

September 1, 2020

To: The Texas House of Representatives Higher Education Committee

Re: Interim Charge #3 Request for Information

Chairman Turner, Vice Chairman Stucky and members:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit information regarding the goals of 60x30TX, the pandemic's impact on workforce demands, data collection gaps and changes needed to alleviate summer melt.

This letter is submitted on behalf of The Commit Partnership and Dallas County Promise, data-based education nonprofits seeking to ensure all students have an equitable and excellent education that results in a living wage career.

The COVID-19 pandemic has left an unprecedented impact on Texas, and particularly on our workforce. Between March and mid-August, a total of 3.5 million workers -- accounting for 24% of the total civilian workforce -- applied for unemployment insurance representing a nearly 10-fold increase over 2019 (See Exhibit A). Fully recovering and returning to economic prosperity depends on our ability to provide individuals with skills and training necessary in a post-COVID economy. Higher education plays a vital role in this endeavor.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its related job losses have disproportionately impacted low-wage workers and women. Nationally, workers of color are 1.5-4.5 percent more likely to lose their jobs, and **workers without a high school degree were 10 percentage points more likely to have stopped working than otherwise similar employees with college degrees**¹ (Exhibit B).

Comparisons to the 2008 Recession are difficult to make because of the rapid rate of job loss in COVID-19, but studies show more than 95% of the jobs created during the 2008 recovery went to workers with an Associate degree or higher² (Exhibit C).

With postsecondary attainment rates trailing most other states, Texas was ill prepared to weather the workforce challenges COVID-19 presented. Only 38% of Texas residents aged 25 to 34 have earned at least an Associate degree, compared to 44% for the country (Exhibit D). And not all Texans are earning college degrees at equal rates: only 33% of Black residents and only 22% of Hispanic residents in this age group have earned a postsecondary degree, compared to 50% for their White peers³ (Exhibit E).

Recovering from the current pandemic depends on Texas' ability to properly leverage higher education by increasing our current post-secondary completion rate. This requires coordinated efforts across K-12, higher education and workforce -- with students at the forefront of any decision.

¹ Brookings Institute: [COVID-19 and Labor Markets](#)

² Georgetown Center For Education and the Workforce, "America's Divided Recovery". Brookings Institute.

³ US Census American Communities Survey 5-year estimates, 2018

We believe a strong set of legislative actions around:

- **Data collection via extending PEIMS into postsecondary**
- **Model safe and secure agreements to foster information sharing between institutions and**
- **Incentives for postsecondary collaborative partnerships that focus on encouraging postsecondary enrollment, persistence and completion, with a strong focus on equity**

will significantly increase postsecondary completion rates, ultimately moving us closer to reaching our state's 60x30TX goals.

1. **Strengthening Data to Empower Students:** *(IC Q.6: What is needed in order to identify and address gaps in existing data collection methods?; IC Q.7: What improvements could be made to alleviate 'summer melt' and to facilitate streamlined student advising?)*

As Texas recovers from COVID-19, legislators must prioritize building systems that enable actionable information and insights. Though data collection (particularly longitudinal trends) in Texas is robust, it is often siloed, lagged, or difficult to access, making the system more compliance-driven than service-oriented.

Dallas County Promise has rooted its postsecondary access and completion efforts in providing **timely, actionable data to students and the adults supporting them, significantly reducing summer melt and increasing the effectiveness of the advising system**. Institutions use this aggregate on-time information (made possible by data-sharing partnerships) to identify trends and effective practices in supporting students. Promise also provides partner districts and institutions with powerful customer relationship management systems that combine timely information from the high school and higher education institutions with SAT, ACT, TSI, FAFSA and Apply TX data.

Access to this rich student-level snapshot transforms the advising system and facilitates tools such as a student app with an automatically updated college enrollment checklist. Combining quality insights and efficient support mechanisms **increased 2019 postsecondary enrollment rates in Dallas County while the rest of the state experienced a 0.4 percentage point decrease**⁴. Dallas County enrollment rate increases were highest among students of color or first-generation college goers.

Though Dallas County Promise has cobbled together support using strong case management systems, the process took several years and continues to require significant manual student matching (for example, ensuring Jose Valez from Bryan Adams High School matches the same Jose Valdez who enrolls at Richmond College). However, we recommend two legislative solutions to facilitate the creation and use of these information systems, enabling other regions to scale or replicate versions of the Dallas County Promise system:

A. Extend the use of a single, uniform student identification number beyond PreK-12

Students interact with multiple systems in their K-12 to college to career journey. With every transition, a new identification number is created, complicating the process for both institutional staff, practitioners and the student. Securely equipping practitioners with useful, student-specific information is critical to providing valuable student support as they transition from one system to another or, in the case of dual credit, operate in high school and postsecondary simultaneously. The lack of a common ID

⁴ Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2018-2019.

number makes it an often laborious process for advisors to gather relevant information to support the student.

The 86th Texas Legislature took a major step toward a seamless handoff from childcare centers into PreK through the passage of House Bill 680. HB680 requires the Texas Workforce Commission to provide a PEIMS number for each child receiving subsidized child care, which continues with the student as they transition to pre-k through high school. This not only gives school practitioners a better history of a student's potential strengths and needs, but it eases the burden on parents and administrators that has historically occurred when a student transitions systems. Without a common identifier to bridge the gap, students enter a new system and need to be re-evaluated for many services. This lack of coordination is not only a waste of resources, but it also often has a detrimental impact on the students due to time spent without receiving services they need. That gap is often exacerbated by parents' delay in seeking these evaluations because they are navigating a new system.

As advisors take on increasingly higher case loads, including a PEIMS number on key reports, such as the Counselor Suite files, could virtually eliminate time spent matching students. Without this, advisors currently spend hours performing data entry to find and support students who have not completed FAFSA steps, as Counselor Suite lacks a PEIMS number. Just as providing a PEIMS number in childcare facilitates the transition to elementary school and provides greater transparency into the impact of a quality childcare center on student outcomes, **carrying a uniform student identification number into postsecondary and compelling institutions to use this ID in addition to their local ID would improve a practitioner's ability to efficiently review student history and identify course options to help students succeed.** Weaving these systems together through a PEIMS number mitigates the chance that a student enters postsecondary without having support or services needed and greatly enhances an advisor's ability to support students in applying and enrolling in the best pathway for them.

B. Create a Model FERPA-Compliant Data Sharing Agreement

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) is federal legislation enacted to protect the privacy of students and their parents. While the act is designed to ensure that students and parents of students may obtain access to the student's educational records, it also can be interpreted to unnecessarily prevent the release of records to third parties.

Robust information sharing requires heightened security and privacy precautions, but often, cross-institution or cross-agency information sharing is mired in dozens of agreements. **Districts, higher ed institutions, and community organizations who support students can spend months or years negotiating mutually agreed upon data sharing agreements** (Tarrant County College actively monitors or negotiates 21 separate agreements), a complicated process that can result in high school cohorts losing out on opportunities for strong regional collaboration on their behalf.

E3 Alliance in Austin demonstrated the success of having a common FERPA-compliant student data release form. Brokering common agreements between college advising nonprofits, ISDs, and higher ed partners enabled a 'flag' to be created in college systems to easily share back appropriate progress data with partners. With access to timely student-level data, one Austin district saw a 16-point increase in college persistence from year to year⁵.

⁵ StriveTogether: E3 Alliance reaches proof point with data-focused strategies and community collaboration. <https://www.strivetgether.org/insights/e3-alliance-reaches-proof-point-with-data-focused-strategies-and-community-collaboration/>

As a solution, we believe consensus on guiding principles of data use and how FERPA should be interpreted would streamline inefficiencies and allow for better information sharing. By **compelling state agencies to create sample template language**, practitioners, institutions and regional partners can spend more time serving students, rather than expending effort on administrative tasks.

2. Reducing Summer Melt *(IC Q7: What improvements could be made to alleviate ‘summer melt’ and to facilitate streamlined student advising?)*

For even engaged and prepared students, navigating the transition from high school to postsecondary can be difficult. Following high school graduation, students no longer have immediate access to their school counselor and are not yet fully connected to college or training program staff.

The summer melt phenomenon is true even of seniors who showed an intention to enroll in a program such as by completing admissions or financial aid applications. Students who signaled a strong interest in enrolling are also the most likely to be open to summer initiatives to support students. Of Dallas County Promise seniors who submitted a pledge in 2019, 9,913 (61%) were enrolled in a college the Fall after graduating from high school or completed an associate degree in high school, yet 15,892 (98%) seniors had indicated on their Fall Promise pledge they planned to enroll in a college and 14,779 (91%) even submitted an admissions application⁶ (Exhibit F).

Barriers that arise during the summer months are often simpler to address than other hurdles, and Dallas has shown extending **high school counselor and college advisor contracts to be year-round, personalized two-way texting with ‘just in time’ reminders, and advisor access to process reports** can mitigate summer melt (Exhibit G).

In addition, Dallas College and 12 other institutions statewide are piloting a personalized support program that provides free online remedial english and math courses for high school graduates prior to entering their freshman year of college. Upon successful completion, students can enroll directly into college-level courses at institutions that have partnered with ISDs. This strategy developed as an effort to curve the COVID slide expected after in-person school ended in early March, leaving many graduating seniors months before an anticipated college start date. **The Legislature should review student outcomes of Texas College Bridge and consider scaling the program to further mitigate summer melt.**

3. A Collaborative Approach To Postsecondary Access and Attainment: *(IC Q1: How can the state meet the goals of 60x30TX?)*

Texas graduates 90% of its public high school students, but only 23% of our state’s graduates go on to achieve a postsecondary credential within six years. Completion figures drop drastically for students of color or students experiencing poverty (Exhibit H), and targeted support for these students are imperative for the state to reach its 60x30TX goals.

⁶ Dallas County Promise Fall 2019 Promise pledge data; 2019 National Student Clearinghouse data of pledged students; Enrollment and application numbers directly from Dallas County Promise higher education partners

Even before the pandemic, Dallas County Promise relied on **strong regional partnerships and data transparency** to serve students across the County. Promise is more than financial assistance; it is a regional plan to increase equitable postsecondary enrollment, completion, and career entry. Wraparound supports and data systems encourage *completion* of a postsecondary certificate or degree, not just enrollment.

This structure has become the linchpin for ensuring countless Dallas County seniors don't opt out of postsecondary education this fall and miss out on important time to learn skills necessary in a post-COVID economy.

A comprehensive approach of combining student financial aid **with** strategic investments in data, student supports, and regional partnerships has expanded throughout the state, including San Antonio, Houston, Tyler, and Fort Worth. These regions are focusing on ensuring students who have been historically under-represented in higher education have the option to continue their training beyond high school. We cannot meet 60x30TX without significant improvement among key demographics (Exhibit I).

Texas legislators can accelerate progress toward 60x30TX by **incentivizing regional collaboration through grants for those meeting postsecondary access quality benchmarks**, including: (1) dedicated staff to coordinate regional efforts, (2) data infrastructure and information-sharing agreements to facilitate timely, personalized student support and (3) student support teams to support persistence and completion, primarily among first-generation college students or students experiencing poverty. These key components are critical to alleviating summer melt, encouraging postsecondary persistence and improving completion rates for all Texans.

We believe strongly that key improvements to our higher education system are necessary for our state to rebound from COVID-19, maintain our standing as an economic powerhouse and recover as a more inclusive and prosperous Texas.

Sincerely,

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