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## 8.9.22 HOUSE COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC EDUCATION

*Public Education Committee agenda item 1: HB 3906 (86R), relating to the assessment of public school students, including the development and administration of assessment instruments, and technology permitted for use by students.*

On behalf of the 65,000 members of the Texas State Teachers Association, the following are comments relating to the assessment of public school students, including the implementation of HB 3906 (86R) and the state's progress on assessment and accountability. Texas public schools will be transitioning to 100% online testing in the coming school year. As a component of this transition, the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) will also undergo several changes that are required by the new law.

The state summative assessment redesign is a result of House Bill (HB) 3906 passed by the 86<sup>th</sup> Texas Legislature in 2019. The 87<sup>th</sup> Texas Legislature confirmed these changes in HB 3261. HB 3261 affirms the implementation timeline, requires the agency to administer a technological needs assessment, and expands the use of the instructional materials allotment to include purchases used to support technology and personnel expenses related to testing. The Texas State Teachers Association (TSTA) remained neutral on the 2019 legislation and opposed HB 3261 in 2021. We testified in opposition to HB 3261 primarily because we believe that it is in the best interest of students to use instructional materials budgets on instruction, not high-stakes tests. Additionally, while HB 3906 prohibits testing on the first day of the week, this protection was stricken by the 2021 legislation.

While we agree that there is room for improvement to the state's summative assessments and believe the reauthorization of the STAAR exam addresses some needed changes, we have concerns about several provisions in both pieces of legislation. There also remain some issues to consider with a test that is completely online.

### **In particular:**

- **TSTA supports** new features of the STAAR including open-ended questions, writing using text-based evidence, and improved accommodations for special populations
- **TSTA has concerns** related to relying on a digital infrastructure — including a parent's inability to opt a child out of testing online and the possibility of compromised student privacy — and the potential for an increase in time spent testing

### **SOME NEW FEATURES OF THE STAAR EXAM WILL SUPPORT STUDENT LEARNING**

The primary components of the test redesign include a transition to fully online testing and several new question types. TSTA recognizes that the transition to online testing opens the door to a number of benefits for teachers and students alike. However, there are several aspects of online testing that we believe the state has done little to address.

Online testing will result in faster test scores. Not having to ship and scan materials means that educators and parents can get student results more quickly. The digital testing format also expands access to testing accommodations for students with specific learning needs. For example, the new platform will offer content and language supports, such as text-to-speech, speech-to-text and ASL videos. Standard supports not limited to specific special needs will also be available, such as mathematics reference materials and a highlighter feature.

Perhaps the most meaningful change in the tests' reauthorization will be that it will allow for several new question types, including non-multiple-choice questions. HB 3906 purports to require a statewide assessment program that is as short as practicable and will minimize the disruption to the educational program. The legislation instilled a 75% multiple choice cap and set requirements that the vast majority of elementary-aged test takers will be able to complete the assessment in about one hour.

According to the Texas Education Agency, the STAAR redesign is based on improving alignment to the classroom experience. New test items have been developed that the agency expects will better access students' background knowledge in all subject areas, will encourage writing using text-based evidence, and will provide students an opportunity to demonstrate understanding in various open-ended formats. Now, reading passages will assess Language Arts TEKS but will be intentionally selected to cover cross-curricular content.

The new legislation eliminated the stand-alone writing tests, which prompted students to write based on personal knowledge and experience. In the redesigned assessment program writing will still be assessed, but as a component of the reading exam. There will be writing prompts at all grade levels that will ask students to write using evidence from text to support their response. Because this relies more on school-based instruction and less on experiences outside of school, we agree that this is an improvement and is a piece that will be a better measure of teaching and learning.

Finally, the new non-multiple choice question types will be more similar to the sorts of exercises in which students are engaged in class and will give students more ways to show understanding. For example, students will be able to draw and label their own diagrams and answer in open-ended formats.

## SOME NEW FEATURES OF THE STAAR EXAM WILL HAVE NEGATIVE IMPLICATIONS ON STUDENTS AND STUDENT LEARNING

The new online format will improve the testing program for teachers and students in some ways, but TSTA has concerns related to relying on a digital infrastructure and the potential and unnecessary disruptions this will cause for student learning. There is a history of online testing systems crashing, and Texas students experienced this as recently as the 2020-21 school year. There are also growing incidents of cyberattacks on student data software, exposing private information that could result in long-term consequences.<sup>1</sup>

TSTA and other education stakeholders also have concerns about the general overexposure to technology and the fear that Texas is moving school too far onto digital platforms. Students should be engaged in active and enriching learning, and screen-based assessment will likely result in an increase in screen-based instruction.

We believe that the variance in the typing abilities of students will not only inhibit student success, especially for the younger students and those with special needs, but that this will disproportionately impact economically disadvantaged students.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/31/business/student-privacy-illuminate-hack.html>

Requests for a special paper administration of STAAR can be made, but this option is only available to a limited number of students who receive special education services. It must be documented as a required accommodation in the student’s individualized education plan, and requests will only be selectively approved. Moreover, requests made based on parent or student preference alone will not be granted.

One of the greater concerns is how HB 3906 signals a potential move to multiple, through-year high-stakes tests, which we oppose. Statute requires TEA to implement a pilot to determine the feasibility of replacing STAAR with what law calls “integrated formative assessments.” In recent Florida legislation, Governor DeSantis boasted that he was eliminating year-end high stakes exams. However, he wasted no time in mandating 3 statewide exams, with the same high stakes attached to the third. We urge Texas not to move in this direction.

*Public Education Interim Charge 8, Committee agenda item 2: Study the unfulfilled recommendations from the 2016 Commission on Next Generation Assessments and Accountability. Evaluate the state’s progress on assessments and accountability and consider possible legislation to support the recommendations from the report. Study and recommend measures needed at the state level to prevent unintended consequences to students, campuses, and districts, including changes that could improve the system for students or help public schools serving a disproportionate number of educationally disadvantaged students impacted by the pandemic.*

Texas Commission on Next Generation Assessments and Accountability made the recommendation to align the state accountability system with ESSA requirements “to ensure that the results are consistent and share common goals.” The state ESSA plan is well-aligned in format with the federal requirement, and we agree the consistency supports common goal language. However, we believe the state plan is not fully reflective of the intent of the federal legislation to reduce the emphasis placed on standardized testing and to return decision-making back into the hands of parents, educators and local communities.

**In particular, TSTA recommends amending the Texas ESSA Plan to:**

- **Reduce the number of mandated standardized tests** to match the federally required minimum
- **Measure schools more holistically** based on a range of factors, especially in elementary and middle schools where the student achievement domain is fully determined by the STAAR exam

## SCHOOLS SHOULD ONLY ADMINISTER THE FEDERALLY REQUIRED STANDARDIZED SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENTS

Despite that fact that ESSA only requires three summative assessments, Texas requires nine. This unnecessary addition is not aligned with ESSA’s intent to minimize standardized testing, it reduces student access to quality learning. The federally required tests are: math, grades 3-8; reading, grades 3-8; and one high school test. Texas, by comparison, requires an additional 6 standardized summative assessments: social studies in grade 8; science in grades 5 and 8; and in high school, Algebra, Biology, English I, English II, and US History.

## SCHOOLS SHOULD BE MEASURED MORE HOLISTICALLY ON A RANGE OF FACTORS

The current reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), permits states to design their own accountability systems. While ESSA requires the plans to meet some

minimal parameters, states overall — and relative to previous iterations of ESSA — have much greater flexibility to design accountability systems that take into account multiple indicators of school success.

Under ESSA, states are required to hold schools accountable in five categories: student performance in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics; a second academic metric, such as growth in ELA or mathematics; progress in achieving English language proficiency; high school graduation rates; and at least one measure of school quality or student success. In addition, states are required to disaggregate these indicators by individual subgroups of students, including those from low-income families, those from major racial and ethnic groups, those with disabilities, and English language learners. Beyond these requirements, however, the 2015 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act permits local flexibilities and really underscores the relevance of and need to include indicators other than test scores.

Although federal law is quite flexible about the range of factors that can be included, Texas still relies heavily on factors derived from standardized test scores to grade schools. The Texas plan is also generally lacking in innovative measures that take into consideration the multivariate elements that contribute to school success. Teachers and other education stakeholders have long agreed that the STAAR exam counts for too much of the accountability of Texas schools, and this is especially true in our elementary and middle schools where the student achievement domain is determined 100 percent by the results of the STAAR test.

The statewide accountability systems across all 50 states range in sophistication and include a variety of indicators, and many states include measures that they know to be a relevant measure of school quality and student success that are outside the scope of standardized test scores. This includes recognition of innovative programming, culture and climate, and educator credentials. Virginia, for example, credits schools for offering foreign language instruction in elementary school. Georgia recognizes schools, including elementary schools, for serving special needs students in inclusion settings. Virginia, Connecticut and New Jersey all credit schools for arts and physical fitness programming. Many states credit schools for programming aimed at improving school climate among students, such as conflict mediation, mentoring and positive behavioral interventions and supports. Iowa includes staff retention, and California, among several other states, includes educator culture and advanced certifications and degrees into school accountability factors.

These are but a handful of examples where states have taken advantage of the ESSA flexibilities to more holistically measure schools based on a range of factors that matter in determining student success. The Texas ESSA plan disregards many of the elements that are a truer measure of school quality than standardized test scores, such as programming and school climate. TSTA urges the Committee to require TEA to include non-test-based indicators of achievement, especially for elementary and middle schools.

In studying the unfulfilled recommendations of the 2016 Commission report, TSTA TSTA urges the House Committee on Public Education to consider ways to better align the Texas ESSA plan to the legislative intent of the reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

*TSTA respectfully submits the above comments for consideration and urges the House Committee on Public Education to consider our concerns as they relate to state summative assessments and school accountability.*