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Losing and Saving and Losing Physics in Texas

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Texas has the second-largest population of the states, and played even a larger role in education reform movements of the past 15 years than its size would indicate. In the Fall of 2011, physicists across the country were surprised to learn that six university physics programs in Texas were threatened with closure because of small graduation numbers. Five of them ultimately closed. Many of the faculty at the institutions losing programs came together and formed a consortium that eventually made it possible to continue offering physics, by unconventional means, to their undergraduates. In the Spring of 2013 came an even larger change. Physics had been part of the recommended high school graduation plan in Texas. As part of a bill making sweeping changes to high school graduation requirements and accountability, the physics requirement was removed. Physics may partly be falling victim to the national focus on STEM, which suggests that the various disciplines of science are interchangeable and not individually important. None of the changes in Texas are hard to imagine coming to other states as well.