

SUBJECT: Replacing STAAR writing exams with locally designed assessments

COMMITTEE: Public Education — committee substitute recommended

VOTE: 9 ayes — Aycock, Allen, Deshotel, Dutton, Galindo, González, Huberty, K. King, VanDeaver

0 nays

2 absent — Bohac, Farney

WITNESSES: For — Randy Willis, Granger ISD; Kim Cook and Dineen Majcher, TAMSA; Bruce Gearing, Texas Association of Community Schools (TACS); Buck Gilcrease, Texas Association of School Administrators; Monty Exter, the Association of Texas Professional Educators; and six individuals; (*Registered, but did not testify*: Kevin Brown, Alamo Heights ISD, TASA; Ann Teich, Austin Independent School District; Julie Cowan, Austin ISD Trustees; Mike King and Gina Mannino, Bridge City ISD; Jodi Duron, Elgin ISD; Mary Whiteker, Hudson ISD; Howell Wright, Huntsville ISD; Betsy Singleton, League of Women Voters; Kristi Hassett, Lewisville ISD School Board; Berhl Robertson, Jr, Lubbock ISD; Jimmy Parker, Lubbock Roosevelt ISD; Keith Bryant, Lubbock-Cooper ISD; George McFarland, Tahoka ISD; Barry Haenisch, Texas Association of Community Schools; Doug Williams, Texas Association of School Administrators; Paige Williams, Texas Classroom Teachers Association; Mark Terry, Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association; Ellen Arnold, Texas PTA; Colby Nichols, Texas Rural Education Association; Maria Whitsett, Texas School Alliance; Portia Bosse, Texas State Teachers Association; Grover Campbell, Texas Association of School Boards; and five individuals)

Against — Zenobia Joseph; (*Registered, but did not testify*: Bill Hammond, Texas Association of Business)

On — Michael Barnes, Texas Center for Educational Policy (TCEP) at the School of Education at the University of Texas, Austin; Courtney

Boswell, Texas Institute for Education Reform; (*Registered, but did not testify*: Criss Cloudt, Shannon Housson, and Gloria Zyskowski, Texas Education Agency)

BACKGROUND: Under Education Code, sec. 39.023(a), students in grades 4 and 7 must take a writing exam as part of required statewide assessments for public school students, currently known as the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) exams. High school students take a combined reading and writing STAAR end-of-course (EOC) exam for both English I and English II, as provided by sec. 39.023(c). These are among the five EOC exams students must pass in order to graduate.

DIGEST: CSHB 1164 would replace statewide standardized writing exams with locally designed and implemented methods to evaluate student writing. Results from those local assessments would not be reported to the Texas Education Agency (TEA) or factored into district and campus accountability ratings.

Beginning with the 2016-17 school year, the bill would eliminate grade 4 and 7 writing exams and the writing component of high school EOC exams for English I and English II. Districts would be required to evaluate students in those grades and subjects using any method a district determined appropriate, including portfolios. Districts would be required to provide written notice of a student's performance on a writing assessment to the student's parents or person standing in parental relation.

High school students would be required to demonstrate satisfactory performance of the essential knowledge and skills in writing for English I and English II in order to receive a diploma.

Each school year, districts would be required to prepare a report by district and campus that included aggregate student performance on local writing assessments in the grades and high school courses required to be assessed. The report would be filed with the school board and posted on the district's website.

The bill would make conforming changes and apply certain requirements to the Job Corps diploma program, the three-year high school diploma plan pilot program, and the Texas Juvenile Justice Department educational program.

TEA would be required to adopt or develop appropriate criterion-referenced exams designed to assess essential knowledge and skills in English language arts by September 1, 2016.

This bill would take immediate effect if finally passed by a two-thirds record vote of the membership of each house. Otherwise, it would take effect September 1, 2015.

**SUPPORTERS
SAY:**

CSHB 1164 would reduce high-stakes testing by eliminating writing as a statewide standardized test for students in grades 4 and 7 and as a component of the English I and English II end-of-course (EOC) exams. The bill would strengthen local control while still ensuring that students gain the writing abilities that will enable them to compete in college and the workplace.

The 83rd Legislature in 2013 passed HB 5 by Aycock, which combined separate reading and writing exams for English I and English II into a single assessment for each EOC. An unintended consequence was that two separate four-hour reading and writing exams were compressed into one five-hour test. About 28,000 seniors are not on track to graduate because they have failed one or more EOC exams, and students are struggling the most to pass the writing assessment. Many parents and educators think the exam is flawed. For instance, the STAAR writing results for high school students in one of the state's most accomplished school districts showed a lower level of college readiness than those students' corresponding scores on Advanced Placement exams and the ACT English Composition standard.

Writing is a complex skill that must be developed by students and their teachers over time and by practice. Students' writing skills cannot easily be judged on the basis of a one-time performance on a prescriptive 26-line

essay. Time that students could be spending learning to think critically and transfer those thoughts to paper instead is spent preparing for a formulaic exam.

The bill would allow districts to measure students' writing progress over the course of a school year through portfolios and other methods. Teachers who spend hours grading student essays are more qualified to assess student writing than temporary workers hired by the state's testing contractor who may only have a few minutes to grade a student's writing sample. While it is true the bill would curtail the flow of accountability data to policymakers, students would continue to take a reading and English language arts exam. Providing data that many educators believe is based on a flawed assessment might be worse than providing no data.

The reduced testing requirements would save the state an estimated \$30.7 million for fiscal 2016-17, according to the fiscal note. The benefits of reducing high-stakes testing would include less anxiety for students, teachers, and parents. Federal law does not require students be assessed in writing, and Texas does it four times during a student's school years.

**OPPONENTS
SAY:**

CSHB 1164 could disrupt the positive impact that the state's testing and accountability system has made on student writing skills. Results from STAAR writing exams provide valuable information that can be used at the state level to adopt policies to improve students' writing. The bill would curtail the flow of that information to TEA and state policymakers.

The bill would represent a step back from accountability because some students are not performing well enough on their writing exams. However, recent administrations of STAAR writing exams have shown gains by students, particularly among African American students and English language learners. These gains could be lost if the state switched to an accountability system that did not require districts to report how specific student subpopulations were performing on writing assessments.

STAAR writing assessments are only given twice before high school, in grades 4 and 7, and twice in high school. This is not a burdensome

requirement and leaves plenty of time for writing that is not related to STAAR tests.

Writing has become a critical skill required by more employers than in previous generations. Texas schools must prepare students for the writing they will be expected to do in college and the workforce. Preparing students to write a coherent, well-organized, and grammatically correct answer to a prompt is not wasted time.

OTHER
OPPONENTS
SAY:

Instead of eliminating state writing exams, the state should work to improve their quality. Changes could be made to require students to compose extended written answers in response to intellectually challenging prompts. Those assigned to evaluate student writing could receive sufficient training to produce highly consistent ratings. Additionally, Texas could encourage teachers to use classroom-based writing assessments to monitor student progress more frequently and adjust their instruction as needed.

NOTES:

According to the Legislative Budget Board's fiscal note, CSHB 1164 would save an estimated \$30.7 million in general revenue for fiscal 2016-17.

The Senate companion bill, SB 1893 by Garcia, was referred to the Senate Education Committee on March 25.