

- SUBJECT:** Revising the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills test
- COMMITTEE:** Public Education — committee substitute recommended
- VOTE:** 8 ayes — Sadler, Dutton, Dunnam, Grusendorf, Hochberg, Lengefeld, Olivo, Smith
0 nays
1 absent — Oliveira
- SENATE VOTE:** On final passage, April 12 — voice vote (Barrientos, Harris, and Zaffirini recorded nay)
- WITNESSES:** For — Sandy Dochen, Texas Business and Education Coalition; Brad Duggan, Just for the Kids; Ed Adams and Sandy Kress, Texans for Education; Roger Stryker, Texas Council for Elementary Science; Eric Hartman, Texas Federation of Teachers; Bonnie Northcutt, Texas Council for the Social Studies; Virginia Woods
Against — Stephanie Cecil, Texas Eagle Forum; Taddie Hamilton and Sharon Cassady, Texas Council for the Social Studies; Al Kaufmann, Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund
On — Lonnie Hollingsworth, Texas Classroom Teachers Association; Jay Levin, Texas State Teachers Association; Mike McLamore, Association of Texas Professional Educators; Mike Moses and Ann Smisko, Texas Education Agency; Geraldine Miller
- BACKGROUND:** The Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) test must be administered to all students in third through eighth grades. An exit-level exam also is administered in the tenth grade, and students must complete this exam successfully to receive a high school diploma.
Student performance on the TAAS test is one of the three primary factors in determining the performance rating of school districts and campuses. For a district or campus to be rated acceptable, at least 45 percent of all students and of students in each identified group (white, Hispanic, African American,

and economically disadvantaged) must pass each section of each TAAS test administered. That percentage will rise to 50 percent in 2000.

For additional information, see *The TAAS Test: How Much Should It Count?*, House Research Organization Focus Report 75-25, September 29, 1998.

DIGEST:

CSSB 103 would modify the TAAS tests given to students above the sixth grade and would modify the exit-level exam, as shown below. Students in the third through sixth grades would continue to be tested on reading and mathematics in every grade, as well as on writing in the fourth grade.

	Current law	CSSB 103
Seventh grade	Reading Mathematics	Reading Mathematics Writing
Eighth grade	Reading Mathematics Writing Science Social Studies	Reading Mathematics Social Studies
Ninth grade	No test	Reading Mathematics
Tenth grade	(currently exit level)	English language arts Mathematics Science
Exit level	<i>Tenth grade</i> English language arts Mathematics	<i>Eleventh grade</i> English language arts (including English III) Mathematics (including Algebra I and geometry) Science (including biology, chemistry, and physics) Social Studies (including U.S. history)

CSSB 103 would require the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to administer all tests established under this bill no later than the 2002-03 school year, except for the new ninth and tenth grade tests. The results of such tests would have to be included in the accountability system by the 2004-05 school year. The ninth and tenth grade tests established by CSSB 103 would have to be administered beginning in the 2004-05 school year and included in the accountability system no later than the 2006-07 school year.

CSSB 103 also would eliminate the current end-of-course assessments for Algebra I, English II, Biology I, and U.S. History. TEA could include student performance on those assessments in the accountability rating system during the 2000-01 and 2001-02 school years. Students who took those tests in the expectation that passing them could be used as an alternative to passing the exit-level TAAS exam still could take such exams until all tests required by CSSB 103 were introduced in the 2002-03 school year.

CSSB 103 would replace all references to the State Board of Education (SBOE) relating to the assessment program with TEA, thus eliminating any authority of the SBOE over the TAAS test.

The exit-level test would have to be designed "to assess a student's mastery of minimum skills necessary for high school graduation." CSSB 103 would allow a student who performed at or above a level established by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board on the exit-level test to be exempted from taking the Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP) test, which students must pass before the end of their first semester of enrollment at any public higher education institution.

CSSB 103 would include in the accountability system the numerical progress of students who failed to perform satisfactorily on a previous TAAS test. The numerical progress on subsequent assessments would have to be aggregated by grade level and subject area. This improvement performance indicator would have to be included in determining the performance rating of all districts, campuses, and open-enrollment charter schools.

The bill would require TEA to develop standards for assessing projects produced by students in the gifted and talented program in grades four through eight and at the exit level. The district superintendent would have to

report on the assessment of gifted and talented students to the district board of trustees annually beginning in the 2003-04 school year.

CSSB 103 would require the commissioner of education to conduct a study due by December 1, 2006, that would evaluate:

- the performance of minority students on assessments added by CSSB 103;
- the performance of students on assessments added by CSSB 103 compared to performance on national assessments;
- the availability and usefulness of data on the performance of high school students; and
- the effect of the additional tests on the dropout rate.

The bill would take effect September 1, 1999.

**SUPPORTERS
SAY:**

Texas' strong academic accountability system is the envy of the rest of the country and one of the reasons that Texas students recently have performed well on the TAAS test as well as on national academic tests. To keep the accountability system strong, CSSB 103 would expand the TAAS test in certain grades and would add tests in grades that are not tested now. Enhancing the scope of the TAAS would enable the accountability system to provide a more accurate picture of the academic achievement of Texas students.

CSSB 103 also would improve the instruction given to students in Texas public schools. What is tested on the TAAS test is certain to be taught in the classroom. That alignment of curriculum and assessment ensures that students receive a well-planned, structured flow of courses from one grade level to the next and that each assessment appropriately identifies whether students have mastered the foundation curriculum material taught at that grade level.

Critics often allege that the TAAS test forces instructors to "teach the test." That is exactly the purpose of the TAAS. Every skill that must be learned to pass the TAAS is a skill that Texas students need to master. If the TAAS test can focus instruction on the areas where it is most needed, all Texas students will have a greater opportunity to learn everything they are expected to learn before they graduate from high school. This focus on the test, however, should not and does not distract teachers from teaching material that is not on

the TAAS test. Many things required in the curriculum may not necessarily be tested, but they will be taught regardless of the emphasis placed on the TAAS test.

CSSB 103 would add tests only at the middle school and high school levels. Elementary students would take the same number of tests they now take. Adding tests in the higher grade levels would fill out the current battery of tests and would help ensure that students in high school, where dropout rates are highest, were assessed adequately to determine their weaknesses and to enable teachers to help students overcome those deficiencies.

The ninth grade is the grade at which the greatest number of students drop out of school. However, because there is no assessment of ninth grade students, it is hard to determine their level of academic achievement in order to develop strategies to keep such students in school. Current proposals being examined by the House Public Education Committee would establish a ninth grade second-chance program to allow students who otherwise might not pass the ninth grade to receive the intensive, focused instruction they need to advance in high school. This type of program would not be possible without a ninth grade assessment test.

Moving the exit-level test to the eleventh grade would ensure that students would be tested on three-fourths of what they were expected to learn in high school in order to graduate. The current test is based on no more than half of the material that is supposed to be taught during high school. Moving the test back would allow employers of high school graduates to feel more confident in the level of skills that such graduates had attained before they graduated. Adding a tenth grade exam before this exit level would allow additional targeting of any weak areas in the student's skill levels and would allow additional instruction in those areas before the exit test. The current structure of TAAS allows a one-year gap between the exit-level test and the test taken before that exam.

The addition of the improvement performance indicator would add more information to the current performance rating system. There is currently no indicator that measures the improved or decreased performance of students who fail to pass the TAAS from one year to the next. Improvement indicators are required for some districts and campuses, but such indicators apply only to low-performing and acceptable-rated school districts and campuses. Also,

such indicators apply to the district or campus as a whole, not to individual students. By rating schools on how much they help improve the performance of those who failed to perform satisfactorily on the TAAS, CSSB 103 would help ensure that no student was left behind or ignored by the accountability system.

CSSB 103 would provide a framework for developing an assessment system for students in the gifted and talented program. The current assessment of these students in the regular program is inadequate. These students also must complete projects or assignments as part of the gifted and talented program, but such projects are not assessed on a statewide basis. By providing an assessment structure in fourth, eighth, and exit-level grades, the performance of those students and of the programs in which they participate could be measured.

Rather than leaving the administration of this important part of the accountability system to the part-time, elected SBOE, CSSB 103 would place the entire responsibility for developing and administering the TAAS on TEA. In reality, the agency already has become responsible for the entire operation of the TAAS through delegation by the SBOE. The board now performs only an oversight role in approving TEA's actions. The Legislature is in just as good a position to oversee TEA actions related to the TAAS and would provide more stable oversight for the testing program.

OPPONENTS
SAY:

Texas already places too much emphasis on the TAAS test. This legislation would serve only to increase the hold TAAS has on the public school system. Students are drilled constantly on the test, and many such drills emphasize test-taking skills over actual academic learning. Such drilling can push out other important classroom instruction. Students who could pass the test without additional drilling could be covering advanced skills but are forced instead to review and be drilled on basic TAAS skills, because teachers must spend inordinate amounts of class time on making sure that as many students as possible pass the test. While student performance on other tests has risen, such performance gains can be attributed at least partially to better test-taking skills taught in order to perform well on the TAAS.

Those students who need additional help or who are on the borderline of passing the test bear additional pressure to perform well on the test. This artificial pressure to do well on a standardized test can make the test an ordeal

for these students. From the first day of school until the test is taken in the spring, students are reminded constantly of the need to pass the TAAS test. Such pressure has led to the development of private TAAS preparation programs. Under CSSB 103, that pressure would be constant through the eleventh grade and would expand the TAAS pressure into more subjects than the current test covers.

The test would be given additional importance in the school accountability system, causing additional pressure on campuses and districts to find any way to make sure that students perform up to par. This pressure has led to at least one district tampering with TAAS records to improve the ratings at certain schools in the district. There are many allegations and investigations into possible tampering by other districts. Adding more tests to the TAAS battery would increase the pressure to do anything to ensure that the district's rating was not lowered by student performance on the TAAS test.

The TAAS is still not testing the kinds of skills that students need to succeed. The test is focused predominantly on rote or lower-order skills that involve learning a particular procedure and applying that knowledge to a slightly different problem. Higher-order skills that involve more reasoning and problem-solving abilities are tested infrequently on the TAAS.

Requiring the exit-level TAAS to be completed before a student could graduate would discriminate against minority students, who tend to perform more poorly on the test than Anglo students. Such students are placed at greater risk of not graduating regardless of their other accomplishments, but only because of their inability to pass a single test. While they have multiple chances to pass the test, each time they fail it reduces their chances of staying in school to try again. Moving the test back to the eleventh grade would decrease the number of opportunities students would have to retake the test and limit their chances to graduate.

CSSB 103 would strip more powers from the elected SBOE and place those powers in the hands of the appointed education commissioner and the TEA bureaucracy. The SBOE needs to maintain some control over the testing program to ensure a balance of interests in the assessment program. The Legislature systematically has taken away powers of the elected SBOE since the revision of the Education Code in 1995. If the Legislature continues on this course, the board will have little left to do in setting the state's education

policy. It would be more honest for the Legislature to ask Texas voters whether they would like to eliminate the elected SBOE than to undercut the board's authority each legislative session.

OTHER
OPPONENTS
SAY:

CSSB 103 should require additional assessments of early grade levels. Research has shown that students tend to fall behind in the early grades and never recover during their school careers. While it is beneficial to test reading, writing, and mathematics, elementary-level students also should be assessed at least once in other foundation curriculum subjects, such as science and social studies. Such assessments can help to ensure that students are learning adequately in the early grades and not falling behind in subjects in which they will need to be proficient to receive a high school diploma.

NOTES:

The House committee substitute would:

- remove a fifth grade test in science;
- swap the writing and social studies tests in the seventh and eighth grades;
- include specific areas to be covered in the exit-level TAAS;
- add an assessment for gifted and talented students;
- add an improvement performance indicator to the accountability system;
- and
- replace all references to SBOE with TEA.

A related bill, HB 3675 by Garcia, which would require all Spanish-speaking students classified as limited-English-proficient to take either the Spanish TAAS test or the English TAAS in third through eighth grades as determined by the student's language proficiency assessment committee, passed the House on May 11 and was reported favorably as substituted by the Senate Education Committee on May 14.