



Testing, Testing

Texas Standardized Exam Moves from TAKS to STAAR

by Catherine Clark

Some background first: Texas has a long history of developing and using state-developed standardized academic tests. More than 30 years ago, the intent of state testing was to ascertain if students were able to demonstrate basic or minimum academic skills. The Texas Assessment of Basic Skills (TABS) test of the early 1980s was such a test, as was the Texas Educational Assessment of Minimum Skills (TEAMS) implemented in 1985. In 1990, the state implemented the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) testing program and shifted the focus from minimum skills to standard academic skills. TAAS served Texas for nearly a decade and was the first test used in the new statewide accountability system.

As expectations for performance rose, legislators determined in 1999 that a test was needed to reflect content standards in the new Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). The state and school districts implemented the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) in 2003. Every TAKS test was eventually aligned with TEKS, raising the bar for academic preparation of students and raising the bar for accountability, as well.

In 2007, legislation expanded the scope of required testing to include an End of Course (EOC) test component to replace the exit-level testing (e.g., TAKS Exit) taken by 11th-grade students. The Legislature prescribed 12 EOC tests, three in each of the four foundation areas: English language arts, science, mathematics, and social studies. EOC testing has already begun on a voluntary basis. For students entering Grade 9 in 2011-12, EOC tests will be required and will affect course completion expectations and graduation requirements.

In 2009, House Bill 3 required that a new assessment system be developed for grades 3-8 and that the tests be linked to both the EOC tests and college readiness standards developed by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board in 2007 (adopted by the Coordinating Board and the Commissioner of Education in January 2008).

The State Board of Education has incorporated the college readiness standards into the TEKS in English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. In fact, Texas was noted by Achieve, a bipartisan reform group, as the only state to implement key college and career readiness policies.¹ Another report, "Quality Counts," rated Texas third in the nation in aligning testing and standards and sixth in the nation in the quality of its standards and assessments.²

A STAAR Is Born

The new testing system that the state will launch in the 2011-12 school year is called the STAAR (State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness) program; it encompasses all the state tests in every grade and subject. A complete overview of STAAR is beyond the scope of this introductory article, but readers interested in more will find a wealth of information

in a recent report by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) on new testing and accountability systems.³

STAAR assessments will be more rigorous, assessing content and skills at greater depth and higher levels of complexity. Test items will focus on academic expectations that are needed in the grade being tested as well as in the next grade or course; in other words, the tests will be aligned with expected academic progress, graduation requirements, and college readiness standards.

In a departure from the traditional multiple-choice test format, many of the science and mathematics test questions will have "griddable" answers, meaning that students must develop a response independently and fill in a grid to indicate the answer rather than selecting from four or five possible answers. Additionally, most of the tests will be somewhat longer. These and other changes will increase the level of rigor and complexity for test-takers at the same time that new test passing standards will be calibrated to press students to demonstrate college and career readiness.

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Implementation Schedule

Spring 2011 will be the last administration of TAKS for grades 3-8 (except for students in grades 5 and 8 who need to retake a test in the summer of 2011 as a consequence of the Student Success Initiative [SSI] requirements). Grades 3-8 STAAR English and mathematics tests are currently under development; the state will begin operational testing in Spring 2012. The state will set standards for these tests in fall 2012.

A report, using the new standards, will be issued in winter 2012. STAAR testing for elementary and middle school classes will proceed each spring, beginning in 2012. STAAR will undergo periodic reviews with the goal of increasing performance standards through the 2019-20 school year.

The state has already developed Algebra I and II, Geometry, Biology, Chemistry,

U.S. History, Physics, World Geography, and English I EOC exams. English II and III and World History will be field-tested in spring 2011 in preparation for administration in 2011-12. The state will set EOC test standards in February 2012, and districts will administer the tests in spring 2012. School districts will receive EOC test reports in June 2012.

Because 2012 EOC testing does not affect seniors in spring 2012, late receipt of test scores should not be a problem for graduation in that year. However, computation of report card grades and class rank for students who must take EOCs present many challenges for school districts, in addition to matters of timing.

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Testing for Grades 3-8

Tests for elementary and middle school students are in the same grades and subjects as TAKS, meaning that mathematics and reading are tested every year. Writing and science are tested twice (grades 4 and 7 and grades 5 and 8, respectively); and social studies is tested in Grade 8. There will be three performance standards: Level III or Advanced Academic Performance; Level II or Satisfactory Academic Performance; and Level I or Unsatisfactory Academic Performance.

The state will establish scores related to these performance standards in December 2012. SSI promotion requirements will not use STAAR results in 2011-12 because the passing standards will be set late in 2012. However, districts will need to continue to use other academic information

as required by law in promotion decisions. Accelerated instruction in small-group settings (10 or fewer students) is still required for students who do not perform satisfactorily.

Cumulative Scoring of STAAR EOC Results

EOC testing procedures will be different from TAKS Exit. TEA will calculate a minimum cumulative score for each foundation subject. The score will be the number of EOC tests per content area times the cut score for “satisfactory” performance.

For example, if the cut score for passing each of the three high school social studies courses is 700, the minimum cumulative score would be at least 2100.

Testing and Graduation Requirements

The EOC cumulative score is based on the number of courses taken that have EOC tests. For the minimum graduation program, there will be eight or nine EOC scores since these students are likely to take Integrated Physics and Chemistry instead of both Physics and Chemistry.

Students on the recommended graduation plan take all 12 EOC tests and the related courses. In addition to meeting cumulative score requirements in the four content areas, they must perform satisfactorily on Algebra II and English III EOC tests. Students on the distinguished graduation program must complete the same requirements as the recommended program, but these students must also meet the college readiness components on the Algebra II and English III EOC tests (not just perform satisfactorily on the test).

The law requires districts to include a student’s initial EOC test score as 15 percent of the student’s final grade for the course. District policy will determine whether that calculation also affects course credit and class rank. District policy will also determine whether performance on an EOC test retake will affect the course grade, course credit decisions, and class rank.

STAAR Test Implementation Issues for Districts

An increase in testing days. STAAR will increase the days devoted to testing because of retest opportunities that will begin in 2012-13. The TAKS system calls

for 25 testing days, including Exit test retakes. With EOC retest opportunities, STAAR will require up to 45 days for testing. Experts have expressed concern that Advanced Placement (AP) testing dates may conflict with EOC test dates.

Time limits. TEA is considering policies to limit the time a student spends taking a STAAR exam on a given day. At the elementary and middle school levels, the agency is considering concluding testing at the end of the regular school day. At the high school level, limits on the time to take a test will be designed to conform better to what students are likely to experience in college as well as to what many other states do.

If implemented, a limit will help prepare students for the SAT, ACT, and AP tests (all of which are timed). Also, with increased high school testing, including retest opportunities, school officials have expressed interest in administering more than one EOC test in a day, something that could be accomplished if test-takers had time limits.⁴

Tests for students with disabilities. Different assessments for students who receive special education services include STAAR Modified and STAAR Alternate. The Accommodated form of the test will be eliminated. STAAR Modified will be developed for all tested subject areas for grades 3-8 and for nine of the 12 STAAR EOC tests (English I, II, and III; World Geography, World History, and U.S. History; Algebra I and Geometry; and Biology). Algebra II will not have a modified assessment because it is not required for the minimum program. All students taking STAAR Modified are automatically on the minimum graduation program.⁵

Teachers will administer STAAR Alternate to students with significant cognitive disabilities, and the assessment will be based on alternate academic standards. As with TAKS-Alt, the test will be an observation instrument for teachers to record student performance. Teachers then evaluate the records with a special scoring tool (a rubric) and enter the results on line. STAAR Alternate will also have increased rigor.

Double testing. Eighth-grade students taking Algebra I will take the Algebra I EOC. They may also be required to take the Grade 8 STAAR mathematics test

because it appears that federal law requires such testing. The same could apply for any middle school student taking a foundational high school course. Such students may need to take the grade-level STAAR test along with STAAR EOC. TEA and stakeholders are studying this issue to see if there might be an alternative to double testing.

Paper and on line. STAAR assessments for grades 3-8 will be administered only on paper. EOC tests will be offered on line and on paper. TEA will conduct comparability studies to ensure that the method of test taking does not affect the results. If results are comparable, online and paper test scores can be used interchangeably. If not, adjustments based on estimated differences in test scores due to the type of administration can be made.

Phasing out TAKS. For a period of time, school districts will administer both TAKS and STAAR tests. Students currently in grades 9 and 10 will need to take and perform at standard on TAKS, and students in Grade 11 will take TAKS Exit. Some Grade 12 students will also be retesting with the exit-level TAKS test in 2010-11. Next year (2011-12), students in Grade 10 will take TAKS subject tests, and students in Grade 11 will take the exit-level test along with some Grade 12 students who will be retesting with the exit-level test.

In 2012-13, students in Grade 11 will take the exit-level TAKS test, and some Grade 12 students will be retesting. By 2013-14, nearly all students will take EOC courses; exit-level TAKS tests will be available only for students who are on the TAKS testing program and still need to pass the test.

There are other examples of TAKS testing that will remain for a short while. For example, a student repeating Grade 9 in the 2011-12 school year will be tested on the TAKS system for her remaining high school years because she was in Grade 9 in 2010-11 when the TAKS system was in use.

EOC failures. Schools must provide accelerated instruction to students who fail to perform satisfactorily on any EOC test. Students who fail to meet at least the minimum required score on an EOC exam but pass the course must retake the EOC exam but will not be required to retake the course. This could result in situations in



which a student who passes Algebra I but fails the EOC test will move on to geometry and will take both an Algebra I EOC and a geometry EOC in the next school year.

Voluntary EOC retakes. Students who pass an EOC but wish to attain a higher score on the test may retake the EOC at a subsequent scheduled testing date. School districts are not required to use a second EOC score to recalculate course grades.

Costs to school districts. Texas school districts have expressed concern about the cost of providing accelerated instruction or remediation. Currently, schools provide accelerated instruction for students in grades 3-8 who do not perform at standard on mathematics or reading tests.

Next year, accelerated instruction must be offered to students who perform poorly on any of the 29 tests that will be administered (12 EOC, 12 reading and mathematics tests in grades 3-8, two writing tests, two science tests, and one social studies test). This represents a sharp increase in the provision of small-group instruction.

Districts have also expressed concern that the number of professionals needed

to schedule and manage the test process will increase. More counselors will be needed to help students understand the implications of the different graduation plans, the calculation of grades and class rank, and the issues related to accelerated instruction and test retakes.

Costs to the state. STAAR provides opportunities to promote cost containment for the state. Field-test questions will be embedded into the regular assessments, not in stand-alone tests, reducing field-test costs to the state and school districts. Some infrastructure costs related to scoring should decrease, and online reporting will reduce paper-based reports. New procedures for written compositions will require fewer readers to score tests, but two writing prompts, instead of one, may increase the cost of writing tests in grades 4 and 7. Tests will be released to the public less often, reducing the cost of developing new test items. State and district costs in the early years of the program may be lower because students taking TAKS will not take English I, II, or III (these tests cost more to score).

In its report on testing and accountability, TEA notes that cost savings will not be sufficient to offset the additional costs of the program, including the cost of developing so many new tests and the need for new instructional materials that are more rigorous and that incorporate college-readiness standards.

For more information about the STAAR system, consult Assessment Resources on the TEA Web Site for helpful links: www.tea.state.tx.us/index3.aspx?id=3320&menu_id=793.★

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¹Achieve, *Closing the Expectations Gap 2011*. Available at www.achieve.org/ClosingtheExpectations-Gap2011.

²*Education Week*, "Quality Counts." Available at www.edweek.org/ew/marketplace/products/qc2011-shr.html.

³Texas Education Agency, *House Bill 3 Transition Plan: A Report to the 82nd Texas Legislature*, December 1, 2010. See Chapter 1. Available at www.tea.state.tx.us/student.assessment/hb3plan/.

⁴A student would not be likely to take two EOC tests in one day, but the school district would be able to schedule two EOC test sessions in a single day.

⁵Note that admission to a Texas public four-year college or university requires completion of the recommended high school program.