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January 6, 2017

Dear HISD Parents and Community Members,

I hope your New Year has started safely and successfully. We have started the spring semester full of energy and focused on the job of educating our students the very best we can to the very best of their potential.

Beginning in August of 2018, every school district in Texas will receive a grade of A, B, C, D, or F based primarily on students' performance on the STAAR test. In order to begin the arduous task of calibrating that A-F rating system, TEA is issuing preliminary A-F ratings based on 2016 testing data as a trial to show schools and districts what their grades would be if the ratings were implemented this year with no further adjustment to the rating system and the criteria used. The primary rationale for the A-F system is that it simplifies the explanation of school and district quality while at the same time helping to improve student performance. In my opinion, it fails in both of those objectives and I'd like to discuss why I and other educators throughout the state have serious concerns about it.

First, the idea that the A-F system is easier to understand is misguided. The rules behind the system appear simple, but when examined objectively are neither simple nor transparent. The reduction of a school or district to a single grade misrepresents a large portion of what happens in schools. It has the predictable effect of telling a school with a good grade that all is well and telling a school with a bad grade that all must change, even though neither is an accurate accounting. With the current methodology, the calculations used to grade a school can yield vastly different results in schools that are statistically similar while assigning the same grade to schools that are very different.

As to student performance, no validated research exists that shows any ratings system, in and of itself, improves performance. Some states have scrapped or are in the process of scrapping the A-F system, and those that still use it have adjusted state policies and rules to such an extent that the methodology for the grading system hardly resembles what the legislators were trying to measure in the first place.

In looking at the A-F system as currently proposed here in Texas, over 50% of the letter grades assigned will be based on once a year state testing. Instead of removing the pressure that students feel at STAAR time, the pressure will only increase. An additional 35% of the grade will align most likely with a community's level of wealth. As we have seen in other states, grades of 'D' or 'F' are highly correlated with schools that serve large numbers of economically disadvantaged students. This system could easily serve to shame hardworking students and members of a less than affluent community. We do not need an accountability system that punishes the poor or the schools that serve them.

In Hondo ISD, we work hard every day to provide relevant and rigorous instruction at all grade levels, and we have no issue with being held accountable to our parents and the community we serve. However, we can't support a rating system that tells nothing about our schools to either the public or the educators who are trying to find out what their students need to be successful. We hope that the Legislature will see the glaring inaccuracies with this rating system and will make significant changes before it is actually used to assess our schools. Please make your voice heard on this issue by contacting your state lawmakers and telling them you are asking for those changes.

As always, I thank you for your support of Hondo students, teachers, and staff. My best wishes to you and yours for a happy and healthy 2017.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A'Lann Truelock', written in a cursive style.

A'Lann Truelock, Ed. D.