

GETTING PAST THE POLITICS; SORTING THROUGH THE CONTROVERSY OVER TEXAS PERFORMANCE MEASURE

Amidst charges and counter charges, the truth is more complicated

Democratic gubernatorial candidate Bill White blamed election-year politics for the creation of the *Texas Projection Measure* yesterday, calling it an effort by Gov. Rick Perry to apply Enron-style accounting principles to what should be a straightforward school accountability system.

That would be great fodder for an election-year campaign if you took that claim on its face and to its obvious conclusion: Perry, wanting to pump up his claims of education success, gave the nod to a new measure that would inflate school ratings and make him look good, all conveniently timed to occur during the cycle of his 2010 re-election campaign.

"They decided to cheat, and then once caught cheating they failed to acknowledge responsibility and accept accountability. They counted failing scores as passing," White said in his speech to *La Raza* in San Antonio on Monday. "How can you teach individual responsibility to students, or emphasize the importance of parental responsibility, if the state's CEO and his appointees don't accept responsibility? How can you hold teachers, principals and school boards accountable if accountability does not start at the top?"

To say the Perry administration intended to "cheat" on school accountability is a loaded charge because it implies an organized deception on the part of Perry and his appointed Education Commissioner Robert Scott and even career agency staffers. Pressed for clarification late Monday night, campaign spokeswoman Katy Bacon said collusion was not what White intended to imply when he talks about Perry cherry-picking his numbers on the performance of Texas schools, while avoiding the mention of challenges.

"I think the question up in the air is that Perry is a career politician who has a habit of inflating or deflating numbers at his convenience," said Bacon, noting better-than-average bumps on scores that just happened to occur during Perry's election years. "We've seen it on dropout rates, and we see it on this."

So how far is the White campaign willing to go on this TPM charge? White, from his own highlights on an early version of the La Raza speech, indicated clearly he was bothered the most by the fact that Perry watched dramatic, almost over-the-top, improvements occur in the state's public school system on his watch and never questioned how authentic those gains might be.

Both Perry and Scott have framed similar criticism as a direct attack on the hard work of Texas teachers and administrators, which makes the political tight rope White walks much riskier. Obviously, it's harder for White to be the friend of Texas teacher groups if he has to tell them their work falls short.

Pressed for specifics on what could really be laid at Perry's feet, the White campaign countered last night that it was the fact that Perry chose to appoint his own former staff member to head up his education agency— implying TEA would have been better off headed up by an educator with a critical eye— that has led, in part, to its own set of consequences, including the current backlash on the Texas Projection Measure.

“The buck stops with Perry,” Bacon said. “Ultimately, it was Perry who appointed Scott – Scott was a former staff person of his – and he has to be accountable for what happens in the *Texas Education Agency*. They should know what's going on. Counting kids as passing when they're failing is not accountability.”

But let's be fair, as far as it goes with the *Texas Projection Measure*. A doctorate in education may nor may not have been the silver bullet in this case. Lionel “Skip” Meno and Mike Moses were the key commissioners to implement the initial Texas accountability system. Both had doctorates in education, but nothing in their curriculum vitas would suggest either had a specialization in education statistics or research methodology.

All this begs the question, “How did we get here, and what does it mean?”

Check back with the *Quorum Report* later today, and we'll walk you through some general early history of the TPM process – including the speech that appeared to galvanize, or at least crystallize, the movement toward the state's new accountability system and the Texas Projection Measure. We'll also talk about who wasn't on board during the process, and why. And we'll explain, to some extent, how the agency landed on its choice of a model, and why.

Tomorrow, we will have a broad analysis of how many schools might have benefited from the Texas Projection Measure and some comments on that from various lawmakers. This is still a tough number to pin down because you also have to consider the interaction of other “safe harbor” provisions in state law that also give schools ratings bumps. The impacts, to say the least, are startling and appear to be far in excess of early agency projections.

In the meantime, White definitely owes a hat tip to conservative Bill Hammond of the *Texas Association of Business* for his Enron accounting analogy. Hammond made the comment early on that a *projection measure* for the state’s schoolchildren was a shell game. We’ll talk about that, both today and in days to come, as the agency works through its new measure.

So here’s your homework: Toggle about halfway through this clip from *The Smartest Guys in the Room* to the point where former Enron CEO Jeffrey Skilling talks to his employees about the initial *Fortune* magazine article that questioned whether Enron’s stock was overvalued.

“The gist of the article is that Enron is sort of a black box which, sorry, it’s true. It’s just difficult for us to show people the specifics of how money flows through the wholesale business,” said Skilling, blaming the article on business magazine competition. “The criticism, I think, is kinda ridiculous.”

No one is saying that malfeasance on the scale of Enron is going on at the Texas Education Agency. That’s not the point. But that concept of creating a system so complicated that no one understands it – that black box – is a theme that recurs, time and again, when discussing TPM. We’ll tackle that one, too, as we discuss the model.