

- SUBJECT:** “Middle college” pilot program and other dropout prevention measures
- COMMITTEE:** Public Education — committee substitute recommended
- VOTE:** 6 ayes— Grusendorf, Branch, Dawson, Eissler, Griggs, Madden  
0 nays  
3 absent — Oliveira, Dutton, Hochberg
- SENATE VOTE:** On final passage, April 7 — voice vote
- WITNESSES:** For — Holly Eaton and Lindsay Gustafson, Texas Classroom Teachers Association; JoHannah Whitsett, Association of Texas Professional Educators  
Against — None
- BACKGROUND:** Under Education Code, sec. 39.055, school districts must have their dropout records audited at least once a year at the district’s expense by a certified accountant who is not a district employee and who has been trained by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to audit dropout records. A school district must submit the approved audited reports to TEA or explain why the district did not approve a report.
- DIGEST:** CSSB 976 would require each campus and district-level planning and decision-making committee for a junior high, middle, or high school campus to analyze information about dropout prevention and to use the information in developing district or campus improvement plans. To complete this analysis, these committees would have to review the following information:
- annual audits of dropout records conducted by each district, as required by Education Code, sec. 39.055;
  - campus information on graduation rates, dropout rates, high school equivalency certificate rates, and the percentage of students who remain in high school more than four years after entering the ninth grade;

- the number of students who enter a high school equivalency program and either do not complete the program, complete the program but do not take the exam, or complete the program, take the exam, but do not obtain a high school equivalency certificate;
- for students enrolled in ninth and tenth grade, information on academic credit hours earned, retention rates, and placements in alternative education programs and expulsions; and
- the results of an evaluation of each school-based dropout prevention program in the district.

The education commissioner would have to establish and administer a “middle college” education pilot program for students who are at risk of dropping out or who wish to accelerate high school completion. The program would have to provide for a course of study enabling a participating student to combine high school and college-level courses in 11th and 12th grades and to receive a high school diploma and associate degree upon graduation.

The middle college education program would have to provide participating students with access to postsecondary educational and training opportunities and provide participating students with flexibility in class scheduling and academic mentoring. School districts would be reimbursed for student attendance proportionally based on the amount of time the student spent on high school courses. TEA could accept gifts, grants, and donations to pay any program costs not covered by these attendance-based payments. TEA would have to consult with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board in establishing and administering this program.

CSSB 976 would amend Education Code, sec. 39.131(a) to allow TEA to impose sanctions on a district that had been rated academically unacceptable for two years or more because of the district’s dropout rates. These sanctions could include ordering the district to develop a dropout prevention plan for approval by TEA; restructuring the district or appropriate school campuses to improve identification of and service to students at risk of dropping out; ordering lower student-to-counselor ratios on school campuses with high dropout rates; and ordering the use of any other intervention strategy considered to be effective in reducing dropout rates, including mentor programs and flexible class scheduling.

The bill would take effect September 1, 2003. The dropout prevention provisions would apply beginning with the 2004-05 school year.

**SUPPORTERS  
SAY:**

CSSB 976 would offer a realistic, effective approach to addressing the state's dropout problem by establishing a process for collecting accurate data, a pilot program to reduce the number of dropouts, and sanctions for campuses or districts that make no progress in reducing dropout rates.

The bill would establish a uniform system for counting dropouts that would include such information as ninth grade completion rates and the number of students who enter and complete high school equivalency certificate programs. Calculating dropout figures has proven to be notoriously difficult because these students are hard to follow once they leave school. Collecting this information at the district and campus level, where individual students would be easier to track, would offer a much clearer and more accurate picture of dropout rates.

One of the most contentious issues in calculating dropout rates has been whether to count students who are enrolled in high school equivalency certificate programs as high school dropouts. TEA does not count these students as dropouts, but other groups consider them dropouts unless they receive a certificate by a particular date. By requiring this information to be broken down and reported separately, the bill would help develop a clearer overall picture of this group of students.

CSSB 976 would provide a tool for reducing dropout rates by creating a high school-college pilot program that could give students at risk of dropping out an incentive to stay in school. Under this pilot program, high schools could offer joint programs with community and technical colleges to offer students more attractive options for staying in school.

The bill would encourage school districts to make dropout prevention a priority by giving TEA the authority to impose sanctions on districts with chronic dropout problems. These sanctions would be aimed at encouraging districts to improve dropout identification and services to students at risk of dropping out.

**OPPONENTS  
SAY:**

The middle college education program should be limited to students at risk of dropping out of school. Including students who wish to accelerate high school completion would divert the program's focus away from dropouts in favor of students who would be likely to complete high school anyway.

**NOTES:**

The committee substitute modified the Senate engrossed version of SB 976 by requiring the commissioner to establish the middle college education pilot program for students who wish to accelerate high school completion, as well as for those at risk of dropping out.

A related bill, HB 1518 by Dutton, which would establish a statewide dropout data oversight committee to review TEA's standards and definitions for dropouts, passed the House on April 30 and was scheduled for a public hearing by the Senate Education Committee on May 20.