

**TESTIMONY**  
**Texas Legislature Select Committee on Public School Accountability**  
**University of North Texas Dallas Campus**  
**June 16, 2008**

Senator Shapiro, Representative Eissler, and Committee Members:

The League of Women Voters of Texas appreciates this opportunity to provide input on the state's accountability system. The League also appreciates the work you are doing to evaluate the current Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) and, hopefully, to recommend changes to the Legislature that will create a more just system, free of punitive ratings and sanctions.

The time for change is now. The state recently closed two urban high schools, one in Austin and one in Houston. The decisions are made without recognition of notable academic gains that still fail to meet the established passing standards. Like so many other schools that are in academic trouble, the students are predominantly poor and nonwhite. English language learners often present an additional challenge. For these schools, the needed changes in the system are too late.

To ensure a healthy future for our public schools, the League of Women Voters supports a Texas accountability system that:

- diagnoses the strengths and weaknesses of schools and school districts by identifying academic achievement and gaps in performance among subgroups of students;
- does NOT establish school or school district ratings;
- does NOT sanction, reconstitute, or close schools;
- measures a school's growth in academic achievement from one year to the next, rather than as a single-year assessment; and
- directs resources to improve performance.

It is critical to take these steps, as more schools are accumulating Unacceptable ratings. The more stringent sanctions of SB 1, passed in the spring of 2006, are beginning to take a toll. When these sanctions are layered upon sanctions levied under the No Child Left Behind Act, the results can be devastating.

The low-performing labels stigmatize the schools, the districts, educators, and neighborhoods. Area real estate values fall. Public opinion of the schools or districts is shaped by the lowest performing group in the lowest subject area—perhaps because one or two students fell short in one of 36 indicators. The bad label sticks, even if a school climbs back to an Acceptable or better rating.

The League's recommendations to retool the accountability system represent the consensus of 25 member organizations from across the state. Their position followed a two-year study and report on testing and accountability in the public schools of Texas. That August 2007 report included an analysis of the demographics of academic ratings for districts and charters by the Texas Association of School Business Officials (TASBO), based on 2006 data from the Texas Education Agency.

The data revealed a bias in the accountability system. Small districts and charters were disproportionately represented in the highest Exemplary rating. Districts and charters that earned the highest two ratings, Exemplary and Recognized, had relatively low numbers of economically disadvantaged students and high numbers of white students. Districts and charters that were rated as Acceptable and Unacceptable had relatively high populations of economically disadvantaged students.

It is time to create a level playing field. It is time to change the focus of our accountability system from one that labels and punishes to one that diagnoses and strengthens.