

TESTIMONY  
On  
Assessment at the High School Level  
Texas Senate Education Committee  
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Background

Texas was one of the first states to require students to pass an assessment to graduate from high school. Beginning in 2000, the exit-level Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) in mathematics, reading and writing was administered to students in the fall of the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. Following the enactment of Senate Bill 7 in 2003, the administration of the TAAS was changed from fall to spring to support the public school accountability system. It was decided to administer the exit-level TAAS toward the end of grade 10 rather than grade 11.

High Schools worked diligently to help students meet this requirement and the media reported on the anguish of families when students failed to meet the standard. Advocacy groups argued that the requirement unfairly discriminated against disadvantaged and ethnic minority students. Some sought to end the practice through litigation. The exit-level test as a graduation requirement was upheld by the courts.

The state also developed and implemented end-of-course tests for the following high school courses: Biology (1995), Algebra I (1996), English II (1999) and U.S. History (1999). Students could satisfy their high school graduation by substituting a passing score on the end-of-course test for the corresponding exit-level TAKS, i.e. Algebra I for mathematics.

TBEC's Proposal for 11<sup>th</sup> Grade Exit-level Assessments

TBEC believed that the 10<sup>th</sup> grade TAAS was not an adequate standard for high school graduation because it did not measure achievement at a level that represented preparation for success after high school. TBEC also believed that the 10<sup>th</sup> grade TAAS was ineffective in driving high school improvement compared to the more extensive testing program in elementary and middle schools.

After months of study by a task force, in November 1996 the TBEC Board of Directors adopted a policy goal statement, *Improving Statewide Student Assessment in Texas*, with the following recommendation regarding high school assessment.

**Establish a high school level assessment program that evaluates achievement as it relates to standards for success in the real world.**

A Texas high school diploma must mean that a graduate has acquired the knowledge and skills necessary for success after high school. The current exit-level TAAS is not appropriate as a graduation standard and must be replaced. **TBEC recommends establishing a new and more meaningful graduation requirement representing high academic and current workplace standards. These assessments should be administered to students for the first time at the end of 11th grade and measure achievement in reading for information, mathematical applications, writing, and other subjects as determined by the Commissioner of Education.** This new and more credible graduation standard should be adopted immediately and applied no later than for the graduating class of 2001. This schedule would give educators ample opportunity to make appropriate program adjustments.

Senate Bill 103

Before the 1999 legislative session, Senator Teel Bivins introduced a bill establishing a new state assessment program that included math and reading tests in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade; and math, English language arts, social studies and science tests in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade. The 11<sup>th</sup> grade tests were to be used as a high school graduation requirement and to exempt students from developmental education upon entering higher education.

From Senate Bill 103 as introduced by Senator Teel Bivins 1999

(c) The agency shall also adopt secondary exit-level assessment instruments designed to be administered to students in grade 11 to assess competencies in mathematics, ~~and~~ English language arts, social studies, and science. The English language arts section must include the assessment of writing competencies. The assessment instruments must be designed to assess a student's mastery of minimum skills necessary for high school graduation and readiness to enroll in an institution of higher education or enter the workforce. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board shall assist the agency in determining the skills necessary for readiness to enroll in an institution of higher education.

3-5 A student who  
3-6 performs at or above a level established by the Texas Higher  
3-7 Education Coordinating Board on the secondary exit-level assessment  
3-8 instruments is exempt from the requirements of Section 51.306.

3-19 SECTION 3. Section 39.025(a), Education Code, is amended to  
3-20 read as follows:

3-21 (a) A student may not receive a high school diploma until  
3-22 the student has performed satisfactorily on the secondary  
3-23 exit-level assessment instruments for English language arts, ~~and~~  
3-24 mathematics, social studies, and science administered under Section  
3-25 39.023(c) ~~[or on:]~~  
3-26 ~~[(1) the end of course assessment instruments adopted~~  
3-27 ~~under Section 39.023(d) in Algebra I and English II; and]~~  
4-1 ~~[(2) the end of course assessment instrument adopted~~  
4-2 ~~under Section 39.023(d) in either Biology I or United States~~  
4-3 ~~history].~~

By 1999, the concept of new exit-level tests at the 11<sup>th</sup> grade was supported by Governor George W. Bush, Commissioner Mike Moses and others. Senator Bivins' bill set off a dialogue and negotiations about student testing in Texas, including the issue of end-of-course exams.

### Senate Bill 103 Enacted

The final legislation included language that was intended to at least partially satisfy the advocates of subject matter tests and end-of-course tests by specifying the course content to be covered in the four exit-level assessments, as follows:

3-17 (c) The agency shall also adopt secondary exit-level  
3-18 assessment instruments designed to be administered to students in  
3-19 grade 11 to assess essential knowledge and skills [competencies] in  
3-20 mathematics, [and] English language arts, social studies, and  
3-21 science. The mathematics section must include at least Algebra I  
3-22 and geometry with the aid of technology. The English language arts  
3-23 section must include at least English III and must include the  
3-24 assessment of essential knowledge and skills in writing  
3-25 [competencies]. The social studies section must include early  
3-26 American and United States history. The science section must  
4-1 include at least biology and integrated chemistry and physics. The  
4-2 assessment instruments must be designed to assess a student's  
4-3 mastery of minimum skills necessary for high school graduation and  
4-4 readiness to enroll in an institution of higher education.

The legislation as enacted also no longer allowed students to meet high school graduation requirements by their performance on end-of-course tests.

6-7 SECTION 5. Subsection (a), Section 39.025, Education Code,  
6-8 is amended to read as follows:  
6-9 (a) A student may not receive a high school diploma until  
6-10 the student has performed satisfactorily on the secondary  
6-11 exit-level assessment instruments for English language arts, [and]  
6-12 mathematics, social studies, and science administered under Section  
6-13 39.023(c). This subsection does not require a student to  
6-14 demonstrate readiness to enroll in an institution of higher  
6-15 education [or on+]  
6-16 [ (1) the end of course assessment instruments adopted  
6-17 under Section 39.023(d) in Algebra I and English II; and]  
6-18 [ (2) the end of course assessment instrument adopted  
6-19 under Section 39.023(d) in either Biology I or United States  
6-20 history].

The 2001-2002 school year was the last year for the TAAS and also the last year for the end-of-course tests on a statewide basis.

### The Debate Continues

Obviously, the enactment of SB 103 did not end the debate about testing at the high school level. This panel is addressing that issue today. The most visible question is whether or not to replace the existing exit-level TAKS with a set of high school end-of-course tests. I submit that the issue should not be defined so narrowly. No one testing program can serve all purposes. If the legislature explores modifying or replacing the current testing program at the high school level, there are several issues to explore and questions to ask, not just one.

## **The Exit-level TAKS – questions and answers**

The exit-level TAKS is the result of political compromise. It is a very unique assessment – a hybrid that includes aspects of comprehensive subject matter tests and aspects of end-of-course tests. Frankly speaking, it is not the kind of test TBEC would have preferred. However, resources have been invested in its development and schools have geared up their instructional program to help students perform to the standard it represents. It should not, therefore, be discarded without careful considering its usefulness as part of the state testing program.

### **1. What is the value of TAKS as an exit-level assessment?**

The last test all students are required to take in high school should “look forward” and provide information about their preparation for life after high school.

As a graduation requirement and an indicator of readiness, these assessments should measure the level of each student’s basic functional skills – reading, writing, mathematics – against standards required for success in college and work. The knowledge and skills as well as the performance levels to be measured by that assessment should be informed by the outside world – higher education, employers, the military and requirements for private life. Evaluating assessment results should provide useful information about the extent to which the high school curriculum, various courses of study, and the instructional program are working to prepare young people for success in the outside world.

The TAKS has limited value as a measure of readiness for life after high school. It is designed to “look back” and measure the extent to which students have learned the knowledge and skills defined for specific courses rather than measuring their skill levels against external standards. The English language arts test does measure reading and writing, but probably not at levels related to life after high school. The mathematics test also does not measure that discipline in a way that make it an indicator for success in college or work.

The other two assessments – science and social studies – are of limited value as an indicator of post-secondary readiness. In my view, it is not so important for an exit-level assessment to measure mastery of subject matter content. That factor is better indicated by the course of study in which the student has been engaged. We should recognize also that it is very difficult to construct a single test of the comprehensive content of a discipline like social studies or science.

For instance, the current exit-level social studies test has 13 items on history, 9 on geography, 13 on economics and social influences, 9 on political influences, and 11 on social studies skills. That limited survey of social studies cannot be viewed as a reliable indicator of student learning across the entire scope of the discipline in any reliable way.

### **2. What effect has the TAKS had on student achievement at the high school level?**

The high school TAKS raised the bar significantly for students and there were predictions of massive student failure rates. The good news is the actual performance of students has exceeded projections and passing percentages are better each year. Last spring, 89 percent of the Class of 2006 had passed all four tests required for high school graduation. The results for student subgroups were: African-Americans 81 percent, Hispanics 82 percent and Whites 95 percent.

It is disappointing that those positive results are not yet confirmed by improving scores for Texas students on other assessments, such as the SAT and ACT college entrance tests. It may be too soon to expect an impact on those results. But, until other measures also show upward movement, it is not possible to state conclusively that TAKS is having the desired effect on student achievement.

### **3. What value does TAKS provide for accountability purposes?**

Proponents of SB103 urged expansion of high school level assessment in part because they believed that the 10<sup>th</sup> grade TAAS tests (math, reading and writing) were ineffective as a driver of high school improvement. The tests were relatively easy for most students so educators focused on providing remedial services to struggling students. The tests provided information about students in only one grade and performance at that grade was the entire basis for accountability ratings. There were no good reasons for improving the entire system.

The high school TAKS program (Mathematics and Reading at grade 9 and English-language arts, mathematics, science and social studies at grades 10 and 11) is the basis for a more comprehensive evaluation of school performance for accountability purposes. The TAKS are more challenging for many students, requiring schools to improve the instructional program rather than just offer remediation for some students.

Grade level testing like the TAKS provides stable, meaningful and comparable performance information for a large segment of students in all high schools. Because virtually all students take the TAKS tests at grades 9, 10 and 11 accountability is based on a common and comparable measure regardless of the course of study chosen by individual students.

Grade level testing at the high school level does have limitations for accountability. It is not particularly useful for evaluating the strength of course content or effectiveness of instruction. It does not have a particularly strong impact on individual teachers because they do not have personal "ownership" of the results.

### **4. What are some of the criticisms of TAKS?**

Educators complain that TAKS is unfair to students because they are expected to respond to items about material they studied years ago. For instance, they are tested on Algebra when they took the course in the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> grade. That raises an interesting question. Why did we bother teaching something in the first place if we expect students to forget most of it?

The TAKS is said to have limited value as an indicator of college readiness because it does not cover some of the content that should be included in such a measure. That is probably a valid point since the exit-level tests were designed to measure only subject matter specified in SB 103 although the language in the bill stated "must include at least..." The exit-level tests could have been designed to measure achievement beyond those minimum requirements, but they weren't.

### **5. How might a test like TAKS be improved?**

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) frameworks are a good model for how a subject matter test can be organized to test different aspects of a discipline.

At the 12<sup>th</sup> grade the NAEP covers three fields of science – Life science, Earth science and Physical science – equally. The assessment measures the three aspects of what students know and can do as follows: conceptual understanding (45%), scientific investigation (30%), and practical reasoning (25%).

The 12<sup>th</sup> grade Reading assessment framework specifies the following allocations for the three purposes for reading: literary experience 35%, reading for information 45%, and reading to perform a task 20%.

The 12<sup>th</sup> grade Mathematics assessment framework specifies the following allocations for four content areas and levels of complexity. The content allocations are: number properties and operations 10%, measurement and geometry 30%, data analysis and probability (25%, and algebra 35%. The framework specifies that one-half of the score should be based on items of moderate complexity with the remainder of the score based equally on items of low and high complexity.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

No one test can do everything well. Policy makers must answer important questions.

- When would it be appropriate to make a judgment about the effectiveness of the high school TAKS program?
- How much testing can the system and will parents tolerate?
- What are the costs and which tests would provide the greatest value?
- When should Texas buy tests off-the-shelf, have tests adapted for use in our state, or develop our own tests from scratch?
- Should state assessments be about student achievement, or supporting the evaluation of the system right down to the performance of individual teachers?
- Should the testing program “lock in” the current education system or be able to measure performance of students in non-traditional settings and instructional arrangements?
- What evidence is there to make judgments about the effectiveness of various proposals?

### Final Thought

If Texas eliminates the TAKS and implements end-of-course tests, it should still administer a comprehensive test to all students near the end of high school that is about their readiness for the future. Kentucky, Colorado, Illinois, Michigan Tennessee, and Wyoming administer the ACT to all students. It would worthwhile to learn from their experience.

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