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An Equity Analysis of the 2013 Texas House Bill 5*

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Competing Goals in College and Career Readiness Policy: An Equity Analysis of the 2013 Texas House Bill 5

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Since its origins, the U.S. education system has wrestled with competing goals to define the purpose and process of public education. Early 19th century advocates for universal public schooling found themselves in the minority against dominant business and philanthropic groups that advocated an educational system that spurred economic competition while maintaining social stratification along racial and class lines (Anderson, 1988). Just as the birth of the universal schooling system was forged through opposing views, today's objectives for college and career readiness encapsulate the tension between conflicting attitudes of the purpose and goals of education. Texas House Bill 5 (2013) represents the latest attempt for the state to direct public secondary school curriculum toward postsecondary readiness goals. The bill implemented a new public high school curriculum structure that divides vocational training and advanced college preparatory curriculum through different course sequences or "endorsements." Endorsements are intended to advance the state's college and career readiness goals while optimizing students' individual choice of study. Although proponents of the bill argued against the notion that endorsements were "tracks," the endorsements reflect subject-specific sequences that align with a college area of study or career choice. While there are numerous accounts on the sociocultural impacts of racially and socioeconomically differentiated curricular tracks in schools (e.g., Anderson, 1988; Gonzáles, 1999), this review applies economic theories of social mobility and competition to explain the context of the competing educational goals contained within HB 5 and the potential implications for inequitable social stratification as a result.

Keywords: college and career readiness; economics of education; Texas House Bill 5 (2013)

Since the influential release of the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*, the U.S. has overtly focused at the federal, state, and local school levels on academic rigor, performance standards, and high school graduation rates as a way to enhance economic growth and national economic stability. A corresponding concern for school accountability and academic curriculum standards pervaded the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which influenced the implementation of high-stakes testing and college-readiness metrics across the nation (Barnes, Slate, and Rojas-LeBouef, 2010; Brown, 2015; Harris & Herrington, 2006; Labaree, 2012). Standards and accountability metrics became determining factors leading educational reforms in the 1980s and were explicitly designed to connect reforms to the U.S. education system with business and economic interests (Brown, 2015). In the same year that *A Nation at Risk* was released by the National Council on Education Excellence, the College Board issued its own report on the knowledge and skills necessary for successful college students (Brown, 2015). Present day college and career readiness standards are a culminating outcome of the reports' impacts and the both competing and converging interests of business and education.

Over the past decade or so, states have continued to emphasize college and career readiness (CCR) standards as a growing feature of their school success plans, district performance metrics, and reform strategies (Blume & Zumeta, 2014). Texas, specifically, has implemented a number of college readiness policies that aim to strengthen the P-16, or pre-kindergarten through college, academic pipeline (Blume & Zumeta, 2014). For example, since 2000, Texas state educational agencies and the Legislature have been guided by statewide plans to increase college attainment. The current 60x30

Texas Higher Education Strategic Plan ambitiously aims to raise the number of Texas college graduates from approximately 24% to 60% by the year 2030 (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2017). In the same vein, in 2005, public concerns over high-stakes testing, low high school graduation rates, and questions of students' academic preparedness led the 79th Texas Legislature to mandate that the Texas Education Agency and Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board create college and career readiness standards for schools through the passage of House Bill 1 (Texas College and Career Readiness Standards, 2009). In Texas, these standards have been framed as core competencies that reflect academic preparedness (Barnes, Slate, & Rojas-LeBouef, 2010; Texas College and Career Readiness Standards, 2009) for postsecondary success without remediation. As they stand today, the college and career readiness standards focus largely on the end goal of prioritizing content mastery in order to spark intellectual curiosity to motivate students toward postsecondary achievement (Texas College and Career Readiness Standards, 2009).

Texas has experienced recent changes in CCR standards. In 2013, House Bill 5 passed the 83rd Texas Legislature unanimously in both legislative chambers and took effect in the 2014-2015 academic school year (Texas Legislature Online, n.d.). The bill implicated multiple aspects of the school accountability system, performance assessment, testing requirements, and curriculum. Most importantly, House Bill 5 (HB 5) replaced the high school graduation plan with a new curricular structure. Previously, public high schools offered three graduation plans: the Minimum Plan, the Recommended Plan, and the Distinguished Plan, which was the only one that conferred college-readiness status. HB 5 replaced these three plans with a singular base plan—the Foundation Plan—that must be amended on an individual student basis by selecting at least one of five “endorsements,” or content-specific course sequences (House Bill 5, 2013). Endorsement selections include: STEM, Business & Industry, Public Services, Arts & Humanities, and a Multidisciplinary path.

The Foundation Plan reduced the core requirements of the previous graduation plans from a 4x4 structure (four years each of English, math, science, and social studies) to 4 years of English and three of each other core subject area. Selected endorsements are intended to sufficiently supplement students' academic preparation. HB 5 impacted school curriculum standards and broadened support for career and technical education in an attempt to remedy social and economic issues through workforce preparation in schools (Heckman & Masterov, 2007; Labaree, 1997). The reduction in core requirements and reliance upon course content for college and career readiness necessitates questions regarding the equitable distribution of educational opportunity and achievement in HB 5. This framing behind the CCR standards closely ties classroom curriculum to college and career readiness goals as a strategy to bolster the state economy through cultivating strong workers and professionals (Grubb and Lazerson, 2004). While the influence of private industry and business on education follows a long history spanning the course of the 20th century to the present and is deserving of study and critique, this paper explores the competing economic ideologies guiding the currently connected interests between business and educational institutions. House Bill 5, Texas' most recent school reform bill, offers a prime case study to explore the connection between curriculum design and goals for economic growth. While each economic theory introduced in this paper arguably advances a degree of social stratification, my analysis first focuses on the purported goals of particular theories and the corresponding potential for producing, or reproducing, inequities in educational opportunities. I further consider relevant literature to analyze concerns for equity in House Bill 5's curricular changes, and discuss the implications for the Foundation plus Endorsement Plan in Texas high schools.

Economic Theories on Education and Economic Growth

Economic theories of education posit connections between the purpose of educational pursuits and their potential to enhance individual economic gain or overall economic growth. In this section, three economic theories that have been traditionally applied to educational policy are examined in the context of HB 5. First, the theory of social mobility argues that greater levels of education are correlated with greater competitive social success; second, signaling and credentialing theories explicate how graduating students indicate their quality to employers or colleges; and third, the theory of social efficiency aligns educational attainment with job market preparation. All of these theories are situated within a capitalistic orientation to schooling, and educational endeavors more broadly.

The emphasis that HB 5 places on college and career readiness indicates a clear interest from state policymakers in enhancing and assessing the relationship between education and economic growth. The recasting of high school graduation plans through endorsements principally indicates a goal to align high school academic preparation with specific fields and industries that students may pursue in college or in vocational career training. In fact, business and industry representatives were key collaborators in the design of HB 5 and its new curricular requirements, and the five endorsement selections reflect business-oriented fields: STEM, Business & Industry, Public Services, Arts & Humanities, and a Multidisciplinary pathway. Each economic theory outlined here illuminates competing goals that guide HB 5 as an education policy.

Social Mobility Theory

Individual choice to pursue opportunity through education is a key feature of the theory of social mobility (Labaree, 1997). For nearly the full development of the U.S. school system, since 19th century common schools to the present, the educational goal of furthering social mobility has informed educational objectives, design, and outcomes (Grubb and Lazerson, 2004; Labaree, 1997, 2012). Social mobility, as Labaree (1997) argued, captures the American democratic ideal that all opportunities are possible through education, though they are not necessarily equally probable. The development of the “tracked, comprehensive high school” in the U.S. education system exemplifies this goal, as all students undergo the same level of education yet exit with very different outcomes (Labaree, 2012, p. 150). Grubb and Lazerson (2004) referred to the goal of social mobility as the “education gospel,” which they posited misleadingly hails education as the sole, direct source of economic opportunity and social equality. The language of school reform policy often alludes to aspirations for students’ equal chances for social mobility while obscuring the caveat that mobility is necessarily relative and requires an unequal distribution of other resources toward unequal outcomes in order for some to become mobile over others (Grubb, 2009; Grubb and Lazerson 2004; Labaree, 1997).

HB 5 promotes a sense of social mobility in its seemingly flat design for “greater curriculum flexibility” toward college and career readiness (Aycok, 2013, p. 17). Each endorsement indicates a different type of academic or career path under the guise of individual choice and capability (House Resource Organization bill analysis, 2013), signifying that students’ individual success rests upon their ability to best select and pursue their area of interest. Nonetheless, in order for high school graduates to matriculate into higher education and be considered “college ready,” Texas students must still complete a “distinguished level of achievement” with more advanced science, social science, mathematics, and foreign language courses (Texas Association of School Administrators, 2013). Thus, the endorsements themselves do not equally prepare students for college and career readiness, despite being presented as equal in postsecondary preparatory rigor.

Signaling and Credentialing Theories

Economic theories on signaling and credentialing are complementary in that they both explain the purposes for individual educational investment toward social mobility as well as theorize how such an investment pays off for an individual. Signaling theory references an individual's demonstration of their worth to an employer, or as is relevant in this case, to a college admissions committee (Bills, 2003). Similarly, credentialing theory argues that the *content* of educational investment through a degree, certificate, or training program is irrelevant to employers—the credential itself is what matters, as it indicates completion of a certain level of education that is presumably valued by employers, and adheres to a framing of credential competition for individual gain within a system of social stratification (Bills, 2003; Brown, 2001). Brown (2001) argued that credentialism confers access to social networks that provide social and economic advancement and reproduce traditionally limited power relations without dispersing social mobility. The added social value of educational credentialism contributes to an “arms race” or social competition to obtain the most degrees, certificates, and other markers of educational attainment for individual gain (Bills, 2003). Both signaling and credentialing operate as stratifying forces within the education system.

HB 5's five endorsements proffer differentiated tracks that shape Texas high school students' courses, curriculum, and, ultimately, their end options toward college or career readiness. College and career readiness standards, as outlined by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (Texas College and Career Readiness Standards, 2009), are designed to indicate content mastery by subject area. While it remains yet unclear what different endorsements signal to employers or colleges about students' readiness, academically and otherwise, the endorsements are designed to promote CCR standards and thus signal some degree of subject-specific content mastery by the student.

In addition, the effect of credentialing among endorsements, such as students opting to enroll in multiple endorsements (if offered at their campus) in an effort to be competitive for selective college admission, remains to be seen. Further analysis following HB 5's implementation is needed regarding precisely what is signaled by each endorsement to colleges, universities, and employers, and what value each endorsement imparts as a credential for graduating high school students.

Social Efficiency and Tracking

The concept of social efficiency departs from the previous theories that focus on competitive individual gain as it structurally links educational pursuits with collective economic growth. Labaree (1997) explained that social efficiency is a form of “structural pragmatism” that aligns educational attainment with particular jobs to fulfill all employment needs in the market (p. 46). Social efficiency as an educational goal supports a stratified curriculum that includes a spectrum of courses ranging from vocational training to academic coursework.

Economic and sociological research has evidenced that curricular tracking in secondary schools has been utilized as a mechanism to reproduce historical social stratification across racial, socioeconomic, (Bowles & Gintis, 1975; Epple, Newlon & Romano, 2002; Heckman & Masterov, 2007), as well as gender lines (González, 1999) under the auspices of social efficiency. The public school system in the early part of the 20th century was largely defined by curricular tracking that directed populations of students into specific course areas based on presumed suitability for their race, class, and gender. Young women—particularly Black women in the South and Mexican American women in the Southwest—were enrolled in home economics courses, while young Black and Mexican American men were counseled into auto shop and other vocational courses (González, 1999). White, affluent, and suburban students have historically tended to benefit from more rigorous academic preparation either through curricular tracking or through attended segregated schools that

offered a classical education over industrial training (Epple, Newlon & Romano, 2002; Gónzales, 1999; Labaree, 1997). Thus, curricular design with goals of social efficiency can predetermine the educational paths of students based on race, class, gender, geography, and other features that are unrelated to academic capabilities, in effect reproducing social stratifications and provoking concerns of educational equity.

The Foundation plus Endorsement Plan through House Bill 5 contains explicit goals toward social efficiency in its adjustments to secondary curriculum. The endorsements design was left largely up to the State Board of Education's (SBOE) approval, which invited education, business, and industry leaders to inform the planning process (House Resource Organization bill analysis, 2013). During committee hearings, supporting arguments from proponents of the bill included meeting "the growing need of Texas employers for skilled workers ready to enter technical trades" as a goal of the legislation (p. 9-10). To this end, HB 5 encouraged the further development of career and technical education (CTE) courses to fulfill elective core subject area credits, though all offered courses must aim toward postsecondary readiness with SBOE approval, except in certain circumstances (Texas Association of School Administrators, 2013). The intent guiding HB 5 is to provide stratified individual choices to meet market efficiencies.

Analytic Argument on House Bill 5 Foundation Plan plus Endorsements

House Bill 5 replaced the former high school graduation plan with the Foundation Plan plus at least one of five types of endorsements: STEM, Business & Industry, Public Services, Arts & Humanities, and Multidisciplinary. If schools cannot offer all five, they must at least offer the Multidisciplinary endorsement (HB 5, 2013). The bill's curricular change was heavily geared toward enhancing the college and career readiness of Texas high school graduates. Economic theory illuminates the goals underpinning the endorsements as well as concerns for equity in the bill's implementation, and its future implications.

Two corresponding concerns arise from analyzing the bill's college and career readiness aims through economic theories: 1) there is an explicit focus on worker-readiness in the bill summary language (House Research Organization, 2013), suggesting a strong orientation toward social efficiency theory in the bill's implementation that provides different options for students based on the most "efficient" market need; 2) the variance across schools in the availability of endorsement options may lead to inequitable educational outcomes statewide. While the five endorsement options purportedly promote social mobility through greater "student choice" over curriculum, the extent of choice remains questionable and warrants analysis.

Social Efficiency Theory in HB 5

The endorsements, oriented toward social efficiency goals, have the potential to reconstitute curricular tracking. Particularly, social factors that influence which endorsements are made available to students at different schools may act as a determinant of who becomes college-ready through advanced coursework and the "distinguished level of achievement" required for college admissions, and who becomes career-ready through CTE coursework, apprenticeships, and industry training. According to the bill, districts may offer CTE tracks in collaboration with institutions of higher education that work toward recognized technical degrees, licenses, or certifications (Texas Association of School Administrators, 2013). CTE courses are intended to be in "areas of high-demand, high-wage careers" (Texas Association of School Administrators, 2013) that do not require a four-year college degree. This is in contrast to the "distinguished level of achievement", which can be reached through extra, advanced credits in any endorsement. The "distinguished level of achievement" and

CTE coursework through the endorsement options create two pathways for accommodating socially efficient graduation plans.

However, as Grubb and Lazerson (2004) argued, the tension within the relationship between education and economic growth results in stratified educational outcomes for similar educational levels. Vocational education in high school provides no further demonstrable economic benefit than other forms of education, as job market needs often evolve to require different skills (Crookston & Hooks, 2012; Grubb and Lazerson, 2004). In fact, research demonstrates that the incidence of CTE dual enrollment can be negatively correlated with total advanced college credits earned (Kim, 2014). A student's choice of endorsement does not readily impart college and career readiness in the corresponding field; rather, the curricular components entailed in endorsements such as seeking advanced college-level courses or a CTE industry apprenticeship act as the mechanisms that contribute to shaping students' postsecondary readiness. The bill's content-oriented stratification between advanced or CTE credits and end goal preparation suggests that the endorsement plan is not intended for all Texas high school students to be "college *and* career ready", only one or the other to best—or most "efficiently"—suit the anticipated needs of the Texas economy.

Variance in School Endorsement Availability

Furthermore, how the endorsements are presented to those who must make educational decisions in contrast to how they truly prepare and impact students is of concern. HB 5's endorsements were developed to allow flexibility in high school curriculum options and expand students' ability to choose fields that interested them (Aycock, 2013; House Resource Organization, 2013). Students' choice relies upon a strong connection between the policy's intended college and career goals and student selection behaviors. Research shows that this connection may be tenuous. Venezia and Kirst (2005) found that students, families, and even high school counselors experienced difficulty in understanding the implications of certain college readiness policies ostensibly intended to benefit them, which brings into question the effectiveness of college readiness policies in articulating across the P-16 pipeline (Rippner, 2014). Since HB 5 mandates that students must opt-in to an endorsement in 8th grade with parental and counselor assistance (Schur, 2015; Texas Association of School Administrators, 2013), the ways in which the endorsements are communicated and how they are understood by students and families to impart college and career readiness and academic preparedness may well vary (Barnes, Slate, & Rojas-LeBouef, 2010; Holland and Farmer-Hinton, 2009). This variance constitutes the gray area of the theory of economic social mobility through education that Labaree (1997) explained: everyone may have equal opportunities, but realizing equal achievement is improbable.

In addition, the endorsement design may further stratify students' signaling and credentialing power. For college-aspiring students, particular endorsements may signal a certain level of quality to academic departments within universities that deem the endorsement desirable, regardless of statewide variability in the actual coursework. For example, the Business & Industry endorsement may signal a student's worthiness, interest, and commitment to schools of business accepting undergraduates. However, given the statewide diversity in the design of actual course curriculum for the endorsements, and the inability of all high schools to offer all five endorsements due to cost and staffing limitations, this signaling phenomenon (Bills, 2003) may calcify into a credentialing system that rewards certain endorsements over others regardless of their actual content and despite the fact that they are not designed to articulate to specific college majors (Brown, 2001).

At highly competitive high schools offering multiple endorsements, there is the potential for students to engage in collecting endorsements by opting-in to more than one in order to compete to be in the Top 10% for college admissions, leaving students at schools able to offer only the Multi-

disciplinary endorsement at a disadvantage. The potential for preferential credentialism to influence college admission and outcomes deserves extra consideration for equity measures to ameliorate inequitable outcomes.

Concerns for Equity

Several features of HB 5's Foundation plus Endorsements Plan present concerns for achieving and sustaining equity in high school options. First, the geographic and demographic correlations to endorsement options at public high schools merit attention. Second, the potential for certain endorsements to become stronger signals to academic majors than others (i.e., the business example mentioned above) threatens equitable consideration of applicants. Finally, the historical pattern of curricular tracking that occurs along vocational versus academic stratification in American high schools must be closely monitored to avoid discriminatory course advising along lines of race, class, gender, and geography.

First, it is well known and documented that the Texas school finance system is inequitable in its funding formula, which results in drastically varying quality of high schools (Aléman, 2007; Alexander, Salmon, and Alexander, 2015; Villanueva, 2016). HB 5 did not include the appropriation of any additional state funding to implement the bill (Parks, 2013). Schools bore the cost of altering their curricula, and inevitably evaluated their fiscal capacity to offer any combination of the five endorsements. HB 5 stated that if schools cannot offer all endorsements, they must at a minimum offer the Multidisciplinary option (HB 5, 2013).

Although no comprehensive data has been generated as of yet, given the presumed cost of offering five sequences of curricula with respective staff, facilities, and supplies, it stands to reason that the full array of endorsements may be offered at more affluent, suburban, well-funded, and predominately White high schools whereas a narrower endorsement selection would be available at less well-funded, urban and rural schools comprised predominately of students of color and/or lower-income students. If this trend were to take place, the original intent of HB 5's endorsement plan to expand students' curricular choices would be nullified and a highly inequitable scenario of endorsement stratification would result across the state, providing the greatest amount of choice to the most privileged students and locking underprivileged students into limited endorsement options, or no options at all beyond the Multidisciplinary plan. In other words, *de facto* curricular tracking would manifest depending upon where certain endorsements are offered and to whom, therefore reproducing social stratifications in educational opportunities.

Second, endorsements may become stratified based on their differential signaling capability and credentialism. The example above illustrating the Business & Industry endorsement signaling preferential consideration by university schools of business demonstrates one example of how endorsements could develop as signals to universities and employers, regardless of their actual content. Likewise, signaling could exacerbate the impacts of a regional lack of endorsement options at certain high schools, as illustrated above. If more resource-rich high schools are largely able to supply more endorsement options, then students graduating with endorsements in STEM, Public Services, and Business & Industry—which are presumably costlier due to needs for laboratories, special technology and equipment, and other classroom provisions—may signal more than just their academic quality. These endorsements may come to signal high-income communities, lucrative social networks, and other aspects of well-funded school districts. This could lead to inequitable outcomes in college admissions and employment.

Lastly, the historical record of curricular tracking is cause for concern with a multi-pronged high school graduation plan. As HB 5 is implemented, the U.S. Department of Education Methods of Administration program and advocates for educational equity (Aycock, 2013) have and will con-

tinue to monitor racial equity across endorsement selections. However, multiple resources are needed to secure educational equity beyond simply funding, universal curricular options, or other uniform approaches (Grubb, 2009). Further empirical study and analysis is needed as the endorsement curricula continue to be developed and implemented at Texas high schools in order to ensure that appropriate options are made available to students across racial, class, gender, and geographic backgrounds and that all students receive equitable counseling and communication regarding their postsecondary goals and the academic steps needed to pursue them.

Discussion and Implications

The Foundation plus Endorsement Plan proposed by House Bill 5 went into effect at the start of the 2014-2015 academic school year. Students already enrolled in high school at the time were presented with the option to opt-in to the new program or continue with the previous graduation plans, so the first cohort of Texas students to enter high school entirely under this plan will graduate in the spring of 2018. As of yet, no widespread data reflecting statewide endorsement offerings or the plan's impact on achieving college and career readiness outcomes has been generated, and Texas higher education's plan for enrolling students graduating high school under HB 5 remains unclear.

The most recent state legislative session, the 85th session in the spring of 2017, produced mixed results for Texas college and career readiness goals, from an equity perspective. The legislature succeeded in enacting a bill requiring that public schools distribute updated outreach materials for college admissions (House Bill 264, 2017). However, structural improvements to the school finance system were unfortunately stymied in the final days of the regular legislative session (Swaby, 2017) with no additional appropriations for implementing HB 5's curricular changes to schools across the state. The updated data from state education agencies on Texas high school graduates, matriculations to post-secondary school, and workforce numbers under HB 5 remain to be seen.

Overall, analyzing the curricular component of HB 5 involves considering the competing philosophical and economic ideologies that inform the goals of education (Grubb & Lazerson, 2004; Labaree, 1997). The contradictions pervading theories of social mobility and social efficiency and the mechanisms through which educational stratification occurs, such as signaling and credentialing, have informed school reform movements over the past century (Labaree, 2012) and continue to deeply influence educational policy, as evidenced in this analysis. School reforms oriented toward college and career readiness encapsulate these contradictions between universal access to opportunity and stratified preparation to enter the workforce. Aside from the ongoing challenges of policy implementation and support, the competing ideologies guiding the development of educational policy perpetuate barriers to achieving long-term educational goals. Although the 60x30 Texas Higher Education Strategic Plan purports goals for Texans' social mobility, that is not the shared goal of economic education ideologies from the start. Indeed, if the aims of the policy are contradictory, so too are the state goals to align high school curricula in order to increase equitable access to higher education *and* a more skilled workforce. Truly equitable educational opportunities cannot result from inequitable endorsement options.

Further research will be needed to review data on the endorsements' impacts, their statewide availability, and the associated costs of designing and offering each endorsement. Future analysis revealing informal signaling and endorsement articulations with particular college departments would be cause for concern. Policy analyses are needed that continue to monitor the equity measures, outcome effectiveness, and foundational goals guiding educational policy and practice in Texas.

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