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State needs clear picture of high school preparedness
By State Sen. Leticia Van de Putte
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Texas officials are projecting a \$24 billion revenue shortfall, which will influence every decision the Legislature makes. Unfortunately, there will likely be a negative impact on schools. A loss of education funding for our state can be devastating when a top priority needs to be preparing our Texas young adults for an increasingly technology-driven, global economy.

We live in a world where basic skills are not enough to succeed on the job or in college. A strong high school education is vital in today's economy, but ominous signs show our nation's high schools are coming up short. Achieve Inc., in a 2005 survey of employers, found that 39 percent of U.S. high school graduates were unprepared for entry-level jobs, while 49 percent were not prepared to advance beyond those positions. Fifty-two percent of full-time college freshmen in state institutions of higher education require remedial courses, and only half graduate in six years. What's more, the Texas higher education graduation rate is the fifth lowest in the nation.

Enrollment in Texas' public and independent colleges and universities is not keeping pace with our booming population, according to "Closing the Gaps," a 2010 Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board study. There is a shortfall in the number of degrees and certificates being earned. Fewer people with degrees translates into lower earnings and fewer skilled workers.

This comes at a crucial time for our state, which is home to the most Fortune 500 company headquarters in the United States. From technology, health care and science, to timber, oil and energy, we will need a stream of qualified young workers to take on these challenging sectors.

Texas has been ahead of the curve in attempting to better prepare our high school graduates for the future. The class of 2011 will be the first to complete four years of the Recommended High School Program, a required curriculum under which every student must take four years of math and science. Graduates must complete this program to gain admission to any state college or university. This program is a huge step in ensuring students gain the knowledge needed to succeed in college classrooms and the workforce.

With that in mind, the National Assessment Governing Board — of which I am a member — is tackling the issue of high school preparedness head-on. As the independent, nonpartisan body that sets policy for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as The Nation's Report Card, the Governing Board is spearheading an effort that will help gauge 12th-grade academic preparedness.

The board is overseeing a series of research projects that, among other things, aim to determine how the NAEP 12th-grade reading and mathematics tests align with the skills and knowledge used for decisions about college placement and workplace training.

By getting straight answers on high school preparedness, the studies can be used to help establish a foundation for building a competitive work force not only in Texas but also nationwide. The NAEP studies will tell us just how ready our high school graduates are for the future, and hopefully set the nation on a path to rigorous, relevant standards for all high schools.

Because second-rate, in preparing students for college and the workplace, just isn't good enough.

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