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Re: Request for Information Related to Interim Charge 3

Honorable Chairman Turner and House Higher Education Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit information on Interim Charge 3. Educate Texas is a public-private initiative of the Communities Foundation of Texas and our mission is to increase postsecondary readiness, access, and success for all Texas students by building partnerships, leading innovation, and scaling practices and policies. We convene the [Texas Student Success Council \(TSSC\)](#), a statewide policy and advocacy group made up of stakeholders representing K-12, higher education, business, and philanthropy to develop policy recommendations that support 60x30TX goals of preparing students for the workforce with credits and credentials of value.

The Texas Business Leadership Council (TBLC) serves on the Texas Student Success Council, offering a wealth of expertise on industry demands, the need to reskill the workforce, and how education contributes to a thriving economy. TBLC is a statewide network of CEOs and senior business executives who advance a long-term vision of a prosperous Texas in a globally competitive business environment. Together, we submit these comments related to work-based learning, summer melt, and a robust tri-agency approach to data collection and analysis.



Introduction

COVID-19 upended the K-12 and higher education system as millions of students moved to online classrooms in an effort to prevent viral spread. The pandemic has led to an unprecedented educational and economic crisis, the magnitude of which remains uncertain.

It is crucial that the state take this legislative session as an opportunity to address summer melt, unemployment numbers, and persistent systemic inequities that have been further exacerbated and made evident by COVID-19. Educating and re-skilling workers will be fundamental to the state's economic recovery and ongoing economic health as we face a future in which the number of middle-skill jobs far exceeds the number of workers trained at the middle-skill level.

In this RFI, we offer information on areas in which Educate Texas and the Texas Business Leadership Council have engaged in prior work, with the hope that it will be useful to the Committee.

1. How can the state meet the goals of 60x30TX?

From conversations with stakeholders representing higher education, K-12, business, and philanthropy, we have found that access to affordable higher education and credentials of value can often be obstructed by systemic barriers that lead to lower enrollment and completion rates. To achieve 60x30TX, it is crucial to strengthen the pathways along the education to workforce continuum by bolstering K-12 and postsecondary linkages, streamlining credit and credential portability, and more closely aligning education with workforce needs.

2. How has the pandemic impacted our state's workforce needs?

Since the onset of the pandemic in March, over 4.3 million unemployment claims have been made in Texas. COVID-19 has compounded an existing workforce crisis that has been brewing in Texas for years as the skills gap continues to widen. By 2036, 71% of jobs in Texas will require a postsecondary credential, but currently only 32% of high school graduates earn a credential within six years of high school graduation. Lower enrollment numbers in credit and certification programs since the onset of the pandemic will likely contribute to this growing gap.

Without intervention, COVID-19 has the potential to worsen the existing workforce crisis in addition to exacerbating existing inequities that create barriers to education and the workforce for many Texans, particularly for first-generation, low-income individuals of color. Current students and recent graduates also face increased competition and unprecedented challenges to obtaining meaningful work-based learning experiences and high-demand jobs that offer a livable wage during an uncertain economic recovery.



3. Is there legislative action that could help expand work-based learning?

States across the country have turned to work-based learning as a method of aligning education with the workforce in an effort to narrow the skills gap and address growing worker shortages. Additionally, work-based learning opportunities, particularly youth apprenticeships, that provide students with paid, on-the-job experiences, college credit, and industry-recognized credentials have been celebrated as a proven approach to increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workforce for low-income students of color. A successful expansion of work-based learning requires a united tri-agency approach to incentivizing and supporting industry and education partners. Specifically, we recommend the following legislative actions:

- Pass legislation that would improve coordination of grantmaking between TEA, THECB, and TWC to better ensure access to and funding for work-based learning initiatives, technical assistance, and regional intermediary development. Aligning funding across the agencies and posting these funding opportunities in a single location would remove a significant barrier to entry for many regional partners.
- Develop and adopt common rules and definitions for high-quality work-based learning and associated terms in statute and across TEA, THECB, and TWC to help guide program implementation and messaging.
- Establish a tri-agency data tracking system that promotes high-quality work-based learning experiences and tracks program accountability. These tracking systems should require: student-level outcomes to be disaggregated by income status, race/ethnicity, gender identity, and region; intermediary organizations, workforce, K-12 educators, and postsecondary providers to collect consistent metrics and outcomes aligned to the common definitions; and student outcomes and progress measures to be collected and analyzed by state agencies and included in an annual Tri-Agency Progress Report and/or 60x30TX Report.
- Offer flexibility to work-based learning programs that attempt to shift these experienced online due to COVID-19, particularly around work hour requirements.
- Develop a statewide and comprehensive broadband connectivity strategy that will have lasting impacts on connecting K-12, higher education and workforce opportunities. Build accountability into this strategy by establishing a broadband office that reports to the Governor. Comprehensive broadband access is critical not only to education, but to long-term economic recovery and innovation.

6. What is needed in order to identify and address gaps in existing data collection methods?

Developing and adopting common rules, definitions, and metrics across agencies for work-based learning, credit for prior learning, competency-based education, and other key program terms would help guide data collection, program implementation, and data messaging. Conducting a tri-agency audit of current data collection and reporting requirements, using these definitions and a standardized set of metrics, would be useful in identifying existing gaps and interventions that increase equitable outcomes for all Texas students and communities. Additionally, the agencies should consider market-level data that



can guide decisions for individuals, institutions, and industry on where to address gaps in efforts to better align pathways.

Regional partnerships of K-12, higher education, and businesses need access to resources and systems that allow for effective data collection and reporting on the common metrics established by the tri-agency. COVID-19 and budget cuts have limited the capacity of education and workforce providers to prioritize data collection and invest in data management systems to overcome these challenges. Making tools, resources, and technical assistance available to regional partners would improve regional partners' ability to meet data requirements, as well as the quality of data collected.

7. What improvements could be made to alleviate 'summer melt' and to facilitate streamlined student advising?

Staff capacity is one of the most pressing concerns in combating summer melt. Counselor to student ratios remains high in Texas, at 444:1 compared to the recommended 250:1. Counselors have big jobs that extend beyond college counseling. Many of the charter school districts and most successful traditional school districts have staffed entire college access and success departments that include alumni counselors.

In many instances, these alumni counselors work in an extremely hands-on manner, by making frequent check-in calls and even visiting students on campus. During the summer prior to college enrollment, these counselors help students navigate challenges that can easily derail their college enrollment. Much evidence exists that this hands-on counseling approach works, but it comes at a substantial cost that can be prohibitive for small school districts, especially those in rural communities.

Additionally, counseling provides an opportunity to integrate career knowledge and information into student advising, which helps to ensure that students are on a postsecondary path that will lead to high-growth, high-demand careers. A robust college and career path advising program can also help to introduce students to summer work-based learning programs and longer-term youth apprenticeships which provide students with work experiences relevant to their college and career plans.

Suggested ways to support postsecondary linkages to help prevent summer melt include:

- Dedicate funds for expanding high school college counseling. This support is too important to roll into already full counselor roles.
- Provide flexibility to counselors so they can adjust their schedules to ensure they have coverage during the summer months if students have questions or need assistance.
- As part of college and alumni counseling, consider implementing a mandatory intent to enroll survey prior to high school graduation. This could help gauge where students are in their decision process and identify necessary support needed.



Suggested ways for institutions of higher education to help prevent summer melt:

- Consider accepting students' unofficial high school transcript for enrollment into all institutes of higher education and providing a later deadline to receive official final transcript. Removing or delaying some of processes that can serve as barrier to student entry will help students get a strong start.
- Consider expanding automatic admissions to community colleges and universities using an established criterion and proactively notifying local students of their admission.
- Offer summer bridge programs for students who have not demonstrated college readiness and for first-generation students to ease the transition to college.

8. What changes, if any, are needed to align data collection between the THECB, TWC and TEA in order to collect consistent metrics?

Consistent measures can help lead to consistent metric collection across agencies. Common definitions, as outlined above, as well as an agreed-upon list of measures and success indicators would help guide the collection of consistent metrics and outcomes data across agencies. We also recommend disaggregating the data collected by student income status, race/ethnicity, gender identity, and region to provide an equity lens through which to interpret the data collected.

Thank you for the opportunity to share information and recommendations on achieving 60x30TX, expanding work-based learning, battling summer melt, and developing a robust tri-agency data system. As you work to address the challenges and opportunities facing students and institutions, we hope these recommendations can inform your policy development. Please let us know if you have any questions or need any further information.

Sincerely,

John Fitzpatrick
Executive Director
Educate Texas

Justin Yancy
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Please contact Priscilla Aquino-Garza, Director of Policy at Educate Texas, at pgarza@cftexas.org with questions, comments, or requests. Educate Texas serves as a thought partner to legislative offices in efforts to increase postsecondary readiness, access, and success for all Texas students.