The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) has received funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to help states improve the college and career readiness of high school students. This project will build on the work done by Achieve through the American Diploma Project (ADP) in finding ways to help states accelerate progress in their state college/career readiness initiatives. 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 and SREB are especially interested in 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 implement fully a statewide readiness initiative.

The project is comprised of several components involving evaluation of current efforts in college and career readiness, development of a plan to accelerate progress, and technical assistance in implementing parts of the readiness agenda, especially those related to teacher development and the senior year curriculum. In conducting the evaluation activities, SREB has used the following framework of steps involved in a state readiness initiative:

1. Develop statewide college/career readiness standards in reading, writing and math that are created jointly by the public school and higher education sectors.
2. Make college/career readiness standards key components of state high school assessments and of statewide higher education placement/readiness assessments.
3. Make school and student performance on the readiness assessments part of the state school accountability program.
4. Adjust or develop curriculum and instruction to target the specific statewide readiness standards.
5. Develop statewide plans for targeted professional development to help teachers understand the specific readiness standards and how to teach them effectively.
6. Development of 12th grade curricula to address the specific college readiness needs of students.

This evaluation finds that Texas is a national leader in policies and actions to increase the readiness of high school graduates for collegiate and career education. No state has more state-level policies and activities associated with implementing a comprehensive statewide readiness agenda. Much progress, as well, has been made since HB 1 and the discussions that preceded it, and subsequent legislation in 2007.

We find that Texas is at a point at which it can build on this progress and complete the agenda. However, to do so will require a commitment to a clear series of steps by all involved. It will require a level of joint, cooperative activity between K-12 and postsecondary education, which within these two sectors has not been reached in any state. And, completing the agenda will require adherence to some overriding principles that should guide how the agenda is implemented.

These requirements for moving forward are needed because of the extraordinarily challenging task at hand. The readiness goal was not envisioned by any state when the structures and policies governing education were established. College/career readiness is a relatively recent phenomenon that challenges any state’s educational organizational structure and function. Meeting these new, cross-sector goals will entail different ways of doing things.

Following are some principles to guide decision-making on advancing the readiness initiative and a series of specific recommendations about the agenda and its action steps.
Principles

1. The goal of having students ready for college or career preparation by or before high school graduation means that the core responsibility lies with the public schools. Meeting this responsibility will require all schools and teachers to know deeply the college readiness standards, to give them priority, and to teach to them effectively.

The purpose of a statewide college readiness agenda is to build the conditions that enable teachers to do these things. Teachers will respond effectively if the standards sent to them are clear, specific and unified; if the state assessment and accountability systems make readiness a priority; and, if teacher preparation and development and curricular materials emphasize clearly the readiness standards.

2. The readiness initiative depends on building the strongest, clearest, most specific connections among the various action components – from the standards to assessments to curriculum materials to professional development to new teacher preparation to school accountability. All must be aligned and interlocking to get all schools statewide to succeed in this initiative.

3. While primarily a K-12 responsibility and role, the readiness initiative depends on postsecondary education, as a unified whole, taking certain actions essential to enabling K-12 to effectively carry out its role. These actions include:
   - Agreeing on and sending one set of signals about readiness standards from all postsecondary education;
   - Working with K-12 to interpret these standards in the explicit performance terms through K-12 assessments, teacher preparation, professional development and school curriculum materials and assignments.

Improving readiness for college is a joint function and the development and implementation of its various components need to be cooperative, at all times recognizing that K-12 teachers hold the keys to meeting the readiness goals. In
addition to the need for joint actions, it is important that both K-12 and postsecondary education own and embrace this initiative through their own policies and structures. The challenge here is for the current educational entities to find ways to include effectively the views of the others.

**Recommended Actions**

With reference to the components involved in a statewide readiness initiative and the above principles, we offer a brief summary of key findings and a series of recommended actions. These recommendations are grouped by: Standards Setting, Assessment, Curriculum, Teacher Development, and Accountability.

**Identification and Adoption of Statewide Readiness Standards**

THECB adopted in January, 2008 content descriptions of college readiness standards in English Language Arts, Math, Science and Social Studies. We find that the SBOE and TEA adoption process will result in TEKS that incorporate the THECB readiness standards. This incorporation is important in that school teachers teach to the SBOE-adopted TEKS, not directly to external standards such as the ACT, SAT or to the THECB standards. We note that the latter sets of standards are helpful in aligning and ensuring that the TEKS are of high quality.

However, it is also important that all teachers know clearly which TEKS are readiness standards so that appropriate priority may be given. Furthermore, teachers need to know what level of student performance will be expected on each standard to be ready for postsecondary education. Across the nation, the presentation of state school standards is in general, descriptive forms that outline the content of the standards. In states where they exist, readiness standards are not highlighted.
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.

To ensure that all teachers know specifically the readiness standards, the performance levels expected and how to teach them effectively, the general content descriptive statements of the standards need to be highlighted and translated into performance terms understood by all teachers statewide. It is important that the same performance standards be used in the development of curriculum materials and assignments, new teacher preparation, professional development, and state assessments.

HB 1 assigns the vertical teams responsibility to develop instructional strategies and to develop or establish minimum standards for curricula, professional development and online support materials focusing on the SBOE-adopted TEKS readiness standards. The same legislation requires TEA in coordination with THECB to develop end-of-course (EOC) readiness assessments. These activities are proceeding in parallel but without the kind of interactive coordination needed. It is critical that the development of curriculum materials, assignments and grading practices, the development of professional development programs and the EOC readiness tests be based on the same content standards and performance expectations; moreover, the performance expectations used in the EOC tests should inform the curriculum and professional development activities. Only in these ways can a shared and deep understanding of the readiness TEKS be developed in all teachers statewide.

To ensure that these components develop according to focused, explicit understandings of the standards, we recommend an intermediate process that develops further specification for the TEKS readiness standards in terms of
performance expectations and facilitates the connection of the college-readiness 
TEKS to assessment, teacher preparation and the curriculum.

This process should be a joint public school-postsecondary education endeavor and involve those responsible for the development of the EOC tests, professional development programs and the specifications for curriculum materials and model course assignments.

Given that EOC development and testing will extend through 2011, the actual standards and performance expectations will not be specifically known in the near-term. However, it is important that the curriculum and instruction be directed to the readiness standards as soon as possible, certainly preceding the 2011-2012 testing. Therefore, this specification process is needed to bring as much performance detail to the standards as possible to allow professional development and curriculum revision to proceed with the confidence that these components will be aligned with the ultimate standards used on the EOC tests.

This specification process would:

- Identify and highlight those specific TEKS associated with the content of the performance levels of the culminating college readiness standards (as will be expressed through EOC tests in English III and Algebra II).
- Describe as specifically as possible the levels of performance indicative of college readiness, in terms both of difficulty of content or task and quality of student response.
- Assure that the performance levels developed compare favorably to national standards.
- Present these performance-specific college readiness standards as the basis for developing the EOC tests, professional development programs, curriculum materials and supplements.
Focus on English Language Arts and Math

HB 1 mandated the development of college readiness standards for science and social studies as well as for English Language Arts and mathematics. While worthwhile to develop such standards in all core subjects, research and practice to date have focused on reading, writing and math as the key skills needed to learn at higher levels. 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 the relationships of these core skills to success in first-year college courses has been established, the relationship of performance in science and social studies courses has not been established. The THECB agrees that more work needs to be done before including these subjects in the EOC college readiness testing. Full focus and commitment will be needed just to develop the college readiness initiative around English Language Arts and mathematics. Accordingly, we recommend that the initial focus be placed on English Language Arts and mathematics.

Readiness for What Kind of Postsecondary Study

The learning skills needed to be ready to prepare successfully in collegiate academic programs and postsecondary career-technical programs for economically sustainable jobs have converged. Empirical evidence supports the application of similar readiness standards for postsecondary associate and bachelor’s degree programs, both academic and career-oriented. There is certainly less research that establishes the kinds and levels of readiness needed for other postsecondary technical programs at the certificate and diploma levels. Further study may prove that one set of readiness standards for all postsecondary study is justified or that a different form of readiness, or way to exhibit readiness, is indicated.

In this context, our recommendation for Texas is to set the same readiness performance standards through the end-of-course Algebra II and English III tests for the community college associate degree transfer and career-technical programs and regional university bachelor’s degree programs, ensuring that these standards
indicate authentic readiness. This recommendation is based on the understanding that all associate degree programs, including those related to career-technical education, require students to study at a collegiate level in language arts and mathematics.

Furthermore, the next year or two should be used to study the relationship of reading, writing, and mathematics readiness to other levels of career preparation programs, including postsecondary certificate and diploma programs. Empirical evidence should be developed that establishes the relationship of reading, writing and mathematics preparedness to the demands of specific occupations and the qualifications needed to succeed in the preparation programs for these occupations.

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

**College-Readiness Assessment**

In light of the critical role of assessment in interpreting and conveying the college readiness standards to teachers across the state, careful attention was given to the ways by which the end-of-course tests are 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 needed for college readiness and yield more information that is useful to identify student needs and improve instruction.

b. There is consensus that writing prompts will be used on the English III tests to assess college readiness. These writing responses are critical in identifying the levels of performance needed in reading and writing.
c. 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 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, is comprehensive and specific as to tasks, timetables, and responsibilities.

d. College readiness standards are being adopted not just for English Language Arts and math but also for science and social science. Policy currently 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 EOC readiness components should be studied over the next couple of years. **We recommend that the English III and Algebra II EOC tests be the core, or anchor, assessments for college readiness.**

e. Legislation also calls for EOC tests to be used to identify readiness to take advanced high school courses. The TEA plan will include items in the English II and Algebra I EOC tests that will indicate readiness for English III and Algebra II.
   **We recommend that the performance standards ultimately set for the readiness standards on the English III and Algebra II tests should provide the basis for determining the readiness standards in earlier related courses.**
It will be valuable in time to build a series of assessments in a number of grade-levels that progressively predict performance in subsequent tests, using the culminating EOC readiness tests as the top rungs on the student performance ladder.

f. As currently legislated, the EOC tests will be used both as high school graduation tests and to determine college readiness. At least for the mid-term, this will require two different qualifying scores, assuming that the readiness scores will be set at an appropriate level. While it is not common to use such tests for the same purposes, Texas has done so in the past with TAKS. The danger potentially lies in setting the readiness qualifying scores at a lower-than-appropriate level so as to minimize the performance gap between that required for high school graduation and that for college readiness.

We strongly recommend that in any situation, the readiness scores be set at a level that signifies readiness to enter college immediately in terms of the needed reading, writing and mathematics learning skills.

g. Legislation currently requires the development of separate college readiness items to augment the core EOC tests. To the extent allowed psychometrically, the college readiness-related items should be embedded in the EOC tests, resulting potentially in two qualifying scores—one related to high school graduation and the other to postsecondary readiness.

h. 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 may be an oversight in conforming newer legislation to past laws. Whatever the resolution, higher education must have a prominent and concurring role in setting the readiness
qualifying scores. It is also important that K-12 through the SBOE and TEA support and embrace the readiness assessments and qualifying scores.

Therefore, we recommend that the responsibility for setting the readiness qualifying scores be shared by the SBOE and THECB.

i. 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.

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.

The following recommendations are aimed at aligning the high school EOC test readiness process with the placement procedures used by public higher education:

- That a uniform system of placement/readiness testing and associated reading, writing, and math standards be established for all community college associate degree transfer programs, associate degree career-
technical programs, and all regional university baccalaureate degree programs. These standards should define those skills needed to succeed in first-year introductory work.

- 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.
- That students who meet the readiness performance standards on the advanced EOC tests (English III and Algebra II) be exempted from taking further placement or readiness tests upon admission to a public community college or regional university in Texas. The exemption for mathematics should be conditioned upon a student taking a senior year mathematics course (not necessarily at a higher level than Algebra II).

**Twelfth-Grade Curriculum**

**a.** Legislation requires the development of 12th grade courses for students who do not meet the EOC readiness standards. These courses are to be developed jointly by TEA and THECB. **The following recommendations support this provision:**

- That the initial focus be on English Language Arts (specifically expository reading and writing) and mathematics.
- That the courses be explicitly based on the college readiness TEKS as expressed through the EOC tests.
- That, as stated in law, successful completion of these courses are creditable toward a recommended or advanced high school diploma.
- That, as stated in law, an EOC assessment based on the readiness standards be developed to determine if students have met these standards upon completion of the 12th grade course.
• That students who meet these standards then should be exempted from introductory placement testing at Texas public community colleges and regional universities.

• That students who meet the readiness standards through EOC testing in English III and Algebra II should be eligible for dual enrollment or early college admission. These readiness standards should be applied statewide in determining eligibility for such programs.

**Instructional Materials**
Curriculum, including instructional materials, 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. This supplemental process is underway and such supplements actually can have a strong, “highlighting” effect on existing curriculum materials and assignments.

We note, however, the importance of, and recommend, being as explicit as possible regarding both the content and performance expectations of the new college readiness standards in providing specifications to the producers of materials. These specifications should be informed by the above recommended process for further identifying and specifying the nature of the readiness standards.

**Teacher Development**
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. **It is critical that a program be established explicitly to convey the new college-readiness TEKS.** 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. These programs need to be based on statewide explicit definitions of the content and performance expectations of these standards. Starting with this explicit basis will enable the professional development programs to deliver uniform preparation statewide. Again, the specification process recommended earlier will help to ensure that the same kind and level of readiness standards used in assessments and curriculum materials will be applied in teacher preparation.

**In addition, we recommend that responsibilities for the funding and delivery of professional development be clarified.** 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, delivering, and evaluating the effectiveness of policies for pre-service and in-service training.

**High School Accountability for College Readiness**

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, high school graduation 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.
As Texas considers a revised school accountability system, we recommend having increased percentages of students meeting college readiness standards assume a central place. Doing so will send a strong signal to teachers about the readiness standards and their priority.