Purpose of Report

The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) has received funding from the Gates Foundation to help states improve the college and career readiness of high school students. The global economy demands a more highly skilled workforce than ever before but the United States is not graduating enough students from high school who are ready to succeed in college or careers. Most states have begun efforts to improve college and career readiness but without adequate recognition of the size and urgency of the problem or the complexity of the solution. States need supportive public policies and practical strategies that will coalesce all of K-12 and public postsecondary education around a coherent college and career readiness agenda. The Gates Foundation is especially interested in SREB working with Texas because of its long and productive history of school reform and because Texas appears to have most of the foundation in place on which to build a successful readiness agenda.

This progress report is the first step in providing policy and education leaders in Texas with an action agenda and implementation plan to mobilize all key stakeholders to make the needed big gains in college and career readiness. We begin by presenting a model agenda for reform to achieve college and career readiness. Next we describe the context for current reform efforts including the key players and the situation confronting state leaders at the time of the passage of House Bill 1— the major new legislation that lays the groundwork for a college and career readiness agenda. We then describe the situation under the current reform framework under HB 1 and subsequent legislation, based on numerous interviews and a review of extensive background information. Next we present our analysis of both the process and the substance of current efforts, outlining what we see as the key issues to be addressed.

A Model for College and Career Readiness

Over several years and based on its experience working with many states, SREB has developed a model college/career readiness agenda that includes six interrelated and essential components:
1. Statewide college/career readiness standards

K-12 and public postsecondary sectors must jointly develop, and formally adopt, college readiness standards in reading, writing, and math that become highlighted subsets of official statewide school standards. Having one set of readiness standards that are approved and used by K-12 and all public postsecondary institutions (two-year and four-year sectors) is vital to sending clear signals to all public high schools about what it means to be college/career ready.

2. Assessment

Students should be assessed by methods that measure progress on the state-adopted readiness standards with qualifying scores that equate to the readiness performance levels expected of entering college students. A second, lower qualifying score should be specified if different levels of proficiency are expected for high school graduation compared to college/career readiness. Assessments of students in 11th grade should be used to direct students to targeted assistance in 12th grade to remedy deficiencies.

3. Public higher education, especially community colleges and all less selective regional universities need to ensure that the same standards and their performance expectation are used in their post-admission placement procedures.

4. Curriculum

Using the standards and performance levels established by the end-of-course assessments aligned with college readiness, the public school curriculum should be modified as necessary to target the specific statewide readiness standards, mapping back to grade 8. Supplemental curriculum and programs should be developed for 12th grade to target students who, based on 11th grade assessments, are on track to graduate without being college/career ready. First year college curricula should be modified as necessary to ensure that it matches the readiness standards.

5. Professional Development

Statewide plans should be developed, focused specifically on the state readiness standards, to help teachers understand the specific readiness standards and how to teach them effectively in grades 8-12. Plans should also address how teachers should implement the new 12th grade courses or activities designed to bring students up to readiness standards once 11th grade assessments are reviewed.

6. Accountability

School and student performance on the college/career readiness assessments should be part of the state school accountability program. This sends a clear message that
schools are held accountable for preparing students to be college/career ready—not just for graduating students from high school.

Ideally, these steps of the model occur in sequence: readiness standards are developed; curriculum is adjusted to reflect the standards; teachers receive training so that they can deliver the curriculum effectively; assessments are developed and administered to gauge student progress in learning the readiness curriculum; and schools are held accountable for producing college/career ready students.

In reality, the readiness agenda is superimposed onto preexisting circumstances and cycles, calling for adaptation and flexibility in implementation. But all pieces of the agenda are ultimately required. Failure to incorporate all of these pieces is the principal reason that many states’ efforts to improve college readiness are falling short of their goals. For example, many states have increased the number of required courses for high school graduation but have not established readiness standards to ensure that the content of those courses matches the expectations for incoming college students. Other states have adopted college readiness standards but have failed to get all public colleges and universities to use those standards in placing students in college-level courses. And many states have increased teacher training, but have not linked the training to specific readiness standards in those fields, limiting the impact of the training on college and career readiness.

While precise and clear readiness standards are the cornerstone of the process, it is through assessment and professional development that the standards are implemented and readiness becomes a reality. The best readiness standards will go for naught if teachers are not clear about what they are to teach, how best to teach it, and how to tell if students have adequately learned it.

Best Practices and Principles for College Readiness Initiatives

Furthermore, experience over the last several years with state efforts to implement readiness initiatives suggests a set of principles and practices needed to guide successful initiatives. These points derive from successes and from the struggles of states in these initiatives. They may be seen as principles that enable certain steps or the whole of the above agenda to be accomplished.

1. The College Readiness Initiative needs to have high state-level, statewide priority and direction. For such priority the following needs to be established.
   a. The college and career readiness problem is very large, much more extensive than popularly thought. ACT and the experience of a number of states that apply statewide or system-wide readiness standards indicate that 70 percent of even college bound high school graduates are not ready for college.

   Most states underestimate the percentages not ready because they do not have statewide, common placement standards applied across all of postsecondary
education – community and senior colleges and universities. Those states that may have statewide placement standards often set them too low.

b. The lack of readiness to begin collegiate or career learning and affordability are the most powerful obstacles to completing a postsecondary college or career degree or certificate. Completion rates at community colleges and four-year universities are very low nationwide and will not improve substantially until students enter more prepared.

c. Improving readiness is a job for virtually all of postsecondary education in a state. A great majority of public postsecondary institutions are significantly affected by the readiness problem, not only community colleges. While the high admission criteria of selective universities assure the readiness of most incoming students, all community colleges and nearly all regional universities nationwide have significant readiness challenges. It can be argued that any institution with open-admissions or average admission scores of less than 1050 SAT or 21 ACT have a true readiness problem in the range of 50 to 90 percent of incoming students. Any institution with a completion rate of less than 50 percent has a readiness problem.

d. College readiness initiatives should not negatively affect admission to community colleges or most regional universities. To the extent these initiatives are seen to limit admissions, they will be resisted by postsecondary education.

In the short term, the establishment of even higher statewide readiness standards only will increase the percentages of students deemed not ready and in need of remediation.

e. To create statewide commitment to a readiness initiative, it may be necessary to define clearly what is meant by readiness, particularly what the standards ready a student to do. The national rhetoric speaks of college and career readiness and is premised on the idea that the same kind and level of skills and knowledge are needed to begin academic or professional study in college as are needed to begin preparation after high school for careers that do not require associate’s or bachelor’s degrees. The assumption that students need the same level of learning skills for occupational or technical certificate level or applied associate degree study as for collegiate programs has not been proved.

It would be preferable that all high school graduates possess learning skills needed for collegiate study. And certainly these skills would serve students well in career-technical preparation, especially in the skill areas of reading, writing and math. However, it may be just as likely that a different, more applied version of these skills or even less rigorous level of reading, writing and math are needed.
There is some evidence that disagreement on the level of proficiency students may need to enter college or the workforce hinders states from pursuing aggressively a readiness agenda.

2. Successful state college readiness initiatives require levels and ranges of coordination within and among educational segments and functions seldom envisioned and virtually never accomplished to date in any state. To succeed statewide, an initiative must:

- Have all K-12 teachers in all schools understanding exactly the college readiness standards, give priority to them, and know how to teach them effectively.
- Have statewide K-12 assessments, course materials and teacher professional development focused on the exact college readiness standards.
- Have all public higher education—at least all community college degree programs and all regional universities—agreeing on the same set of college readiness standards in terms of content description, performance levels and assessments of student readiness. Only this level of coordination will enable one set of strong signals to be sent to all of K-12 statewide.
- Ensure that the college readiness standards and performance levels adopted by all public higher education are the same ones used in K-12 based readiness assessments.
- Ensure that all public higher education apply the statewide CRS and performance levels through use of the same placement tests and qualifying scores.

3. The coordination needed across education sectors will require joint and integrated actions that were not envisioned when powers and responsibilities were assigned to the various governing entities. Cross-cutting challenges such as college readiness were not anticipated.

The coordination and connections needed across K-12 and postsecondary education, and between the SBOE and TEA, in standards-setting, assessments, accountability, professional development, and curriculum challenge less the current authority of existing entities to make certain decisions than it requires them to find effective ways to include the views of other agencies.

If aligned standards and assessments are the goal, then K-12 and postsecondary education leaders need to work jointly toward achieving a consensus that can be embraced by each entity.

The steep challenge of such coordination has caused several states to consider revised governance structures or even structures that overlay existing ones. Such super-boards or the more advisory structures such as the numerous P-16 councils in many states seek to forge the needed connections.
As logical as these structural solutions appear, finding ways to build connections between existing agencies on key steps is more likely to gain the long-term ownership and commitment to these cross-sector initiatives than a superseding of current decision-making authorities. The failure or at most, lukewarm results, of the many P-16 movements across the nation bear witness.

The following considerations should be useful in building the kind of joint actions and coordination needed for an effective state readiness initiative:

a. Both K-12 and higher education must be involved at each stage. It is K-12’s responsibility to prepare students for college; it is higher education’s responsibility to be clear and unified in signaling one set of common readiness standards to K-12 and to help in interpreting them in assessments, professional development, and other activities based in K-12.

b. The kind of coordinated actions needed does not necessarily require equality in decision-making or shared powers. In these unprecedented joint ventures, the focus should not be on which agency legally and formally makes the final decision so much as on whether the decision represents a consensus based on the fully effective involvement of the other agencies. Indeed, decisions that leave other parties estranged will render the readiness initiative ineffective.

c. The primary locus of responsibility and action for preparing students for college is K-12. All steps in the readiness agenda target K-12 and fall to the schools to implement. State readiness initiatives seek to create the goals and conditions through which K-12 will help more students be ready for college upon high school graduation.

This reality should guide both the nature of decisions and the joint processes through which they are made. The criterion should be whatever helps K-12 make readiness a priority and to do so effectively.

More specifically, the joint procedures should recognize that the college readiness standards must be:

- adopted by K-12 and the State Board of Education as state school standards
- taught by K-12
- included in K-12 materials
- assessed by K-12
- applied in the K-12 accountability system
- targeted in professional development

Public higher education must have roles in each of these functions; however, each ultimately is a public school responsibility.

d. Higher education’s role should be one of enabling and helping K-12, creating the conditions through which all school teachers—both in-service and pre-
service—know the readiness standards, give them priority and teach them effectively. This role is carried through the following actions:

- Building and presenting one set of college readiness standards across all public higher education for use both by K-12 in instruction and by all community colleges and universities in placement decisions.
- Working in coordination and consultation with K-12 to interpret the readiness standards in expected performance levels. This is done through advising on the K-12 test construction, teacher professional development and the specifications for K-12 curriculum and materials.

It should be noted that while final decision-making authority in each of these areas technically lies with K-12, higher education’s role needs to be strong to the point of concurrence in key areas, such as in setting the qualifying scores for college readiness on the end-of-course tests.

**Standards**

1. Most states and readiness experts have focused on reading, writing and math because more is known about the relationship of these skills to first-year success in college.

   These also are the skills that enable students to learn further and to build knowledge. They are the cross-cutting, foundational skills needed for learning in any discipline. They are most appropriate to statewide efforts to establish a threshold level of skills for college readiness.

   While adding knowledge-based standards from the various science and social science subject areas would likely make the readiness criteria stronger and more predictive, it is the reading, writing and math skills that are essential and probably most predictive of readiness.

   Moreover, a concentration on fewer standards in depth is probably more powerful in statewide initiatives of this scope.

2. It is critical to go beyond a simple description of the content of the readiness standards—the outline of what skills or knowledge is needed. These descriptions form the official statement of the standards as adopted by the state and as such provide the foundation from which the standards are interpreted and manifested by the schools and their teachers.

   However, these general content descriptions must be converted into performance terms—“how well” can something be done or known. Deriving and building common, statewide understandings of what student performance is expected is the challenging, hard work. These performance expectations are defined through the development of test items and rubrics and of curricular materials, assignments and associated grading protocols. The performance expectations are further
interpreted through new teacher preparation and professional development. Only in these ways can classroom teachers come to know exactly what level and kind of performance characterizes a standard.

Successful state college readiness initiatives depend on an effective statewide process for taking the state-adopted content standards through a series of steps that progressively interprets and defines them in student performance terms.

These steps relate to state assessments, curriculum materials and teacher professional development, each of which can bring to teachers an effective understanding of the performance standards.

**Texas Context for College/Career Readiness Agenda**

Texas has been a national leader in K-12 reform efforts, having pioneered standards-based reform beginning in the 1980s. It is also among the first states to set a college preparatory curriculum as the default high school curriculum and was an early adopter of the high school exit exam. Its efforts at reform have been aimed at improving its below-average standing among states in terms of high school graduation rates and college going. More recently, momentum in reform has been sustained by the need to rectify significant performance gaps across racial/ethnic groups. Of most concern are the lower rates of high school graduation, college enrollment, and college completion among the rapidly growing Latino population.

Outside observers have credited Texas with a steady focus on increasing the rigor of the K-12 standards and raising the proficiency levels on assessments. Beginning in the early 2000s, a new set of tests was adopted that were linked to higher standards than had been put in place by the first wave of reform. But those same observers now caution that continuation of the gradual pace of reform will no longer suffice. The challenges posed by demographic changes and the increasing educational demands of the global economy call for bolder steps to increase standards with a specific focus on increasing college and career readiness.

**The Players**

There are three principal state entities in Texas whose full collaboration is needed to accomplish college and career readiness:

- The State Board of Education (SBOE) is an elected body that has statutory authority over the K-12 curriculum. The board exercises this authority by formally adopting the curriculum standards for all subjects of K-12 education, approving instructional materials, and setting qualifying scores on state assessments. The Board consists of 15 members elected to represent different regions of the state.
- The Texas Education Agency (TEA) is the chief administrative unit over public K-12 education. Under the leadership of the Commissioner, who is appointed by the Governor, the TEA oversees development of the statewide curriculum as approved by
SBOE, manages the textbook adoption process, administers the statewide assessment program, administers a data collection system, and reports outcomes from the statewide accountability system.

- The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) advises the legislature and provides leadership and coordination for the Texas higher education system (but no direct governance over institutions) for purposes of improving higher education in Texas. Its current work is guided by the state’s higher education plan, *Closing the Gaps*. The board consists of nine members appointed by the Governor for nine-year terms. The board hires a Commissioner to direct the efforts of the agency staff.

The complexity involved in developing and implementing a readiness agenda is clear just from the above agency descriptions. Coordinating an agenda among an elected SBOE and an appointed Education Commissioner is challenging. On the postsecondary side, THECB lacks statutory authority to impose statewide policies on public colleges and universities in curriculum, assessment, and placement practices. In addition to these state-level agencies, K-12 is, of course, characterized by local school districts that maintain a significant degree of autonomy over key aspects of a readiness agenda.

There have been several other groups involved in recent efforts to improve college and career readiness, contributing much to reform efforts but complicating the task of ultimately reaching consensus about what needs to be done by whom:

- The Commission for a College Ready Texas was appointed by Governor Perry in April 2007 to provide input and context into the efforts that were being led by THECB. That group was disbanded following the release of a major report to the Governor in November 2007.
- A P-16 Council was formalized by the legislature in 2003, in Senate Bill 286, and charged with improving coordination across educational sectors, including issues pertaining to college and career readiness. Its membership is established in statute to include members of four Texas state agencies: TEA, THECB, the Texas Workforce Commission, and the Texas Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services. HB 1 charged the Council with developing a strategic plan for college readiness and success.
- Vertical teams of high school and postsecondary faculty in eight subject areas were established pursuant to HB 1 to develop college readiness standards for recommendation to TEA and THECB. These teams completed their work to develop college readiness standards in 2008.
- The Texas College Readiness Project is a three-year project designed to improve alignment between secondary and postsecondary education in Texas. The project is sponsored by the THECB and draws upon the services of an outside research and policy organization called EPIC. This project has a three-year timeline with three phases that reflect the agenda set forth by HB 1.
- The High School Completion and Success Initiative Council was established by HB 2237 to take effect in late 2007. The Council is charged with identifying strategic priorities, developing a strategic plan, and making recommendations to improve the effectiveness, coordination, and alignment of high school completion and college and
workforce readiness efforts. The Commissioner of TEA appoints members from specified groups to serve two-year terms.

- A 15-member Select Committee on Public School Accountability was established by SB1031 to conduct a comprehensive review of the public school accountability system.
- Achieve, a national network of states committed to improving college and career readiness, has worked with a Texas team since 2001 when the TEA Commissioner invited Achieve to review education reform in Texas. The Texas Achieve team consists primarily of representatives of the TEA.
- A grant to SREB from the Gates Foundation supports efforts to help the state accelerate the progress of the college and career readiness agenda established by the state and Achieve. A state leadership team includes representatives of SBOE, TEA, THECB, the legislature, the executive branch, and local schools.

Reform Components of College Readiness

Pre-HB 1

Standards. The SBOE, in 1998, adopted the first set of curriculum standards under the newly established Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). These standards were stronger than those they replaced and for the first time provided standards for each grade separately instead of standards for clusters of grades. TEKS are developed and reviewed by outside experts and approved by SBOE after a period of public input. They are used to shape the curriculum at each grade level in each subject. Prior to HB 1 implementation, the TEKS did not specifically address college and career readiness.

Curriculum. Effective with the 2004-05 academic year, the Recommended High School Program (RHSP)—a college preparatory curriculum—became the default curriculum for public high school students. About 70 percent of high school students take this curriculum. It currently includes four years of English and three years of math, including Algebra II and Geometry, three years of science, and three and one-half years of social studies.

Assessments. A high school exit exam was first introduced in 1992. The Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) is a state-developed test that was adopted in 2003 to assess the standards as defined by TEKS. TAKS serves multiple purposes. It is now used as the high school exit exam that all students must take, beginning in 11th grade, to graduate from high school. It is also used to measure student performance under the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law. By state law, TAKS has two cut-off scores: one for high school graduation and a higher one to signal college readiness. TAKS is also used for college placement, but not exclusively, as colleges are required under the Texas Success Initiative to assess incoming students in reading, writing, and math and are authorized to use a number of approved standardized assessment instruments. The Texas Success Initiative sets minimum passing standards on these approved assessments.
Accountability. TAKS is the primary assessment tool used in public school accountability. This accountability regimen has been criticized for emphasizing punishment rather than rewarding achievement and for failing to set sufficiently rigorous standards. On the latter, Texas appears caught in the same trap as many other states. Under NCLB, states can set their own standards for adequate yearly progress and the lower the standards, the less they face federal sanctions. But lower standards work against improving college readiness. The Texas accountability system has also been criticized for being based too narrowly on one test and for encouraging the curriculum to be too driven by the need to teach to the test. Under the current approach, schools are not held accountable for graduating students who are college and career ready.

Professional Development. There are myriad programs aimed at professional development for K-12 teachers but they are not coordinated in a statewide manner and are not focused specifically on helping teachers understand college readiness standards. The TEA lacks statutory authority to direct professional development. Much of the professional development is delivered through special grants to local districts and nonprofit agencies and is oriented toward special topics like science and math academies. In sum, there is no comprehensive professional development that is a coordinated part of the college and career readiness agenda.

House Bill 1 Era of Reform

The passage of HB 1 in 2006 ushered in a new era of reform aimed at improving college and career readiness. In this section we summarize the key developments since its passage. We focus only on the aspects of HB 1 and follow up initiatives that relate to the core components of the SREB model readiness agenda (i.e., standards, curriculum, etc.) and do not review the many other initiatives aimed to further promote readiness, such as P-16 regional councils, STEM academies, Texas Governor’s Schools, College Connections, Summer Bridge Program, intensive summer programs, and student clubs. While well-intended and likely valuable, these programs and activities may be of limited efficacy absent the core components of readiness reform. As an example, HB 2237 provides funds for the TEA Commissioner to make grants to organizations that provide volunteers for after school programs to enhance college readiness and workforce readiness. Such grants would be more effective if awarded after agreement is reached on the definition of college and career readiness and the curriculum and instructional methods for its delivery.

HB 1 has justifiably been praised both inside and outside the state for having provided a comprehensive framework that addresses college readiness standards, assessments, curriculum, professional development, and accountability. It is founded on a sound definition of college readiness as success in entry-level college courses without the need for remediation. As the principal mechanism to increase readiness, HB 1 requires the SBOE to incorporate college readiness standards into Texas’ foundation curriculum—the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). To assist the State Board with its charge, HB1 directed the Commissioners of Education and Higher Education to appoint high
school and college faculty to Vertical Teams to develop college readiness standards for English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies.

The implementation of HB 1 has been managed primarily by THECB, which spearheaded the establishment of the vertical teams to recommend the college readiness standards. The vertical teams, which involved faculty from K-12 and postsecondary education, completed their work on college readiness standards in 2007. The standards were first reviewed and approved by THECB, in January 2008, and then sent to the TEA and approved by the Commissioner of Education in April 2008.

The leadership taken by THECB reflects the strong interest that postsecondary institutions have in enhancing college readiness of high school students and their commitment to pursue college readiness in the context of the state higher education plan, Closing the Gaps. But it has also created concerns that other stakeholders have been insufficiently involved in creating the infrastructure for reform.

Reportedly in reaction to the call for broader stakeholder involvement, the Governor, in April 2007, appointed the Commission for a College Ready Texas, with 21 members including representatives from business, education, and the broader community. The eight vertical team co-chairs were also appointed as members. The purpose of the Council was to provide expert resources and input to the vertical teams and the SBOE about the college readiness standards and the plan for implementing the standards. The Commission submitted a comprehensive report to the Governor in November 2007. The recommendations appear to be general endorsements of the directions being taken under HB 1. The Commission recommended that a statewide strategic plan be developed “for introducing college readiness standards” and to set forth a process to develop instructional materials that are aligned to the college readiness standards, an assessment system with end-of-course exams that align with the readiness standards, a new information system that provides clear data on a student’s progress toward meeting readiness standards, and professional development to ensure that teachers are prepared to increase college readiness.

With regard to the college readiness standards proposed by the vertical teams, the Commission’s recommendations are ambiguous. The report found that “significant gaps exist in current Texas standards when they are compared to nationally recognized standards of college readiness” and notes that the standards “do not always reflect the specificity and focus to clearly communicate the intent of the standard.” It recommends that college readiness standards “be written with specificity and articulate a clear understanding of the complexity level expected within each standard.” But it also states that its initial review found that vertical team standards in math and science did appear to match nationally recognized standards and that amended draft of English language arts standards “represents a consensus” about the knowledge and skills required for college readiness. There is no clear finding or recommendation about the adequacy of the vertical teams’ recommended college readiness standards. Further, the report is not clear as to what, if any, future work it envisions for the vertical teams.
Two subsequent pieces of legislation have added to the momentum on readiness reform:

SB 1031

This legislation phases out the use of TAKS for grades 9-11 and replaces it with end-of-course exams in Algebra I and II, geometry, biology, chemistry, physics, English I though III, world geography, world history, and US history. Beginning with the class of 2012 the end-of-course exams will be used for graduation purposes. The legislation directs that each exam include a separate set of questions geared to assess college readiness. TEA, with input from THECB, is to adopt the readiness questions. SBOE is to establish a performance level that indicates a student’s college readiness. There will be two cut scores—one for high school graduation and the other for college readiness. A student’s score on the readiness portion of each test is not to be used to determine performance for high school graduation purposes.

SB 1031 also directs school districts to provide appropriate instruction for students who do not score passing grades on end-of-course assessments and for students who, at the end of 11th grade, are judged unlikely to receive the required scores to earn a high school diploma. The law also established the Select Committee on Public School Accountability to conduct a comprehensive review of the public school accountability system. The Committee completed its interim report in December 2008. Among other recommendations, the Committee recommended that schools be accountable for educating students to levels of college readiness.

HB 2237

This law implemented a multitude of measures to address dropout prevention, high school success, and college and workforce readiness. Most noteworthy for purposes of this report are provisions regarding (1) future planning for college readiness, (2) professional development, and (3) the incorporation of readiness standards into 12th grade college preparatory classes.

The bill establishes the High School Completion and Success Initiative Council to identify strategic priorities and adopt a strategic plan to improve high school completion and college and workforce readiness. The council is composed of the commissioner of education, the commissioner of higher education, and seven members appointed by the commissioner of education from nominations from the governor, the lieutenant governor, and the speaker of the house of representatives. The bill specifies that the strategic plan:

- Specify strategies to identify, support, and expand programs to improve high school completion rates and college and workforce readiness.
- Establish specific goals with which to measure the success of the strategies.
- Identify strategies for alignment and coordination of federal and other funding sources to meet the goals of the plan.
- Identify key objectives for appropriate research and program evaluation.
HB 2237 also contains a number of provisions to enhance professional development—some aimed at TEA and some at THECB. It authorizes the TEA commissioner to develop and award grants to districts, regional education service centers, nonprofit organizations, and institutions of higher education for establishing and providing technical assistance and professional development activities in the staff development training of public school teachers aimed in part in training teachers to implement the college readiness curriculum. It also requires the THECB to establish and allocate funding for a large set of programs and initiatives aimed at enhancing professional development—with a special focus on math and science.

HB 2237 also contains provisions regarding the SBOE role to incorporate college readiness standards into the foundation curriculum standards. One such provision appears to restate requirements from HB 1. It requires that, beginning with the 2008-2009 school year, the SBOE incorporate college readiness standards and expectations into the essential knowledge and skills of the foundation curriculum for courses in which students in grades 9-12 generally enroll. But a subsequent provision is aimed specifically at 12th courses designed for students who do not pass the end-of-course assessments in 11th grade. It requires that the commissioners of TEA and THECB develop and recommend to the SBOE for adoption the essential knowledge and skills of courses in college preparatory mathematics, science, social studies, and English language arts designed for students at the 12th grade level who do not meet college readiness standards on a required end-of-course assessment instrument. The bill specifies that these courses are to prepare students for success in entry-level college courses.

**Analysis of Current Situation**

**Overview**

Texas is certainly a leader in number and range of activities to confront the challenge of improving college and career readiness. HB 1 establishes a sound foundation in state policy that addresses each of the key components of a readiness agenda. Leaders and stakeholders in Texas appear to understand the nature of the readiness problem and to be committed to addressing it—unlike the situation in many other states. But like other states going forward, Texas would benefit from better coordination and clarity of the roles and responsibilities of the multiple players, with appropriate state policies that lay out, without conflict or ambiguity, responsibilities for implementing each piece of the agenda. In addition, there is activity already in motion that would likely be more effective once the state can resolve these core, sticky issues.

The need for quick and bold action has been made all the more clear by the release of the 2008 *Measuring Up* fifty-state report card by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. Grades for Texas reinforce the findings cited by the Commission for a College Ready Texas that Texas performs below the national average on several key indicators relating to college readiness. The *Measuring Up* report confirms that Texas has one of the lowest high school graduation rates in the US along with very poor rates of college participation, on which it earned a grade of D-. College participation rates for the
growing Latino population are far lower (24%) than for whites (39%). And reflecting the lack of readiness by those who do attend college, Texas earned a grade of C- in completion. Again, the results for Latinos are very discouraging. Only 38% of Latinos graduate college within six years, compared to 56% of whites. In short, in spite of the steady attention to reform efforts over the last two decades, Texas remains below national averages on most key indicators.

Process Issues

Texas has reached a level of consensus on assessments that is unique among states. While other states battle over what kind of instruments to use to award high school diplomas, assess college readiness, and hold schools accountable, Texas is moving ahead to implement end-of-course assessments for all three purposes. These kinds of assessments are viewed by experts as the best method of linking learning to desired standards. Texas deserves great credit in this dimension of reform. It seems reasonable to expect if consensus can be reached on an area of great potential conflict that it can be reached as well over the incorporation of college ready standards into the foundational curriculum standards.

Two barriers to reaching this consensus appear to be a lack of trust and a complicated policy environment in which there are too many uncoordinated pieces. The first barrier may be more readily addressed once the second barrier is resolved. The loss of trust may result in part from ambiguity over who is responsible for each piece of the agenda, and in part from a lack of transparency and appropriate inclusion of interested players. If delineated roles are made clear, there are fewer opportunities for misunderstandings and charges that certain players are either over- or under-represented in decision making.

It is one thing for parties with shared responsibility over an agenda to disagree on the substance of reform. But what we have seen here is confusion about what has actually occurred. This strikes us as something more easily remedied than substantive disputes. At the very least resolving the ambiguities about the status of the implementation process will clarify the substantive areas of disagreement. Some aspects of these charges and counter-charges could likely be ameliorated if the process itself is more clearly and unambiguously set forth and monitored. An important part of clarifying the process will be to establish the parameters for involvement of the various groups, committees, and commissions that have been established.

Substantive Issues

We have identified nine issues that need to be addressed by state leaders in order to strengthen efforts to implement college and career readiness initiatives.

1. Confusion about status (but not the substance) of college readiness standards

Our review of the College Readiness Standards setting process involved examining the process used by the THECB and the combined K-12 and higher education vertical
teams; the process and results of validating the standards with national comparisons; the process and results of comparing the proposed College Readiness Standards with the existing TEKS; and the extent to which the SBOE adopted and included the College Readiness Standards in the TEKS.

There is consensus that the process used to establish the College Readiness Standards through the THECB and the vertical teams resulted in sound standards. The Commission for a College Ready Texas assisted this effort by providing an external perspective and recommendations, which led to some added amendments to the initial language arts standards as proposed by the vertical teams. TEA requested that Achieve conduct a review of the proposed College Readiness Standards with the ADP Standards. This review was positive as were comparisons of the proposed College Readiness Standards to ACT standards. It should be noted that our review focused only on the language arts and math standards and that the validation studies centered on the content of standards, not performance levels.

We also examined the process and results of comparing the proposed College Readiness Standards to the current TEKS. The vertical team, assisted by TEA, conducted these “gap analyses,” which involved identifying where in the TEKS each proposed Readiness Standard existed (or not) and the strength of the alignment. These side-by-side comparisons predominantly showed that a great majority of the Readiness Standards were significantly aligned with the TEKS.

In cases where there was not a strong connection or an absence of one, TEA proposed amendments to TEKS, which will be recommended to the SBOE for approval. The SBOE has assured us that the TEKS will be adopted that include the College Readiness Standards amended as necessary. The process for such adoption will vary for language arts and math owing to the scheduling and sequencing of the TEKS adoption cycles.

Concern has been expressed over the extent to which the proposed College Readiness Standards would be recommended and approved by TEA and then adopted by the SBOE as part of the TEKS. The approval and adoption process appears to be occurring, although complicated, by the scheduling and sequencing problems.

The other, related part of the issue, concerns the extent to which the College Readiness Standards should be highlighted as part of the TEKS. In fact the initial review emphasizes this point. However, as we worked through the review we became convinced that expecting this kind of earmarking of the content standards would not be fruitful and practical. We say this for several reasons:

a) The nature of the College Readiness Standards adopted by SBOE as TEKS are descriptive only in terms of their content. They are relatively silent or uninstructive regarding the level of performance expected. The presentation of state standards in such general content descriptive terms is the general practice in states. The College Readiness Standards as established by the
THECB also are not instructive by performance levels. They, too, are primarily descriptive only to content of the standards.

b) The reality is that readiness is more about the level of student performance on certain skills and knowledge. Establishing these performance expectations and conveying them to all teachers in all schools are functions dealt with through test development, curriculum material and assignments, and teacher professional development. It is through these vehicles that a general description of a standard’s content is converted into what it means in terms of student performance.

Accordingly, our review sought to insure that the proposed College Readiness Standards were incorporated and aligned with the SBOE adopted TEKS and that this set of content standards provided a basis out of which the important process of identifying and highlighting the College Readiness Standards and establishing performance expectations could proceed.

c) Our evaluation finds that some form of intermediate process is needed to identify more clearly the TEKS that most strongly relate to the college readiness standards in language arts and math. This process should also begin to prioritize the relative importance of these standards and bring more definition to them in terms of performance expected. The purpose is to identify and shape these college readiness standards in forms that are amenable to their inclusion in the end-of-course assessments, teacher preparation and professional development, and curriculum materials.

This focusing and defining process should be jointly carried out by TEA and higher education with help from testing, teacher development, and curriculum materials experts.

2. Meaning of college and career readiness standards

The 2005 Executive Order and HB 1 refer to college readiness standards without mention of career or workforce readiness. The vertical teams’ charge was to develop standards for college readiness. The report of the Commission for a College Ready Texas included a discussion of workforce readiness—perhaps a reflection of the participation of representatives of business on the Commission. That report states that there are “few, if any, distinctions made in nationally recognized and exemplary state standards between college readiness and workforce readiness.” The report proceeds on the assumption that college readiness and career readiness are one and the same—using the phrase “college and career readiness” in several places.

HB 2237 uses the phrase “college and workforce readiness” in several places without making it clear if these are one and the same. SB 1031 directs that separate scores be set for the new end-of-course exams—one for college readiness and other for high school graduation. The bill does not clarify which, if either, of these two scores
would signal career readiness. While research does support equally high levels of rigor in a high school curriculum for both postsecondary and career pathways, it is not clear what direction Texas leaders intend to set for career readiness standards.

Our experience in other states and the Texas evaluation finds that the situation regarding readiness for postsecondary academic study, on one hand, and career preparation, on the other, is not clear. Setting the same performance standards in reading, writing, and math for certain career certificates or technical programs as for community college academic transfer and regional university baccalaureate programs yields the following problems:

- While we have an empirical base for setting performance standards for the academic programs (community college transfer and university baccalaureate programs), no such research or data exist for various kinds and levels of postsecondary career programs.
- Moreover, in many states there is concern that treating readiness for academic and career programs through the same kind and level of performance standards will cause either the overall standards to be set too low or will stall the whole readiness initiative over fear of restricting access to career programs.

Our overall conclusion for Texas would be to set the same quality readiness performance standards through the end-of-course Algebra II and English III tests for the community college associate degree transfer programs and regional university bachelor’s programs, ensuring that these standards indicate authentic readiness. Furthermore, the next year should be used to study the relationship of reading, writing, and math readiness to the various levels of career preparation programs.

Texas would be a leader nationally in both of these activities.

3. Range of subjects for development of college readiness standards

HB 1 mandated the development of college readiness standards for science and social studies in addition to English language arts and math. While it is a worthwhile goal to aim for readiness standards in all core subjects, the SREB recommended model addresses just reading, writing, and math because these are the focus of the need to reduce remediation in college and are the fields where there is more national expertise in the development of college readiness standards. Extending the readiness agenda to cover science and social studies at this point risks diverting attention and time from implementing the core readiness activities around English and math.

4. Impact of college readiness standards on college curriculum

Nearly all of the discussion in interviews and documents about the impact of college readiness standards on curriculum centers on the high school curriculum. Yet it is
also important that entry level college courses in all public postsecondary sectors reflect college readiness expectations. If those courses expect higher levels of incoming readiness, student success in college could be unaffected by implementation of the readiness agenda. Materials prepared by the Texas College Readiness Project make reference to comparing college readiness standards to college courses to identify “reference courses” that are most aligned with the college readiness standards. But the report does not imply that any significant effort will be made to adjust those courses that are found not to align with college readiness standards. The THECB update on the status of HB 1 implementation refers to phase II vertical team work to recommend how public school curriculum can be aligned with college readiness standards. Clarification is needed as to whether the “gap analysis” that is to occur will address college curricula as well as high school curricula.

5. Use of college readiness standards in college placement

Good progress is being made on the use of end-of-course assessments in a number of subjects to be aligned with college readiness standards. There is to be a common qualifying score on each exam to signify college readiness. It is clear that the intent of these assessments is to provide indicators of student progress toward career readiness in time for targeted 12th grade instruction to increase the college readiness of high school graduates. Far less clear is the impact of college readiness standards and end-of-course assessments on the placement practices of the public postsecondary institutions. HB 1 does not address the issue of placement; it says only that “to the extent practicable” end-of-course assessments should be developed so they may be used to determine the appropriate placement of a student at an institution of higher education. The THECB does not have authority to mandate uniform placement practices across all colleges and universities. Under the Texas Success Initiative, postsecondary institutions are authorized to use a range of approved assessments, including the TAKS, which is being phased out and replaced by end-of-course assessments. It remains unclear how colleges and university assessment and placement practices will reflect the college readiness standards as approved by SBOE and reflected in end-of-course exams.

In reporting our findings on assessments later in this section, we indicate that the state needs to adopt policies that would require public higher education to ensure the following:

- That a uniform system of placement/readiness testing and related reading, writing, and math standards be established for all community college associate degree transfer programs and all regional university bachelor’s programs.

- That the standards and performance levels on which this uniform placement process is based should be identical to the readiness standards and performance expectations established for the end-of-course tests in Algebra II and English III.
6. Instructional materials – sequence issues

Ideally, as noted in the discussion of the SREB model for career and college readiness, curriculum, including instructional materials for delivery of curriculum, is shaped by standards—in this case by the new college readiness standards. However, textbook adoption is a lengthy and costly process that is carried out according to preexisting cycles. The math textbook adoption process was recently completed—before the development of college readiness standards for math. Approved materials do not fully cover readiness topics for math. Consequently, there needs to be a supplemental process for obtaining instructional materials on an “off-cycle” basis so that students receive a curriculum that is aligned with college readiness expectations.

7. Teacher Policies

College readiness needs to be part of both teacher preparation (pre-service) and professional development (in-service). While pre-service issues are addressed through teacher education programs in colleges and universities, there are many programs and activities authorized and underway to enhance professional development for teachers and administrators. But they do not appear to be tightly aligned with the new college readiness (or career readiness) standards. There are two issues to address with respect to professional development. One is to ensure that among the many professional development programs are those aimed specifically to help teachers and administrators understand the college and career readiness standards and learn how best to teach students to reach those standards. The other issue is to clarify responsibilities for the funding and delivery of professional development. There may be too many different programs administered by too many different players for the investment to have the best chance of success. A more centralized approach on these critical teacher policies would include planning, designing, delivering, and evaluating effectiveness of policies for pre-service and in-service training.

8. High school accountability for college readiness

HB 1 specifies that accountability reports include indicators that address requirements of No Child Left Behind, including high school graduation rates, but the bill includes only vague language that there be “measures of progress toward preparation for postsecondary success.” The recent interim report of the Select Committee on Public School Accountability affirmed that college readiness should be incorporated into the public school accountability system. That report offered some criteria for a revised accountability system. Many issues remain as far as designing an accountability system that (a) reconciles possible competing incentives between NCLB and college readiness goals, (b) creates appropriate incentives and rewards for school improvements, (c) produces feedback to teachers for increasing student learning, and (d) provides clear accountability to the public. As these issues are resolved, it is important that end-of-course exams have a central place in high school accountability regarding college readiness.
9. Assessment

In light of the critical role of assessment in interpreting and convening the college readiness standards to teachers across the state, careful attention was given to the ways by which the end-of-course tests were being developed as they relate to college readiness. Following are our findings:

a. Texas should be recognized for using end-of-course tests to assess college readiness. These tests can address in more depth the performance need for college readiness in yield of greater information that is useful to address student needs and improve instruction.

b. It is crucial that TEA and higher education work closely together and collaborate at the highest levels in test development. TEA, which has primary responsibility for developing tests, and the THECB are developing a process plan to ensure such cooperation and joint action. It is important that higher education be involved at each stage:
   - standards and item selection
   - item review
   - test construction
   - content validation
   - performance-standard setting
   - follow up studies

The plan is nearly complete.

c. There are several issues that need resolution to ensure the high level of coordination and consultation needed between K-12 and higher education:
   - By law, the SBOE will establish qualifying scores indicating college readiness on the end-of-course tests. However, in the section of law referring to THCEB’s placement testing process, there is a reference to THECB setting the readiness qualifying scores on the end-of-course tests. This conflict is most likely an oversight in conforming newer legislation to past laws, but needs to be resolved. Whatever the resolution, and even if it is found that SBOE possesses this formal authority, higher education must have a prominent and concurring role in setting the readiness qualifying scores.
   - It will be important that the readiness standards and related performance levels used in end-of-course testing be substantially the same as used in the placement testing conducted by higher education institutions across the state. Currently, there is no common approach to placement testing shared by all higher education. Making the college readiness standards a priority throughout K-12 requires that higher education institutions apply these standards uniformly to their incoming students as well as K-12 applying them to end-of-course testing.
- The end-of-course tests will not only have a college readiness component, but will be used as graduation tests. This may require at least two different qualifying scores if the college readiness items are fully embedded in the end-of-course tests along with other TEKS items. It is crucial that the readiness qualifying scores be set at a level that ensures true readiness and not at lower levels that would assume further growth in the senior year. The readiness scores should indicate immediate readiness for college.

- College readiness standards are being adopted not just for English language arts and math but also for science and social science. Policy current directs that end-of-course assessments in all of these areas have college ready components. The current plan is to develop the English III and Algebra II end-of-course tests first because it is known that they are reliable indicators of success in entry-level courses. The THECB agrees that the question of including science and social science end-of-course readiness components should be studied over the next couple of years.

- It appears that there is consensus that writing samples are needed in the English III tests to appropriately assess college readiness.