

**Listening Sessions: TAKS and the Accountability System”
Dr. Kathleen Staudt, Border Interfaith**

I testify to you wearing “two hats.” My **first** hat is that of Border Interfaith leader and former co-chair. Border Interfaith, affiliated with the Texas Industrial Areas Foundation, organizes for social justice in the greater El Paso area in 11 congregations (spanning three school districts): Temple Mount Sinai, Peace Lutheran, St. Jude’s Sanctuary, Unitarian Universalist, St Pius X, Western Hills United Methodist, San Patricio, Chenrezig Buddhist Community, Immaculate Heart, Santa Teresita, and University Presbyterian, my own congregation.

My **second** hat is that of political science professor and researcher who teaches courses in which many future social studies teachers enroll. Since my arrival in El Paso in 1977, I have published 13 books, 5 of which focus on the U.S.-Mexico border, and over 70 academic articles and chapters in books, including a chapter in the forthcoming Politics of Latino Education in Texas, co-edited by David Leal (UT) and Kenneth Meier (TAMU), on research comparing three middle schools using NAEP-type tests to assess civic/social studies knowledge.

This summer, Border Interfaith sponsored three public “listening sessions” to hear what almost 200 El Paso parents, teachers, and students had to say about the Texas public school accountability system. We thank you for the opportunity to share our concerns and solutions. Border Interfaith listened to mostly troubling testimonies about a broken system of high-stakes standardized tests. We offer 3 issues of concern and conclude with our recommendations for addressing these issues.

Issues of Concern

Issue 1: “Teaching to the Test” leads to disengaged students and puzzled parents, without preparing students for higher education learning and assessment.

In our state accountability system, the high stakes for standardized testing diminishes the teaching professionals’ day-to-day work as “teaching to the test” with drills, mock tests, and tutoring sessions organized around memorizing answers to multiple-choice questions. (The exception is the reading test, with writing assessments). Multiple-choice questions neither effectively prepare students for higher-order thinking, writing, and researching skills nor the application of knowledge to problem-solving in the real world. Instead, students memorize factoids, sometimes with flash cards, that they can easily forget. Furthermore, the system does not prepare students for higher education, professional training, and meaningful work. Successful students in higher education require writing, thinking, and application skills, not the drilled answers that are quickly forgotten. We heard the following in listening sessions.

*We heard from students and teachers that Spanish-speaking children, especially in high school, are required to take tests in English before they know the language well enough to demonstrate their content knowledge.

*We heard from parents who wanted to know the exact questions and answers their children missed, so that they could work with their children, but were unable to get this information.

*We heard from teachers and professors who reported incorrect coding for some answers and confusingly worded questions. If English language-learner students misunderstand just one word in a question, they may answer incorrectly even if they know the content.

We listened to students, describing boring drill-oriented classes, where reading and writing are prized less than the regurgitation of correct answers on tests. One student who finished her test early was not allowed to read.

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Group offers ways to attain better schools

By Kathy Staudt and Adriana Garcia / Guest columnists

Article Launched: 08/03/2008 12:00:00 AM MDT

This summer, Border Interfaith sponsored three public "listening sessions" to hear responses of El Paso parents, teachers and students to the Texas public-school accountability system.

We listened to approximately 200 participants in preparation for Monday's state legislative committee's reception of testimony in El Paso.

Border Interfaith leaders will testify to the committee on Monday to what we heard and what we recommend.

Border Interfaith listened to mostly troubling testimonies about a broken system of high-stakes standardized tests. With a no-pass label, standardized tests induce children to view themselves as failures from early ages.

The system also diminishes the teaching profession to drilling students to memorize factoids for mostly multiple-choice tests in a practice labeled "teaching to the test."

Furthermore, the system does not prepare students for higher education and good work. Successful students in higher education require writing, thinking, and application skills, not the drilled answers that are quickly forgotten.

And finally, the system does grave injustice to

Spanish-speaking children, who are forced to take tests in English before they know the language well enough to demonstrate their knowledge.

We heard from parents who cannot be told questions their children missed. Some teachers and professors reported incorrectly coded answers and confusingly worded questions. If English language-learner students misunderstand just one word in a question, they may answer incorrectly even if they know the content.

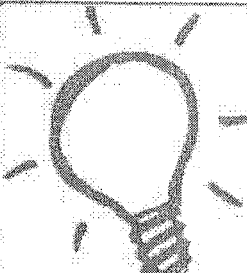
We listened to students, describing boring drill-oriented classes, where reading and writing are prized less than the regurgitation of correct answers on tests.

We heard about sickness on testing day from the stress of high-stakes tests which may label children as failures.

We wondered about testing systems that induce 8-, 9- and 10-year-olds to become ill rather than curious, inspired and intellectually stretched. We heard about many children vomiting on testing day.

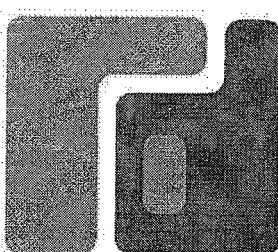
And we heard from many teachers, frustrated with the way the standardized multiple-choice tests have overtaken their profession, deadening the joys of teaching and learning. Some teachers and principals get "bonuses" for increasing test scores, as if learning involved widget production on a factory line.

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Besides the stories like those above, we also heard parents and teachers affirm the need for accountability, but not the high-stakes accountability systems of machine-graded multiple-choice tests that "produce" failures and cost taxpayers a pretty penny while diverting money from more effective teaching practices.

We listened carefully and make the following recommendations:

Reduce the high stakes of accountability tests and the constant preparation for tests: penalties, punitive practices, bonuses and gimmicks (all costly and stressful).

Develop accountability tests that involve meaningful learning measures in higher education and good jobs, such as writing, research, presentation and application skills.

Invest as much or more attention to engaging students to stay in school and graduate.

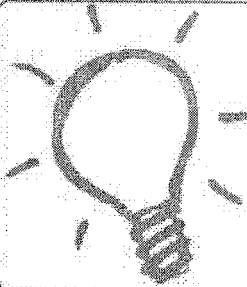
Adopt two-way bilingual programs (rather than one-way bilingual or early exit from bilingual programs) with successful track records, shown in research to produce higher levels of assessed content knowledge.

Make test questions available to parents.

Kathy Staudt is a member of University Presbyterian Church, a former co-chairperson of Border Interfaith and a political science professor.

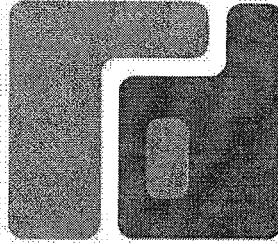
Adriana Garcia is a member of Santuario San Judas Tadeo Catholic Church, a co-chairperson-elect of Border Interfaith, and a PTO leader in Central El Paso.

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Issue 2: The extremely HIGH-stakes nature of TAKS tests creates extreme student stress and campuses not conducive to curiosity, discovery and learning.

We heard about student sickness on testing day from the stress of high-stakes tests which may label children as failures. We became appalled at testing systems that induce 8, 9, and 10-year-olds to become ill rather than curious, inspired and intellectually stretched. We heard many stories about how, on testing day, children vomit, get headaches, and break out in warts from anxiety.

*We gasped at teachers' frustrations about how standardized test preparation has overtaken their profession, deadening the teaching and learning process. They described schools on test day becoming like high-tech surveillance operations with wardens and guards.

*We were saddened by little children publicly stigmatized with shame about TAKS results, facing penalties like withdrawal from electives or from regular physical education.

*We listened to teachers describe "bonus" systems that involve payments to teachers and principals who bring up test scores, wondering if schools had become factories and our children, widgets in a production line.

*We wondered about the loss of teaching days and the month after test administration. At least **one-sixth** of the school calendar is devoted to many tests, TAKS and re-takes. [According to testimony of Spring Green ISD, 51 of 180 days are devoted to tests!] As one teacher stated, "please, let us teach." Obsessive attention is focused on the test and tests alone.

Issue 3: The system produces failures, low high-school completion rates, and wider gaps in higher education access and attainment.

With a no-pass label, standardized tests induce children to view themselves as failures from early ages. Students who perceived themselves as failures from an early age soon give up and become prime candidates for dropping out of school before graduation. Texas, along with other states, has a serious problem with non-high school completion. According to the San Antonio think tank, the Intercultural Development Research Association (www.idra.org), a 35% attrition rate exists for students in this region. In other words, we lose over one in three students, seriously impacting them as individuals and our regional economy.

Statewide, rates are similarly dismal, especially for Hispanic and African American students. Huge GAPS currently exist between ethnic and racial groups. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's "Closing the Gaps" initiative is meant to reduce the huge gaps in higher education access and completion, not only for the sake of Texas students, but also for the sake of our state's economic future (<http://www.thecb.state.tx.us/ClosingTheGaps/default.cfm>). With huge gaps in high school attrition, decreasing the likelihood of higher education pursuits, the state will fail efforts to close the gaps. According to the Texas Education Agency, for 2006-07, Hispanics and African Americans make up over half of all students, with Hispanic students 46.3% of all students—a percentage likely to increase in the future (<http://www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/2007/state.html>).

Recommendations

Besides the stories like those above, we also heard parents and teachers affirm the need for accountability, but not the high-stakes accountability systems of machine-graded multiple-choice tests that "produce" failures and cost taxpayers a pretty penny while diverting money from more effective teaching practices. We listened carefully and make the following recommendations:

*Reduce the HIGH stakes of accountability tests and the constant preparation for tests: penalties, punitive practices, bonuses, and gimmicks (all costly and stressful). Reduce the number of tests to allow actual teaching time to expand.

Develop accountability tests that involve meaningful learning measures in higher education and good jobs, such as writing, research, presentation and application skills. The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) offers excellent models that include short-answer and essay-type written responses which are better ways to assess knowledge and skills than multiple choice questions.

*Invest as much or more attention to engaging students to stay in school and graduate.

*Address English-language learner students in sensitive and research- effective ways.

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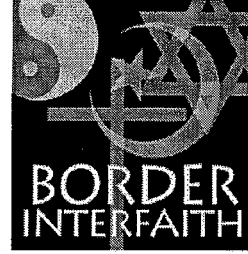
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Representatives Giving Testimony
to the Select Committee on Public School Accountability
El Paso, Texas • August 4, 2008

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Concerns heard from three listening sessions in July at Temple Mount Sinai, Western Hills United Methodist Church, and Saint Patrick's Catholic Church. What we heard:

- Students: fearing failure, headaches, vomiting, experiencing failure, getting discouraged and being labeled or teased about being "dummies"
- Parents: unable to find the exact questions their children missed; withdrawing children from school to 'home school' them; students dropping out
- Too much pressure to pass for students, parents, and teachers
- Important learnings not tested on TAKS being reduced or omitted; not the best preparation for higher education (Little critical thinking or problem-solving tested)
- TAKS not being the best test for helping students identify their weaknesses
- TAKS an ordeal for struggling students (dyslexic, Special Education, Spanish speakers)
- TAKS too easy for bright smart students; bored with having to do nothing after they finished the test
- Students: "punished" by being placed in boring TAKS remediation classes or Summer School; being taken out of electives they enjoy