Mission: School Transformation, the next step in the effort to transform public education in Texas and create Student-Centered Schools, Future-Ready Students.

Turner hasn’t been shy about expressing his criticism of the current direction of public schools, and he believes educators are the ones who will have to make a change.

“We are committed to changing the system from within,” he said at Midwinter. “Our beliefs framed our vision…we have to move from vision to mission. This is the work of schools, not politicians.”
Passionate and eloquent, Turner makes a compelling case for the need for change in public education and creating a system of future-friendly, 21st century classrooms; innovative, next-generation learning standards; and a more nuanced assessment and accountability system that truly measures a student’s success.

But it’s more than just a speech. Turner and his staff have been working to transform education in Coppell ISD one classroom at a time for years.

“The district’s community-generated strategic plan aligns well with the work of the Visioning Institute and calls for helping our teachers learn new ways to engage students in a rigorous and relevant curriculum, as well as helping students recapture their joy of learning,” Turner said. “We have to realize that the work of transformational change is hard, slow work, but absolutely essential in moving toward the ideals outlined in the Visioning Document.”

Turner is quick to point out that 80 percent of the changes outlined in a New Vision for Public Education doesn’t need legislative changes to happen.

“TEA does not have any rule that requires us to bore kids to death,” he often quips.
“Change takes courage. We must find that courage.”

Turner came to Coppell, an affluent enclave north of Dallas, a decade ago. He inherited a district that was acing the state’s accountability system—test scores were high and community support was strong. But Turner knew the kids of Coppell deserved more—they deserved an education that would prepare them for the global economy in which they’ll live and work.

Announcing transformative efforts in a struggling district is one thing; championing them in a district that is by all accounts successful is something else. Still, Turner was able to build community support.

“I’ve never been with a group of parents that didn’t want more for their kids,” Turner said. “Because many of our parents are globally connected in their work, they realized that what they were doing in the workplace didn’t match up to the things their kids were doing in the classroom.”

Turner and his instructional leaders use TASA’s New Vision for Public Education in Texas Implementation Rubric, a guide that helps districts assess where they stand on each of the six articles of the vision: new digital learning environment, new learning standards, assessments for learning, accountability for learning, organizational transformation, and a more balanced and reinvigorated state/local partnership.

“I think we’re leading the way in using the implementation guide,” Turner said. “Through the visioning process we started listening to the kids. What I realized is the classrooms today don’t look much different than when I was in the classroom in the 1970s. Kids across the district told us they were bored sitting in class listening to the teacher talk.”

But that’s rapidly changing in Coppell. The change is happening most quickly at the elementary level, where project-based learning is one way students are engaging in their lessons and taking ownership of their learning. Teachers are creating innovative lessons that cross subjects, bringing relevancy to each assignment.

“We are trying to shift the job of the teacher from instructing to a designer of lessons,” Turner said.

At Coppell’s Town Center Elementary, the classrooms and hallways look much different than they did even five years ago—and certainly look a generation away from how most of us remember grade school.

Turner has managed to harness money raised by school PTAs and focus it on technology, with matching funds from the district. That creative revenue stream has helped buy carts of iPads and iPod Touches for the school, not to mention MacBooks and SMART Boards.

On a recent morning, fourth-graders line the hallways of Town Center, huddled two-by-two around iPads using a free app the school’s dyslexia teacher discovered called Read2Go. The app, essentially an e-reader, does a number of cool things that allow readers with print disabilities to access books with features like text-to-speech narration (the ability to see and hear words read as
they are highlighted) and an option to connect and read with Braille displays. The dyslexia teacher realized the app had value for kids at all levels.

The fourth-graders are looking at pictures and taking turns making up a story to go along with them. An audio feature captures their stories then plays them back. Though relatively unsupervised and able to chat with each other, none of the children are misbehaving or off task, but are engaged and enthusiastic about their assignment.

“Kids were coming to school and powering down,” Turner said. “This technology is part of who they are.”

Town Center's hallway décor includes what you’d expect to see at an elementary school such as art made with crayons, markers, and paper mâché, but among the handmade work you’ll find QR codes—some designed by students as young as kindergarten—that when scanned take the user to the student’s work.

In Kelly Coleman’s fifth grade classroom, students have been reading a story in language arts about a family whose grandmother was trapped on the other side of a swollen river. So, for science, the kids are constructing a TarPul (a wire bridge system where someone can cross in a basket by pulley).

They enthusiastically test their systems, made with strings, cups, sticks, and dirt, analyzing the effects soil erosion has on their success.

It’s not all about technology, Town Center Principal Angie Applegate pointed out. It’s about kids making discoveries and being in charge of their own learning. Teachers are there to guide them and lead them, not lecture them. It’s a constructionist approach.

“They’re really taking learning to a different level,” Applegate said. “It all ties back to real world learning.”

In a second grade classroom, students work in groups of two studying pollination. Matthew Direnzo and Nicole Whitacre have their heads together as they test out different items, like tape, an eraser, a marble, and a fuzzy ball, by dipping them in baking soda and shaking them gently to see which one picks up and then drops the most particles. They theorize and scribble notes on their observations.

“This one is awesome,” Nicole squeals after tapping the fuzzy ball over a big black circle and watching the powder sprinkle down. “It’s the best one yet!”

Enthusiasm is endemic in Coppell elementary classrooms. In nearly every class, kids are working in groups on projects and, though it’s a tad noisy, all of them seem to be completely absorbed in their work. There’s no one drifting, no one bored.

“What was good five or 10 years ago is not good enough today,” Turner said. “It can be a little scary because teachers have to give up control of the classroom to an extent.”

Across the district, at Denton Creek Elementary, Cynthia Alaniz’ fourth-graders are busy blogging about the latest books they’ve read. Outside Alaniz’ classroom, a QR code is posted so that anyone with a smart phone can link to her classroom blog immediately.

Alaniz started blogging last school year and implemented it as a classroom venture this year.

“Blogging has had a great impact on my instruction,” she said. “Because I have seen its power to generate excitement among 9-year-olds, I incorporate (blogging) daily.”

Alaniz uses the blog to build a classroom community. She communicates with parents, promotes literacy, develops writing skills, and enhances content knowledge. Students use the blog to recap what they’ve learned during the day.
Students greet visitors at the door and show them around the room, illustrating how they use technology in every lesson. The class has access to a cart of iPod Touches, which they use with the same frequency and ease that generations past used spiral notebooks and No. 2 pencils.

For a recent writing project, the fourth-graders create an original song. After they came up with the lyrics, they decided they needed a tune. Two students used the Virtuoso app on their iPod Touch and composed a tune while another used Jam Session and added effects.

They also use the iTouch video feature to record “book talks” that the students enjoy giving. Videoing each talk meant they could share with each other what each group experienced.

Turner is the first to admit that turning an entire system and setting it on a new course is hard, slow work. At the highly acclaimed Coppell High School where about 2,700 students attend grades nine through 12, Turner said he still has some work to do. He estimates about 30 percent of classrooms there are student-centered classrooms.

“We have extraordinary teachers with great content knowledge who we are helping to reinvent themselves and their classrooms in order to meet the needs of these new digital learners,” he said.

Coppell’s New Tech High gave district leaders the chance to build a 21st century high school from the ground up. New Tech started in 2008 and now boasts nearly 500 students. An Apple Distinguished school for the second year in a row, the New Tech Network also considers Coppell’s New Tech a model school, sending people from across the country and around the world to visit. The school hosts more than 100 groups each year and has had visitors from as far away as England, Japan, and Dubai.

“We created New Tech to provide our community with another option for high school students,” Turner said. “It’s a model based on relationships and active participation in the curriculum. Project-based learning provides the vehicle for learning the content and the opportunity to practice skills like public speaking, collaboration, critical thinking, problem solving. These students are responsible for their learning rather than the teachers being responsible.”

New Tech has been so successful that the district has struggled to find a fair way to structure admissions. One year, hundreds of parents and middle-schoolers lined up across the street from the school waiting for the designated time for admissions to begin. They dashed across the street, knocking down barriers the school district had set up. Turner readily admitted the district underestimated the response, but the point was made. Both parents and students wanted something different—another option from a traditional school setting.

“We do school differently,” Harrell says.

Students, or learners as they’re called at New Tech, are responsible and in charge of their education. The campus is fully wireless with a 1:1 ratio of students to computers.

In a recruitment video for the school, which was produced and directed by students, Blake Lackey talks about how project-based learning has impacted his high school experience.

“At first I wasn’t so hot on New Tech High. I thought that it was only for people who were into computers,” said Blake, a sophomore. “But eventually when I took...
the tour here, I realized it was something completely different than I ever imagined.”

Blake recalled an assignment in freshman biology where his class studied diseases and in their final projects played the role of doctor, assessing diseases and making a diagnosis.

“I can remember everything about that entire project because I remember the final product,” he said.

Kim Wooten, who teaches AP biology, forensics, and anatomy, loves the New Tech model. A peek into Wooten’s classroom reveals her anatomy students working on a variety of presentations. One group decides to write and produce a mini-horror movie to demonstrate what they’ve learned. Sure, it will take some extra time on their own, but they’re OK with that.

“The way they approach it here, it makes you want to learn,” said Seth Newman, 18.

“In a traditional school, you sit, you do what you’re told, you pass, and you go on,” Wooten says in the school’s recruitment video. “Here it’s teamwork, it’s partnerships, and New Tech learners have a say in their own destiny, which is the way it’s supposed to be.”

But innovation at the secondary level isn’t unique to New Tech. Project-based learning is happening at Coppell High School, too. All around CHS, teachers are experimenting with a variety of methods to involve students in the content. Turner hopes that one day we’ll have to rethink what we consider “traditional” education.

Jodie Deinhammer’s anatomy and physiology classes at CHS are a showcase for project-based learning. Her students recently participated in a competition sponsored by the National Institutes of Health where they designed hands-on investigation projects that can be used by elementary teachers across the country to teach about health and nutrition. The work was so impressive that Deinhammer recently learned 21 of her students’ projects have made it to the finals of the competition.

An example of project-based learning is happening in Shari Hunt’s and Rhoda Hahn’s science classes at CHS, where students work collaboratively on a project: “The ChickFix Dilemma.” The class is divided into teams with each team designated as either a group of chicken farmers or scientists. The farmers collect and analyze data on chicken growth and antibiotics, and compare yearly profits with antibiotics and without. The scientists, meanwhile, study antibiotic resistance and the potential hazards of overuse of antibiotics in chicken.

After a week or so into the project, the scientists will report their findings to the chicken farmers, then the farmers have to make a decision: do they stick with the method that increases their bottom line or does the scientific evidence give them pause?

Projects like this often culminate in hot debates, with students using data as evidence to build sophisticated arguments. For the last phase of the project, all students will collect survey data regarding the use of antibiotics in the Coppell community and build a database for analysis.

Turner likes what he sees in classrooms like these.

“I wish I could tell you this was going on in every classroom in Coppell ISD,” he said. It’s not, yet. But we’re getting there.”

Jenny LaCoste-Caputo is the director of communications and media relations at TASA.
The Teacher Retirement System of Texas (TRS) has been a cornerstone of the public education system in Texas for more than 70 years. Since 1936, TRS has been the mechanism for providing retirement benefits to public school employees, which has assured the attraction, retention, and retirement security of the education workforce in our state. Over the years, the system has weathered various economic crises while performing its mission. TRS has worked in concert with its members, public education groups, and the legislature to evolve with changing times, address challenges, and meet the needs of an increasingly complex environment.

The latest national stock market crisis has created serious volatility in financial markets both nationally and internationally, and resulted in investment losses for retirement plans, whether defined benefit (DB) or defined contribution (DC), in both the public and private sectors. Though TRS, like many pension funds, suffered heavy investment losses along with most other investors in the market, it continued to fulfill its mission and quickly recovered most of its asset value thanks to strong investment controls, prudent benefits management, and excellent money management. Today, TRS is recognized as one of the healthiest pension funds in the nation.

Unfortunately, much of the recent attention from the media and others has focused on those state and local pension plans that were not well funded or maintained. This has resulted in blanket attacks on public pension funds, without regard to the individual quality of various programs. Instead, a common implication is that DB funds are somehow inherently flawed and should be outlawed or converted to DC plans. This assertion is simply untrue, as demonstrated by the good performance of TRS. TASA, has compiled this information to address specific misconceptions about the TRS pension system, and general misconceptions about public pension systems and defined benefit programs.

Overview

Currently, there are 1,797 public retirement systems in Texas overseen by the Texas Pension Review Board. The combined net assets of these systems are approximately $175 billion, and total membership exceeds 2.3 million active and retired members.

In November 1936, voters approved an amendment to the Texas Constitution to create a statewide teacher retirement system, which was officially established by the legislature in 1937. TRS is the largest public retirement system in Texas in both membership and assets. The system provides benefits to public school teachers, and other public school employees, and to employees of state colleges and universities.


TRS serves more than 1.3 million participants, of which over 1 million are public and higher education members and close to 300,000 are retired recipients. The system is a DB plan, and the trust fund is sustained primarily by three sources: contributions by working employee members, state contributions, and investment revenues. It is important to note that of the 1,037 school districts, only 17 contribute to social security for all employees and only 31 contribute to social security for auxiliary or part-time employees only. Thus, the overwhelming majority of district employees are not eligible to receive social security benefits.

The Texas Constitution requires the TRS board of trustees to make prudent investments with system funds and provides the legislature with the authority to further restrict the board’s investment discretion. The board is also charged with the general administration of the system.

Confusion/Misinformation

TRS is a retirement system into which the state and employees pay a percentage of their payroll. Some groups have implied that the defined benefits administered by the system is a gift, or some sort of free grant of salary for not working. This is patently untrue. The retirement benefits received by the members, like any retirement benefits, are earned by years of service and career-long financial contributions to the system by employees and employers.

Generally speaking, DB plans promise to pay a specified monthly benefit for life upon retirement, which can be a specified dollar amount or based on a formula established by law that is based on years of service, salary, and other factors, as is the case in Texas. DB plans are professionally managed. DC plans are those wherein employees are responsible for the management of their individual accounts and there is no guarantee of lifetime retirement income. Under both DB and DC plans, employees contribute a portion of salary to the fund. While there are other differences in each of these plans, the main objective of both is to provide retirement income to participants.

Additionally, some commentators have confused the TRS pension plan with TRS-Care, the retiree health plan.

Though both are administered by the TRS system, they are entirely separate financial systems. TRS-Care, like all healthcare systems in the nation, has been severely stressed by issues beyond its control, chiefly medical inflation. TRS-Care has therefore had to seriously adjust benefits and make frequent special requests for funding from the legislature. Legislative support of the TRS retirement benefits actually decreased last session.

As stated above, the TRS pension system has recently been grouped with other public pension plans that have neither the strong actuarial standard nor the strong investment controls and expertise of TRS. Such comparisons are like comparing a strong defined contribution mutual fund with a fund that has clearly been mismanaged and pillaged. No convincing case has been made that DB plans are inherently flawed, nor that DC plans are inherently superior. Any analysis of the quality of retirement systems must, therefore, consider the actual qualities of the plans themselves rather than simply castigating one type of plan or another.

Current Conditions of TRS Pension Fund

As of June 30, 2011, the system’s net actuarial assets totaled more than $115 billion, up from $111 billion in June of 2010. The market value of the system grew from more than $95 billion to over $107 billion during the same time period.

From 2010 to 2011, the most recent TRS actuarial report found that the assets outperformed the assumed rate of return of 8 percent, earning more than 15 percent net of expenses over the last year. This represents $7 billion in gains. In addition, liabilities grew slower than expected due to lower than projected salary increases. Unfortunately, during the recent legislative session, the legislature lowered the state’s contribution rate for both years of the current biennium after the fund’s actuaries recommended they increase it by 1 percent.

Unlike some pension plans, the TRS plan is a sustainable well-funded program that is successfully weathering the recent major market declines and volatility. If all current contributions from the state, employers, and active employees remain constant and there are no benefit increases for retirees, the trust fund assets are sufficient to make benefit payments through 2075.

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8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.
Despite an unfunded liability of $24.1 billion, the system’s actuarial funding ratio for 2011 was 82.7 percent, which exceeds the 80 percent industry standard threshold.\textsuperscript{10} In addition, the State Auditor’s Office (SAO) concluded in a November 2011 report that TRS’s financial statements for FY 2011 were materially correct and were presented in accordance with accounting principles generally accepted in the United States.\textsuperscript{11}

Critics of public pension plans are calling on reforms that include replacing the traditional DB plans with DC plans. They argue that DB plans are too risky for the state because funding obligations must be maintained over long periods of time and essentially create an entitlement program akin to Medicaid.\textsuperscript{12} However, a report issued by the National Institute on Retirement Security (NIRS) found that a major investment advantage inherent in public pension plans is the very long investment range they require.

\textit{Because of this, funds can withstand short-to-medium-term investment losses, and stick to an asset allocation strategy in a disciplined way through different phases of an investment cycle. This allows pensions to achieve an investment return that is better than individual investors can achieve on their own, on average, over the long term. In addition, unlike an individual who ages and should adopt a more conservative investment strategy over time, pension funds do not age, and are able to take advantage of the enhanced investment returns that come from a balanced portfolio.}\textsuperscript{13}

Critics also assert that tax funded programs such as the TRS pension plan “should be predictable and sustainable, and not reliant upon estimators, actuaries, market conditions, or the legislature’s resolve to be fiscally prudent.”\textsuperscript{14} This assertion is ridiculous because standard business accounting practices that cover a myriad of businesses and industries, both public and private, rely upon estimators, actuaries, and/or market conditions in assessing current and future financial conditions and viabilities. Examples include insurance companies, banks, state legislatures (including Texas), mortgage companies, just to name a few. Finally, all state retirement programs, whether they are DB or DC plans, are reliant on state legislatures, because they are the bodies required to craft and pass the state’s budget.

The success and long-term sustainability of the TRS pension system is the result of many prudent funding practices and legislative policy decisions made over the years. For example, in 2005, legislation was passed changing the retirement benefit calculation. Members meeting certain age and service credit requirements prior to August 31, 2005, were grandfathered from the changes, but all other members not meeting the grandfather provisions were subject to the following changes in law:

\begin{itemize}
  \item Final average salary at retirement was changed to the highest five years of salary (instead of three years);
  \item Members who take early retirement who are age 55 or older and have 20–24 years of service receive a larger reduction to their annuities.
\end{itemize}

The statute allowing members to purchase one to three years of additional service credit was repealed effective January 1, 2006, and increasing contribution costs for certain members purchasing out-of-state service credit was mandated. And most notably, the legislature established increased age eligibility requirements necessary to qualify for an unreduced annuity at retirement for those establishing membership in TRS on or after September 1, 2007.

\textbf{Conclusion}

In the midst of a worldwide economic crisis, the TRS pension plan serves as a stellar example of a strong, well-managed plan that its customers can count on. Its performance and reputation makes it a valuable tool in recruiting and retaining the best job candidates to serve public school students across Texas. Education employees count on their TRS retirement benefits because, under federal law, the vast majority of them are not eligible for Social Security, and the TRS pension plan is their only retirement income option.

The TRS board and the Texas Legislature have implemented policies and procedures over the years to ensure the plan’s predictability and sustainability for years to come. Texas educators are depending on state lawmakers to protect the benefits they’ve earned through years of service and to continue to monitor and make any necessary changes to the system to ensure continued long-term viability.

\textit{Amy Beneski is the associate executive director of governmental relations at TASA, and Beaman Floyd is a consultant.}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{10} ibid.
\textsuperscript{11} Texas State Auditor. 2011. \textit{A Report on the Audit of the Teacher Retirement System’s Fiscal Year 2011 Financial Statements.}
\textsuperscript{12} Texas Public Policy Foundation. 2011. \textit{Reforming Texas’ State & Local Pension Systems.}
\textsuperscript{14} Texas Public Policy Foundation. 2011. \textit{Reforming Texas’ State & Local Pension Systems.}
\end{flushleft}
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Since 1960, the Texas Association of School Administrators (TASA) and the Texas Association of School Boards (TASB) have partnered to bring school board members and school administrators the state’s premier education-related Convention.

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Online registration opens June 15 at http://www.tasa.tasb.org/registration/index.html
The Texas Public Schools Research Network—a TASA/CREATE Partnership:
A Study of Teacher Selection and Assignment in Texas Public Schools

by William Reaves, Sherri Lowrey, Susan Holley, Dale Johnson, and Sam Sullivan

The Center for Research, Evaluation and Advancement of Teacher Education (CREATE), along with members of the Texas Public Schools Research Network (TPSRN), collaborated to study Texas public school teacher selection and assignment practices. CREATE is a university research and development consortium comprised of 46 universities within the state of Texas whose research agenda focuses on issues of teaching quality and effectiveness. The TPSRN is a public schools-university research collaborative administered by CREATE, in partnership with the Texas Association of School Administrators (TASA). The 13 Texas public school districts that participated in this study were Birdville ISD, Dallas ISD, Fort Worth ISD, Harlingen ISD, Highland Park ISD, Lamar Consolidated ISD, Northeast ISD, Northside ISD, Richardson ISD, Round Rock ISD, San Antonio ISD, Stephenville ISD, and Weatherford ISD.

Recent fiscal policy considerations have led to renewed attention to teacher selection and assignment practices that affect the quality and effectiveness of classroom teachers in public school settings. This research summary describes (1) the desired professional and personal teaching attributes principals list as essential when looking at potential hires for their campuses, (2) the correspondence between the attributes principals seek compared to those found in district employment documents, (3) the degree to which teachers’ employment experiences and district employment practices are information rich, and (4) the effects of information richness on perceptions of teacher job clarity and job fit.

Research Design and Sample
All data in this report were collected via four sources: (1) AEIS state data base, (2) district selection artifacts, (3) a teacher questionnaire comprised of selected questions taken from the Survey of First-Year and Second-Year Teachers by the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers with permission of the author; and (4) a principal questionnaire designed by researchers to mirror the teacher questionnaire.

Within each participating district, researchers selected a sample of schools comprised of pairs of the highest and lowest performing campuses at high school, middle school, and elementary school levels, yielding a total of 91 campuses: 29 high schools, 32 middle schools, and 31 elementary schools.

Newly employed teachers at the sample campuses in the 2008–2009 and 2009–2010 academic years were asked to respond to a teacher questionnaire. Of the 1,430 teachers who were sent the teacher questionnaire, 759 responded, representing a 53 percent return rate. All 91 principals at sample campuses were administered a principal questionnaire of which 62 responded, representing a 68 percent return rate.
1 Desired professional and personal attributes: Principals identified the following five professional attributes and five personal attributes as most essential to consider when hiring a campus teacher:

**Professional attributes:**
- provides challenging instruction at high cognitive levels
- relates to and motivates students to engage in learning
- implements successful classroom management
- implements a student learning focus
- monitors/assesses student progress

**Personal attributes:**
- exhibits a positive attitude and commitment to teaching
- works collaboratively and constructively as a team player
- expresses a desire to continue learning
- works collaboratively to assess at-risk students
- is a risk-taker who is willing to think outside the box when addressing students’ instructional needs

There were no significant differences related to either professional or personal attributes sought by school principals among campus types (elementary, middle, or high school) and/or campus academic performance levels (percent of students passing All TAKS).

2 Correspondence of professional and personal attributes with district employment artifacts: District selection and hiring artifacts were collected, including policy documents, teacher job announcements and descriptions, employment applications, reference forms, and interview forms/protocols. The documents were compared with the professional and personal attributes principals listed as important when hiring teachers to see if specific teaching skills and attributes were referenced in the documents.

3 Information-rich hiring practices: Researchers sought to determine whether district selection practices were information-rich or information-poor. Information-rich hiring practices refer to those that allow the candidate and the employer enough information and opportunity to determine if there is a match between the candidate’s skills and those demanded by the job and the campus culture. In this study, information richness was analyzed as a two-dimensional construct: (1) depth of candidate information (e.g., submissions and interactions with the district/campus during the hiring process); and (2) range of hiring practices (i.e., the range of information from the candidate that the selector(s) used to make a selection decision). The information teachers reported submitting at the time of application for employment was compared to the frequency with which principals reported consulting the same information to make a hiring decision.

**The personal interview was reported** by 98 percent of principals as the primary source for obtaining information, followed by resumes, professional references, and documentation of certification.

**Information sources submitted** by the teacher but least reviewed by the principal for selection purposes include cover letter, undergraduate transcripts, scores on certification examinations, and graduate school transcripts.

**Although principals reported** that knowledge of subject and ability to provide challenging instruction were among the teacher characteristics most frequently sought when hiring teachers, less than 30 percent of responding principals considered pertinent information sources available to them such as review of college transcripts, scores on certification exams, sample lesson plans, or videotape/observation of applicant teaching.

Researchers examined the range of interactive opportunities (e.g., frequency of interviews, number of people present, whether applicant was asked to present a lesson, attending a faculty meeting) employed by school districts that enable both teacher candidates and selectors to communicate with and observe each other.

**The interview was cited** by 99 percent of teachers as the most prominent interactive opportunity. Most teachers participated in two interviews at their respective campuses, conducted by teams of professionals, usually including the school principal and an average of two faculty colleagues, such as department heads and/or grade-level leaders.

**Most districts appeared to offer** minimal structure and control over the interview process, presumably relying on professional judgment and discretion of principals as to the best format, content, and criteria for conducting the interview.

**Other than the interview, few other** interactive opportunities at the campus level were found to exist.
- About 20 percent of teachers reported observing campus teachers instructing classes in the schools in which they were interviewed.
• About 7 percent of teachers reported either an opportunity to conduct a sample lesson observed by a teacher and/or administrator or observe faculty and/or team meetings.

4 Information-rich hiring practices and perceptions of job clarity and position fit: Researchers reasoned that information-rich hiring practices would lead to both increased teacher perceptions of job clarity and position fit. The more teachers understood what the position entailed, the more likely they could decide if the fit between their own professional skills/attributes and the current classroom assignment and campus was a good one.

Teachers reported highest levels of job clarity regarding teaching assignment, campus philosophy, principal philosophy and style, specifics of the curriculum, and new teacher support services offered by the district.

Teachers reported less clarity relating to what the campus’ students were like and whether they might enjoy teaching them, the other teachers at the campus, opportunities for involvement in campus decision making, how much autonomy they would have as a teacher at the campus, and non-classroom duties they would be required to perform.

Principals consistently over-estimated teacher clarity by large percentages from the perceptions of teachers in the following areas: understanding of campus students, understanding of teachers on the campus, expectations of teacher autonomy, clarity about non-classroom duties, and participation in campus decision making (See Chart 1).

Job clarity and position fit scores for teachers in districts using any screening devices were found to be significantly lower (p=.006 for job clarity; p=.000 for job fit) than for teachers in districts where such devices were not employed.

Job clarity and position fit were not significantly correlated to the time between job notice and job start.

Job clarity and position fit scores for teachers who reported being hired after the beginning of the school year were not significantly different than those teachers hired before the school year began.

Information richness scores were significantly lower in districts using a commercial screening device than in those districts not using one.

Researchers found no significant differences in information richness, job clarity, position fit scores relative to district type (suburban, urban, rural), campus level (elementary, middle, or high school), and/or campus performance levels (campus TAKS scores).

Researchers further hypothesized that increased teacher perceptions of job clarity and position fit would lead to many positive outcomes, including stable teacher retention and positive outcomes for students. The link between these variables and student achievement is an area for further refinement and investigation.

Comparison of Teacher/Principal Perceptions of Job Clarity
Suggestions and implications for school districts

The results of this study suggest that district selection tools and practices can be more tightly aligned with the particular teaching attributes needed for the position. Some areas that school districts may wish to consider include the following:

- **Move from generic to more assignment-specific** job announcements and job descriptions for teacher positions.
- **Redesign referral forms** to offer better information on the desired skills and attributes sought by districts, provide clearer instruction about how the rating scale on the form should be used by references to rate, and describe particular skills.
- **Increase principal access** to the information that… teachers already provide.
- **Provide greater structure and quality control** for the campus interview process.
- **Re-examine the use and application** of commercial screening devices. They may or may not provide candidate information germane to the specific skills and attributes sought by principals.

William Reaves is executive director emeritus and director of special programs for CREATE and Sherri Lowrey is associate director of research; Susan Holley is associate executive director of instructional support and leadership development for TASA; Dale Johnson is a research professor for Tarleton State University; and Sam Sullivan is a professor of curriculum and instruction for Sam Houston State University.

The CREATE mission is supported through four core strategies:

**Expand Knowledge through Research.** Inform university and public school leaders by delivering strategic, data-driven analyses focused on university-based teacher preparation, including what we know about teacher preparation, what works to improve it, and what institutional leaders can do to advance it.

**Build Capacity for Institutional Change.** Work with partners to build a sense of urgency to renew their commitment to prepare teachers who positively impact student achievement. Promote university-wide leadership to prioritize the importance of collaboration in the preparation of teachers.

**Initiate Action through Programs.** Provide opportunities for education professionals to engage them in development and implementation of research-based teacher preparation practices. Disseminate frameworks to facilitate strategic planning and evaluation in order to improve program effectiveness.

**Strengthen CREATE’s Capacity.** Build upon past accomplishments by growing and diversifying the funding base, expanding communications strategy, and implementing clear measures of impact.
Finding the Goldilocks Solution to Curriculum and Instruction in the Era of Standardized Testing

by Denise Collier

This year’s high school seniors have gone through our public schools in the era of high-stakes testing. They began this testing in their early elementary grades (by grade 3), and every year thereafter (through at least grade 10) they have encountered multiple state accountability tests in a variety of subject areas. From the earliest accountability tests in Texas, called TABS, through TEAMS, TAAS, TAKS, and now STAAR—the new state system that begins this year—the alphabet soup of high-stakes state testing has become the primary driver for measuring learning, rating schools, and determining what and how well our students have learned.

Testing is important. And using a variety of tests—types, methods, content—including the results of broad-scale tests that assess learning statewide, is an important part of measuring and improving teaching and learning. But high-stakes testing has become such an overwhelmingly prevalent part of the educational landscape in schools and districts that, like the wallpaper in the room, we have almost become blind to our inordinate focus on them and on the negative unintended outcomes this type of testing can have on teaching and learning in our schools. We have been fed a diet of high-stakes testing and passed it on to our students for so many years that perhaps we’ve forgotten to “taste the porridge” before we eat. It is time, and perhaps well past time, to take a broader look at how we might ensure that teaching and learning is informed by such tests, but not driven by them.

In the early developmental stages of standards-based teaching and testing, statewide tests were intended to measure the student learning relative to a set of learning standards (concepts and skills) in a particular curriculum content area such as reading or mathematics. The basic tenets included:

- Establish standards, or what students should know and be able to do.
- Develop assessments geared to the standards.
- Preserve local control by encouraging districts and schools to enact instructional programs and organize professional development aligned to the standards.
- Create accountability systems that are based on whether students are meeting the standards.

(Tenets paraphrased from Resnick and Zurawsky)

Accountability tests were not intended to take the place of rigorous learning standards or to overshadow more authentic forms of assessment. Over time, unfortunately, due to the high-stakes nature of these statewide assessments, the content of the test has too often become the de facto curriculum that is taught in our schools and classrooms. And the format of the
test (fill in the bubble by the correct answer) has too often become the way teaching and learning occurs in the classroom...paper and pencil, worksheets, bubble sheets. “The sometimes piece-meal evolution of most state-level education testing programs has led to assessment systems that fundamentally diminish rather than enhance the quality of a state’s schools.” In other words, if it’s not on the test it’s not taught in the classroom; and if it’s tested in a certain way, it’s taught in that way.

This narrowing of the curriculum and instructional diet to address only the tested concepts in non-challenging, artificial, worksheet-type learning scenarios can have the opposite effect on learning than that for which we are striving. These tests can become the entire fare of teaching and learning and result in a curriculum and instructional diet that is the equivalent to running a “race to mediocrity”—everyone working very hard at low-level learning to pass a test that is based on the easiest-to-assess learning standards of a subject area, all the while knowing that the diet is not preparing students sufficiently for future academic and life opportunities and challenges. Over time, this type of curriculum diet may raise test scores but can lower the bar for learning and real, authentic learning. The learning diet becomes bland and boring.

Curriculum tools, such as roadmaps, frameworks, and pacing guides, have been developed by districts, publishing companies, and other educational service providers to provide clarity about what, when, and sometimes how to teach the expected learning standards. And entire cottage industries have sprung up devoted to winning this race to mediocrity. Test prep workbooks, textbook ancillary materials, online practice test programs, and the like have been developed to provide more opportunities for students to partake of the test-prep diet. “Students become expert test takers but cannot retain or apply what they “know” in a context other than the test environment.”

Instructional materials and curriculum tools can be of great benefit to teachers (especially those new to teaching). But if they are based on a narrow curriculum, rely on test-prep practices, unduly constrain flexibility in the sequence and pacing of instruction, and restrict or lack authentic learning opportunities for students, they can become too constrictive of teacher practice and student learning and thus perpetuate the bland diet of the race to mediocrity. It is important for teachers and students to have clarity in the expected learning standards, and teachers and students need to be provided tools and supports to meet these expectations. But, no one wants to be directed to “be on page 12 on Tuesday, we’re coming in to check.” And page 12 may or may not reflect the content, level of academic rigor, and learning that is most critical for the students. Over-prescribed curricula focused on narrow test-driven content, just
as with over-reliance on standardized testing, can have negative impacts on teaching and learning. “The fact that states mostly rely on multiple-choice tests...to measure student learning discourages the development of higher-thinking and problem-solving skills.” (Stecher, Vernez, Steinberg, 2010)

Building teacher capacity to teach the expected curriculum in engaging and authentic ways and supporting students to engage meaningfully in learning opportunities are core responsibilities that districts must take. These responsibilities cannot be abdicated and replaced by a too-restrictive curriculum map, framework, or pacing guide. The responsibility for joining this race to mediocrity is not wholly the responsibility of policy makers, resource publishers, and test developers. It is also a race we have willingly engaged in to meet the demands of and avoid the sanctions imposed by state accountability systems.

So, how do we ensure the porridge is just right? I believe we can get the results by running another race...the race to excellence and academic rigor. If we are teaching a meaningful and rigorous curriculum, if students regularly engage in a diet of challenging and authentic learning opportunities from K–12, then they are much more likely to be prepared for college, work, and life, and be able to pass a test over the content they’ve been taught.

The reverse is not true, however. If our students are continually fed a diet of low rigor, narrowly defined content standards; spend an inordinate amount of time in worksheet-type learning; and have limited opportunities for authentic, challenging learning, they may pass a test, but it is far less likely they will be prepared for the challenges of college, work, and life.

In the current political context of high-stakes accountability, it will be challenging to shift away from the race to mediocrity at the policy-making level, but as educators, we should press for just such a reform. We should embrace accountability if it is based upon meaningful, rigorous learning and within accountability systems that are “designed to inspire and that are founded on high expectations, a sense of fairness, trust, and complete confidence in the measures employed.”

It is time to enrich the curriculum, instruction, and assessment diet so that we expect our schools to run and win the race to excellence.

Dr. Denise Collier of Collier Educational Consulting is a TASA consultant.

References


Huckabee is proud to partner with the Killeen and Hurst-Euless-Bedford school districts on their new, cutting-edge Career and Technology Academies. These career academies are designed to give students hands-on, real world experience to prepare them for multiple career choices like animation, architecture, computer technology, culinary arts, engineering and health science, just to name a few. Students will be able to use existing and emerging technologies as a part of their education, and many career pathways can lead to industry certifications or college credit.
Malcolm Gladwell’s book *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* looks at how major changes in our society often happen due to ideas, behavior, and messages spreading in a manner similar to the outbreak of an illness—hence the coining of the term, “social epidemic.”

Gladwell used Paul Revere’s famous ride to Lexington to illustrate the power of “messaging.” Following the Boston Tea Party, the American Colonists reached a point of no return. Revere became the “one man—one voice,” starting a social epidemic that eventually led to the creation of a new nation! Revere carried the message; however, those he told carried the message to others—thus the epidemic. The contagious “spreading” of the message resulted in a new beginning for America.

It is now time for Texans to embrace the power of a social epidemic. It is time for your voice to be heard at the Capitol in Austin. All Texans need to understand that our public schools face impossible challenges due to critical funding issues, testing/accountability, and 21st century workforce demands. Schools have lost their freedom to govern locally.

The “one size fits all” prototype is leaving children behind.

Schools across Texas are embracing a *New Vision for Public Education in Texas*. This vision embraces schools where all students are engaged in relevant, meaningful activities and where classrooms reflect innovation, creativity, problem-solving, collaboration, communication, and critical thinking. In this new vision, daily standardized test preparation and boring fact-memorization skills are replaced with digital learning, curriculum standards relevant to real-world challenges, multiple assessments for student performance, and accountability that’s based on a combination of measures, not just a test. This vision also promotes local control of schools with the state accepting responsibility to provide equitable, adequate funding.

In a nutshell, it’s about creating student-centered schools and future-ready students.

What can you do to support this 21st century learning vision? You can embrace the power of a social epidemic. Become a messenger for change in our public schools. Show your support for student-centered schools and future ready students, not test-driven classrooms and test-driven accountability systems. Share this message with your family, your friends, your co-workers, your legislators.

*Mary Ann Whiteker is superintendent at Hudson ISD.*
A Little Sunscreen for the Sunshine

by Ian M. Halperin

As a school administrator you have many responsibilities. While student success and financial accountability generally lead that list, there are lots of smaller issues that, if mishandled, can lead to unrest and mistrust within your district. One of those areas is protecting the personal information of your students and staff. State and federal “sunshine” laws are designed to ensure that we, as representatives of a government agency, conduct our business in the open and that all citizens have a right to be informed and retain control over the instruments they have created.

When talking about Texas public schools and public information, the Texas Public Information Act (TPIA) defines what is and is not public information. Beyond the TPIA, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) provides federal guidelines as to what information you can and can’t release about your students. Both of these laws are complex and the subject of much debate.

This article will provide an overview of several sections of these laws. You should consult your school attorney or the Texas Attorney General (AG) for specific advice. Any of this is subject to change by an AG ruling, the legislature, or a court case. While there are potential legal ramifications for violating the TPIA or FERPA, the potential PR and staff morale issues are far more likely to cause you pain.

Much of the information contained in this article comes from the 2012 Public Information Handbook published by the AG’s Office. I highly recommend that you download a copy and keep it handy for reference. You can get it for free here: https://www.oag.state.tx.us/AG_Publications/pdfs/publicinfo_hb.pdf

Protecting Your Staff

Is your district doing everything within the law to protect the information of those you serve? While the media likes to trumpet the TPIA when they use it to obtain information for a story, the exact same law provides us with tools to protect our private information and our district.

The first step is to check your local policy and be sure you have established reasonable procedure for handling requests and designated a public information coordinator. This is very important for meeting timelines and ensuring all requests are treated uniformly. For the past six years, I have processed all open records requests received by my district. Recently, there has been an increase in
the number of requests I would classify as “solicitations.” Since the law does not allow you to ask a requestor why they want the information, you can only speculate as to how the information will be used. But when an investment company or brokerage house submits a request for “name, address, phone number, salary, and age of all employees,” I think it’s safe to assume some cold calls will be involved. And while this data mining is perfectly legal under the law, I do not believe it is what the legislature had in mind when it created the TPIA in 1973.

The exceptions listed here are by no means the only sections that may apply to information contained in a request, but they are a good place to start when it comes to protecting your employees. Every request is unique and has to be treated as such. Remember, you cannot just redact the information. You must inform the requestor that you believe the information is protected (citing the correct section) or inform him or her that you are going to seek an AG’s opinion. If the requestor allows you to make the redactions, you may. Be sure to get it in writing. And be sure you follow the deadlines!

Section 552.024 of the law allows all public employees to decide whether or not to allow public access (release) of the following information, provided they do so within the 14th day of employment:

- Home address
- Home telephone number
- Emergency contact information
- Social Security number
- Whether they have family members

When an employee elects to keep this information private, the AG allows us to redact the above information without seeking a ruling.

A form letter your district can use when responding to a request for this type of information can be found at https://www.oag.state.tx.us/open/ord_forms.shtml.

In addition, the AG has recently ruled that date of birth, in conjunction with other information, may be considered confidential. Now is a great time to update your employee information forms and be sure you include the “opt out” provisions. In my district, almost 90 percent of the employees have elected not to have their information released.

Public employees’ work e-mail addresses are always subject to release. Be sure to review your district’s acceptable-use policy and be prepared to answer questions as to why they may be receiving e-mails for political purposes but as employees they might violate policy if they forward them. And check with your IT staff on what your criteria are for determining spam and blocking e-mails.

Section 552.102 addresses two items directly related to public school employees that the AG considers confidential.

### TPIA Pop Quiz

How much do you know about the TPIA? Let’s take a little quiz and find out. The answers are at the end of this article.

1. **True or False?** The request must contain the words “open records” or “public information” to be valid.
2. You **MAY/MAY NOT** ask why the person wants the information.
3. The state agency responsible for setting fees related to the Act is:
   - A. The Attorney General’s Office
   - B. The Comptroller’s Office
   - C. The Texas Building and Procurement Commission
   - D. The General Service Commission
4. **True or False?** You have 10 days to provide the requested information.
5. According to a recent AG ruling, if the requested information is posted on a Web site, providing the URL for that Web site **DOES/DOES NOT** meet the intention of the Act?
6. The Act requires that the requestor be notified within 10 business days if you:
   - A. Seek an AG opinion
   - B. Are not able to produce the documents within 10 days
   - C. Determine that the fees will exceed $40
   - D. All of the above
7. **True or False?** Since we are in Texas, as long as we follow the Texas Public Information Act we can ignore FERPA.
8. According to the Act, the name of an applicant for superintendent of a public school district is excepted from the Act, except for the name or names of the finalists which must be released at least ____ days before the final vote.
9. The penalties for violating the Act include:
   - A. Six months in county jail
   - B. A fine not to exceed $1,000
   - C. Loss of state funding
   - D. A and B
   - E. All of the above
10. **True or False?** The AG’s Office expects you to know all of the above.
Transcripts of Professional Public School Employees

Section 552.102 also protects from required public disclosure most information on a transcript from an institution of higher education maintained in the personnel files of professional public school employees. Generally, this includes grades, GPA, and Social Security number. Section 552.102(b) does not except from disclosure information on a transcript detailing the degree obtained and the curriculum pursued.

Evaluations of Public School Teachers and Administrators

Although disclosure of the evaluations of public school teachers and administrators does not constitute an invasion of privacy, such evaluations are confidential by statute and, therefore, excepted from public disclosure pursuant to section 552.101 of the Government Code. Section 21.355 of the Education Code makes confidential a “document evaluating the performance of a teacher or administrator.”

Again, these sections offer guidelines as to what types of information may be considered private. You are advised to seek an AG ruling, citing the relevant section(s), before you redact anything.

Protecting Your Students

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974, commonly known as FERPA, is a federal law that protects the privacy of student education records. Students have specific, protected rights regarding the release of such records, and FERPA requires that institutions adhere strictly to these guidelines. FERPA divides these records into two broad categories: directory information and non-directory information.

When dealing with student directory information, FERPA is a little flexible. Some information in a student’s educational record is defined as directory information under FERPA. Under a strict reading of FERPA, the school may disclose this type of information without the written consent of the student. However, the student can exercise the option to restrict the release of directory information by submitting a formal request to the school to limit disclosure.

This election is made at the beginning of each school year in most districts, but it can be changed by the family at any time.

Directory information may include:

- Name
- Address
- Phone number and e-mail address
- Dates of attendance
- Degree(s) awarded
- Enrollment status
- Major field of study

Though it is not specifically required by FERPA, institutions should always disclose to parents that such information is considered by the school to be directory information and, as such, may be disclosed to a third party upon request. Institutions should err on the side of caution and request, in writing, that the student allow the school to disclose directory information to third parties.

Notice the words “may include.” It is not “must include.” Under FERPA, a school board can determine which items they consider directory information. Many districts have determined that a student’s home address and phone number are not directory information and, therefore, not subject to release except in specific situations. These may include military recruiters (in accordance with federal law), approved contractors and service providers (yearbook publishers, class ring providers), and other government agencies with a legitimate need to know. Adopting this policy allows students’ names and selected information to be used in school publications and sports programs and released to the media, but it deters solicitors while helping protect their privacy.

Non-directory information is any educational record not considered directory information. Non-directory information must not be released to anyone except parents and/or legal guardians. Further, faculty and staff can access non-directory information only if they have a legitimate academic need to do so.
Non-directory information **may include**:
- Social security number
- Student identification number
- Race, ethnicity, and/or nationality
- Gender
- Transcripts; grade reports

Since we can’t seek an AG’s ruling in FERPA cases, how do we notify the requestor that we won’t release the information? The Texas Education Agency offers the following reply to those requests:

“Pursuant to the federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA), 20 U.S.C. Section 1232g, YOUR ISD is required to withhold from public disclosure personally identifiable information in educational records. Additionally the United States Department of Education Family Policy Compliance Office has determined the FERPA determinations must be made by the educational authority in possession of the educational records. Therefore, YOUR ISD may withhold any information requested under the Public Information Act that YOUR ISD determines is confidential under FERPA without the necessity of seeking a determination from the attorney general under section 522.301 of the Government Code.”

Remember, this only applies to student educational records. Parents/legal guardians have the rights to any of these records without filing a request.

**Additional TPIA Tips**

When counting days to determine deadlines, school holidays when the district is closed do not count against you. But you must note them when you seek an AG opinion.

Under the TPIA, you are not required to create a document to respond to a request. For example: someone requests the ethnic breakdown of all varsity football players. While you may have a document that lists varsity football players AND a document that contains the ethnic breakdown of male high school students, you are not required to create a third document from that data.

Remember that only documents in existence at or before the time of request are responsive. Requests cannot be for documents created in the future.

In addition, Section 552.135 addresses the confidentiality of “informers” when they are students, former students, or employees of a school district and provide information about possible crimes. Section 552.2661 addresses a requestor who fails to pay an ISD for previous requests.

**Conclusion**

School administrators need not fear the TPIA. “Open records” are not bad words, but you can’t ignore them and you must have a local policy and procedures to ensure that they are handled in a timely manner. By knowing the law, you can reassure your staff, students, and parents that your district is doing everything you can to protect their records and personal information.

Ian M. Halperin serves as executive director of communications and community relations for Wylie ISD.
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Mission: School Transformation—Board Resolution Available Online

TASA has prepared a sample Board Resolution to help districts build support for the transformation needed in Texas public schools—transformation that fosters innovation, creativity, and a thirst for learning with new, more meaningful assessment and accountability measures, rather than a system built around narrowly focused standardized tests that end up as the “be-all, end-all” yardstick for a school’s success. We encourage you to share this document with your board members and ask them to adopt the resolution during their board meetings to show their support for Student-Centered Schools, Future-Ready Students. TASA’s Web site includes a list of almost 200 districts that have already adopted the resolution (http://www.tasanet.org/adopted-board-resolutions). Please contact Jenny Caputo, TASA’s director of communications and media relations, when your district takes action (or if you already have) so that we can include you.

Resolution Concerning High-Stakes Standardized Testing of Texas Public School Students

WHEREAS, the over reliance on standardized, high stakes testing as the only assessment of learning that really matters in the state and federal accountability systems is strangling our public schools and undermining any chance that educators have to transform a traditional system of schooling into a broad range of learning experiences that better prepares our students to live successfully and be competitive on a global stage; and

WHEREAS, we commend Robert Scott, Commissioner of Education, for his concern about the overemphasis on high stakes testing that has become “a perversion of its original intent” and for his continuing support of high standards and local accountability; and

WHEREAS, we believe our state’s future prosperity relies on a high-quality education system that prepares students for college and careers, and without such a system Texas’ economic competitiveness and ability and to attract new business will falter; and

WHEREAS, the real work of designing more engaging student learning experiences requires changes in the culture and structure of the systems in which teachers and students work; and

WHEREAS, what occurs in our classrooms every day should be student-centered and result in students learning at a deep and meaningful level, as opposed to the superficial level of learning that results from the current over-emphasis on that which can be easily tested by standardized tests; and

WHEREAS, we believe in the tenets set out in Creating a New Vision for Public Education in Texas (TASA, 2008) and our goal is to transform this district in accordance with those tenets; and

WHEREAS, Our vision is for all students to be engaged in more meaningful learning activities that cultivate their unique individual talents, to provide for student choice in work that is designed to respect how they learn best, and to embrace the concept that students can be both consumers and creators of knowledge; and

WHEREAS, only by developing new capacities and conditions in districts and schools, and the communities in which they are embedded, will we ensure that all learning spaces foster and celebrate innovation, creativity, problem solving, collaboration, communication and critical thinking; and

WHEREAS, these are the very skills that business leaders desire in a rising workforce and the very attitudes that are essential to the survival of our democracy; and

WHEREAS, imposing relentless test preparation and boring memorization of facts to enhance test performance is doing little more than stealing the love of learning from our students and assuring that we fall short of our goals; and

WHEREAS, we do not oppose accountability in public schools and we point with pride to the performance of our students, but believe that the system of the past will not prepare our students to lead in the future and neither will the standardized tests that so dominate their instructional time and block our ability to make progress toward a world-class education system of student-centered schools and future-ready students; therefore be it

RESOLVED that the _____________ ISD Board of Trustees call on the Texas Legislature to reexamine the public school accountability system in Texas and to develop a system that encompasses multiple assessments, reflects greater validity, uses more cost efficient sampling techniques and other external evaluation arrangements, and more accurately reflects what students know, appreciate and can do in terms of the rigorous standards essential to their success, enhances the role of teachers as designers, guides to instruction and leaders, and nurtures the sense of inquiry and love of learning in all students.

Download sample resolution in PDF format

Texas Resolution Goes Nationwide!
The call for transformation is spreading beyond Texas! On March 15, the Community District Education Council 30 in Queens, New York, unanimously approved a nearly identical resolution. The Council encourages other New York City area districts to pass similar resolutions.
TWO SUPERINTENDENTS joined a long list of lawmakers on Saturday, March 24, as featured speakers at the Save Texas Schools Rally. The march to the Texas Capitol and rally on the steps drew roughly 2,000 supporters, all delivering the message to lawmakers that they need to find a way to increase funding for public education.

John Folks, from Northside ISD in San Antonio, kicked off the rally telling those gathered that he wasn’t willing to accept “the new normal,” a catch phrase bandied about by lawmakers last year referring to economic conditions and the fact that schools will have to do less with more.

Dr. Folks also reminded those gathered that the upcoming elections (early voting is May 14-24 and primary elections are May 29) are incredibly important. “The fight begins now with elections,” he said. “Not when the legislature comes in.”

John Kuhn, superintendent of Perrin-Whitt CISD and author of last year’s “Alamo Letter” that compared the plight of Texas schools to the odds faced by William Travis and his forces at the Alamo, also spoke.

Kuhn compared education to football, with the educator as quarterback and lawmakers as the offensive line.

“Give us time to stand in the pocket and complete these passes,” Kuhn said.
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**TASA Spring/Summer 2012 Calendar**

### April

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<tr>
<td>13–15</td>
<td>Texas Association of Suburban and Mid-Urban Schools (TAS/MUS) Spring Conference</td>
<td>Lost Pines Hyatt Resort, Bastrop, TX</td>
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<tr>
<td>18–19</td>
<td>First Time Superintendents Academy, Session 4</td>
<td>Experts in the Field, Austin Marriott North Hotel, Round Rock, TX</td>
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<td>3–4</td>
<td>50 Ways to Close the Achievement Gap</td>
<td>Elizabeth Clark, TASA Headquarters, Austin, TX</td>
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<tr>
<td>8–11</td>
<td>Level I Curriculum Management Audit Training</td>
<td>Jan Jacob, TASA Headquarters, Austin, TX</td>
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### June

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<tr>
<td>24–26</td>
<td>University of Texas/Texas Association of School Administrators (UT/TASA) 64th Annual Summer Conference on Education</td>
<td>Austin Renaissance Hotel, Austin, TX</td>
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Senior Leadership Institute
**Ahead of the Curve: New Leadership for New Challenges**
JUNE 10–12 • BOULDER, COLORADO
Senior leaders must always have an eye on the horizon to stay ahead of the changing demands that will face them in the coming years. Join colleagues from across the country and Douglas Reeves, founder of the Leadership and Learning Center, as well as nationally recognized speakers Cathy Lassiter and Ainsley Rose, in a conversation about the “how and why” of activating change in schools.

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For more information contact Brooke Little at 866.399.6019 ext. 227 BLittle@LeadandLearn.com

Senior Leadership Institute
**Ahead of the Curve: New Leadership for New Challenges**
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“As we enter a new era in school reform, senior leaders must position themselves to be ‘ahead of the curve.’ But what does this mean exactly? Attend this institute to learn how.” —Douglas B. Reeves

For more information contact Brooke Little at 866.399.6019 ext. 227 BLittle@LeadandLearn.com

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