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Response to "What Do Klein et al. Tell Us About Test Scores in Texas?"¹

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We have reviewed the article by Toenjes (2005). Below we summarize our responses.

First, Toenjes incorrectly describes the focus of our study. As we note in our paper, the findings from the 20-school analysis merely triggered and supplemented our statewide analyses. Most of our article examined the stark discontinuity between TAAS and NAEP trends for the entire state of Texas (namely, the meteoric increase in scores and the narrowing of the gap between racial/ethnic groups on TAAS not being reflected on NAEP). The huge discrepancy between NAEP and state test scores in Texas is well-documented, it is still present, and it has been described in other studies (Haney, 2000; McCombs et al., 2005; Peterson & Hess, 2005). Toenjes' comments about the representativeness of the 20 schools are irrelevant to our statewide analyses, and that analysis was the focus of our paper.

Second, Toenjes appears to have misunderstood the purpose of our 20-schools analysis. The intent was not to make conclusions about relationships between achievement and socioeconomic status statewide. Rather, the purpose was to examine whether, in this particular sample for which scores on two different tests were available, the TAAS functioned in the same way as an alternative test that many other states use, namely, the Stanford 9. The fact that the TAAS and Stanford 9

¹ Accepted under the editorship of Sherman Dorn. Send commentary to Casey Cobb (casey.cobb@uconn.edu).

showed radically different relationships with SES does not tell us anything about what those relationships would be in a larger sample, and we never claim that it does. In particular, we do not, as Toenjes claims, use the 20-schools study to conclude that TAAS lacks validity.

Instead, we used the findings with the 20 schools to show that in these particular schools, the scores on a commonly used test of mathematics achievement did not correspond to scores on the TAAS. The difference between these two tests was much larger than can plausibly be explained by differences in content coverage, and therefore raises questions about the meaning of TAAS scores for these schools. As we state clearly, “We are therefore reluctant to draw conclusions from our findings with these schools or to imply that these findings are likely to occur elsewhere in Texas. Nevertheless, they do suggest the desirability of periodic administration of external tests to validate TAAS results. This procedure, which is sometimes referred to as ‘audit testing,’ could have been incorporated into the study of the Metropolitan Achievement Test discussed previously.” This is a much more cautious conclusion than Toenjes claims we make.

Third, Toenjes misunderstands the relationship between our study and the Grissmer, Flanagan, Kawata, & Williamson (2000) study. Toenjes states that we concluded that the observed increases in Texas student academic performance reported by Grissmer et al. (2000) were highly suspect. Our paper contains no such conclusion. We focused on whether the TAAS scores were suspect, whereas Grissmer et al. examined gains in NAEP. As we clearly state in our paper, “these studies differed in the questions they investigated, the data they analyzed, and the methodologies they employed.” The studies do not in fact produce conflicting findings; they simply address different questions.

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Dr. Stephen P. Klein is a Senior Research Scientist at RAND, where for the past 30 years he has led studies on health, criminal justice, military manpower, and educational issues. His current projects include analyzing licensing examinations in teaching and other professions, delivering computer performance tests over the Web, and measuring the effects of instructional practices and curriculum on student performance.

Dr. Laura S. Hamilton is a Senior Behavioral Scientist at RAND where she conducts research on educational assessment and the effectiveness of educational reform programs. Her current projects include a study of systemic reforms in math and science, an investigation of district and school responses to standards-based accountability, and a study of teachers' and principals' use of information from a value-added assessment system.

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