# Why Texas Business Backs Rigorous Course-Taking

*By John H. Stevens, Texas Business and Education Coalition*

Since the early 1990s the Texas Business and Education Coalition (TBEC) has been the most persistent and effective advocate calling for all Texas high school students to complete a rigorous academic core course of study. TBEC's involvement began with its *Texas Scholars* initiative, which organizes business volunteers to explain how a rigorous academic foundation will enhance students' future chances for success. The *Scholars* program now operates in more than 350 school districts that serve over two million students. TBEC also helps strengthen the message by working with policy makers to align a major financial aid program and college admissions standards with the state's 24-credit Recommended High School Program. Largely because of these efforts, the percentage of Texas graduates completing the high-level Recommended Program has increased from 15% in 1999 to 51% in 2001.

*Scholars* began as a local initiative in Longview, Texas, where Joe Randolph, the training manager for Eastman Chemical, observed that new employees lacked the knowledge and skills to succeed in the company's apprenticeship program. Mr. Randolph and Mary Alice Schmitz, a local middle school principal, recruited business volunteers to motivate eighth grade students to complete the 24-credit course of study in high school by explaining the international nature of the economy, the increasing demand for skilled workers, and the relationship between rigorous course taking and future standard of living.

From Longview, *Scholars* spread to other east Texas communities. State Board of Education (SBoE) member Mary Knotts Perkins became an enthusiastic promoter, and in 1992 the SBoE endorsed the initiative for statewide implementation. TBEC made *Texas Scholars* the centerpiece of its community outreach activities and the movement began to influence state education policy. The changes have been dramatic. Prodded by TBEC, the SBoE voted to deny credit toward high school graduation for below-level courses like *Correlated Language Arts* and *Fundamentals of Mathematics*. Then in 1993, Mary Knotts Perkins, Commissioner of Education, Lionel "Skip" Meno, and TBEC, were the forces behind the SBoE's creation of the Recommended High School Program, modeled after the course requirements of *Texas Scholars.*

Even with all this outreach, however, it was clear that many students were still being routed away from the recommended curriculum. Accordingly, TBEC leaders began talking with state legislators about the importance of a more universal approach. Faced with overwhelming evidence that all students benefit from a rigorous academic curriculum, the legislature acted. Beginning in 2004, students entering ninth grade will automatically be enrolled in the recommended curriculum and can opt out *only* if both the student's parent and a school official agree.

Raising the expectations for high school course-taking was just one piece. TBEC representatives also participated with legislators in a dialogue about "pipeline issues" — not the petroleum kind, but those related to the progress of young people through the K-12 system, on to higher education, and into the workforce. In the 1990s, the state enjoyed a significant financial surplus and legislators wanted to enact a major new financial aid program to help Texas students pay for college. Responding to research finds from ACT presented on behalf of TBEC, the Legislature established the TEXAS (Toward Excellence and Access) Grant Program. Legislators appropriated $200 million for the first biennium and have increased funding since then. Students qualify for TEXAS Grants by completing at least the course requirements of the Recommended Program and demonstrating financial need. In response, several public universities have guaranteed admission to graduates that complete the Recommended Program, or made it part of their admissions criteria.

Still, the idea of recommending a 24-credit graduation plan with a rigorous academic core is not universally popular. Texas business has stayed the course with education reform because knowledge and skills are even more important in the workplace now than a decade ago. American businesses compete globally for their share of world markets and the American people compete for their share of good jobs. Everyone – policy makers, educators, students, parents, and the general public – must do their part if our young people are to be adequately prepared to contribute to and participate fully in all aspects of life now and in the years to come.

Business has played a crucial role in building the political will to engage in a serious,

standards-based approach to school improvement. It must energize itself also to ensure that all students acquire a solid academic foundation that will prepare them for success after high school.

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# What Students Need to Succeed: An Agenda for Change

The Education Trust

For today's young people, success in work and in college begins on the same curricular path in high school. Establishing this new common curriculum and providing it to all students will take meaningful K-16 efforts in which K-12, higher education, business and policymakers all have roles to play.

## Start with your data

Regardless of whether these K-16 action plans are formed at the local, state or national level, they should be driven by data. Indeed, the first task for K-16 partners is to collect and analyze their own data. They should look at enrollments, achievement and attainment of their students both in high school and college, and examine how resources, including qualified teachers, are distributed. If possible, they should track student high school course-taking and test scores, and compare these to their performance in college and the workplace.

With data in hand, policymakers, educators and communities can make sure students have the curriculum they deserve by providing the following:

### *High school courses aligned to postsecondary requirements*

It may sound obvious, but it needs to be said: students cannot learn what they have not been taught. Algebra, for example, is foundational to later success. But students will never even see algebra in courses like "Contemporary Mathematics."

***States and districts need a rigorous "default" high school curriculum.*** The best data we have show that students enrolled in the college-preparatory track in high school are more successful whatever they do after high school. An immediate action, then, is to make this sequence the recommended or "default" curriculum for rising ninth-graders, at the very least for courses in English language arts and mathematics. The only way high-schoolers can be enrolled in something less rigorous is if students and their parents sign themselves out of the high-level courses.

Like Texas, states and districts should take the additional step of refusing to award high school credit for courses such as "Correlated Language Arts," "Fundamentals of Mathematics," and other low-level substitutes for learning English and mathematics.

***Higher education needs to agree on a common definition of the skills students need to begin credit-bearing courses.*** As important as it is for K-12 to get its ducks in a row, aligning the system works two ways. For its part, higher education needs to be clear about the level of reading, writing and mathematics skills incoming freshmen need to begin credit-bearing work. Different admissions requirements are fine. But consistent placement policies that include two- and four-year institutions will give high schools the clear target they need to prepare their graduates. Colleges will benefit, too, when they can staunch the current flow of resources into remediation and channel them back into their academic programs.

### *Good teachers and instruction*

Once students get into high-level courses, they need knowledgeable teachers who can provide instruction equal to the quality of content. While we acknowledge that staffing presents a huge challenge for some districts—especially those serving large numbers of low-income students and students of color—there are things policymakers can do to help:

***States and districts should examine their employment practices.*** Richard Ingersoll of the University of Pennsylvania has found that restrictive state and district policies about recruitment, hiring and class size often keep qualified teachers from the students who need them most. In addition, he shows that schools are being drained by a constant "revolving door" in teaching—a