



LOCKHART INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Dear Lockhart ISD Community,

I am so proud of the positive start to the school that we have enjoyed, and I hope that this message finds you well. I wanted to provide the community with an important update and follow up to our Board of Trustees meeting this week. Unfortunately, we had technical issues, and the meeting was not recorded. During the meeting, I spoke directly to the board and those in attendance, addressing the Texas Education Agency's (TEA) accountability ratings and sharing essential insights into school districts' challenges with state accountability while focusing on our district's commitment to continuous improvement. We understand the importance of this discussion and are committed to ensuring that the message is communicated to our entire community. While we had many areas of improvement on the 2024 STAAR and improvements in most campus ratings, I have mixed emotions regarding our results and projected school ratings. As you may know, the TEA was kept from releasing school ratings last year due to a lawsuit and are currently unable to share campus A-F ratings due to a court order.

If you know me, you know that I pride myself on my competitive spirit. It is this spirit that attributes to much of my success over the years. Needless to say, I love a great competition. When I think of a fair competition, I think of a few things: First, I think of clear rules. The rules of the competition should be well-defined, transparent, and communicated to all participants before the competition begins. These rules should apply equally to everyone. Next, I think of a level playing field. All participants should have access to the same resources, information, and opportunities. There should be no inherent advantages for any competitor based on factors unrelated to the competition itself. Lastly, I think of a mechanism for redress. There should be a process in place for participants to raise concerns or appeal decisions if they believe the competition was unfair.

The current A-F rating system continues to be plagued with flaws. There is no transparency or fairness to the rules of the A-F game. For many years, we have not received the accountability manual (rule book) until the end of the school year or later, even though statute requires it. Also, statute requires that it be mathematically possible

for every school to receive an A, yet the Texas Education Agency continues to change the rules and use lagging indicators and make this impossible. Lastly, the TEA is supposed to ensure that the STAAR is valid and reliable as determined by a third party. Although we have administered the STAAR assessment for over a decade TEA has yet to get a third party determination. What at least two research studies have shown though is that the STAAR is not aligned to appropriate grade level reading abilities.

Another problem is that the Texas Education Agency recently began using AI to grade the writing ability of students. Last school year in Lockhart ISD, we saw an increase of almost 30% in the number of zeros given as scores in 5th-grade writing compared to the previous year. This was consistent across the region and state. How can the TEA reconcile this drastic change and not question the validity of the AI grading? If school districts disagree with the results of the AI grades, they have one week to resubmit at a cost of \$50 per student. For obvious reasons, most school districts were not able to have writings rescored by humans but reports are coming out that those who did are reporting higher scores in up to 70% of the essays scored by humans.

Given these profound issues, it is clear that the Texas Education Agency has not fulfilled its legal obligations. The A-F grading system is not just a flawed policy—it is a violation of the principles laid out in our state's education laws. The TEA's failure to follow the statute is not only harmful to our schools and students, but it is also a breach of trust with the people of Texas.

Last weekend, I coached one of my soccer teams in a tournament in San Antonio, and a few calls were made or not made that the kids felt affected the outcome of the game. Maybe they did or didn't, but during my post-game talk with the team, we discussed the proper way to respond when you feel the rules were violated. As a coach, I am always focused on raising great young men who will be leaders as adults. Some of them wanted to handle the situation by bickering with the opposing team or even the referee. In the end, we discussed what was in our control and what wasn't, and what productive options we had.

As a public school leader passionate about ensuring that all kids thrive and that public schools thrive, I have questioned myself over how to respond to the blatant disregard the TEA has for accountability statute. To be clear, I do not have an issue with school accountability and actually believe that it is a necessary part of ensuring equity for all kids in the Texas education system. But our current system is deeply flawed.

This is why the TEA must be held accountable and why legal action is necessary. What are we to do when the very body entrusted to provide leadership, guidance, and support drops the ball? This is not a game for our kids. By suing the TEA, we send a powerful message that our schools and our children deserve better. While Lockhart ISD was not

part of the lawsuit last year, we expect the costs associated with this action to be similar to last year, in which school districts paid about \$4,000 each. We believe this investment to be worthwhile in order to provide our kids with a better education in the future.

We demand a system that is fair, transparent, and reflective of the true quality of education—a system that supports all students, regardless of their background, and provides them with the opportunities they deserve. Our communities need an accountability system that has clear rules, a level playing field, and valid reporting to kids and parents.

In conclusion, we will remain committed to student growth and success in Lockhart ISD. We will continue to advocate for a more equitable and accurate assessment system for our students and schools. We believe that every student in Lockhart ISD has unlimited potential and should receive the quality education and opportunities they deserve. We will maintain focus on our district's goals and mission as we move forward. Thank you for your continued support as we work together toward this goal.

Sincerely,
Mark Estrada
Superintendent- Lockhart ISD