

SUBJECT: TASP test and enrichment courses for students in higher education

COMMITTEE: Higher Education — committee substitute recommended

VOTE: 7 ayes — Rangel, Ogden, Gallego, Goolsby, Kamel, Reyna, Rodriguez

0 nays

2 absent — Harris, Moreno

WITNESSES: For — Bill Segura and Dr. Ana M. "Cha" Guzman, Austin Community College.

Against — None

On — Dr. Ronnie Glasscock, North Central Texas College.

BACKGROUND: Education Code sec. 51.306 requires most students entering public state universities and colleges to take the Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP) test, designed to measure a student's knowledge and performance in reading, writing and math. Any student who performs below the state's minimum score in these subjects must take remedial courses. Individual institutions may set higher standards than the state for the TASP test.

Remedial coursework is designed to assist students who may be deficient in a certain subject and do not count as credit towards a degree. Students may not enroll in upper division courses beyond 60 semester hours nor graduate without making a specified minimum score on the TASP test.

High school students who achieve a minimum score set by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) test and entering or transferring students who achieve a board-set score on the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) or the American College Test (ACT) may avoid taking the TASP test if they enroll within a specified number of years after taking the test — within three years for the TAAS test, within five years for the SAT or ACT. Deaf students are exempted from the testing requirements; blind students must take the test only if it is administered in Braille or by audio.

DIGEST: CSHB 2309 would amend Education Code sec. 51.306 to make the TASP an assessment procedure for determining whether students should take enrichment courses rather than a testing instrument to determine whether students should have to take remedial courses.

The bill would eliminate a current prohibition against students enrolling in any upper-division college course or graduate until their TASP test results meet minimum standards in all areas. Schools would be prohibited from using the assessment results to block a student's advancement in a degree program.

Each public higher education institution would use an assessment procedure, which would have to be diagnostic in nature. Each institution would consider student performance on the assessment procedure to determine whether a student should have to take enrichment courses. Enrichment courses would be defined as a non-traditional offering to provide in-depth problem-solving and critical thinking skills and knowledge to enable a student to succeed in the student's chosen instructional program.

The coordinating board would be required to develop formulas to augment institutional funding for freshmen courses for which the student failure rate was higher than average.

High school students who achieved the minimum score on the TAAS test would be exempt from taking the TASP for five years rather than three. Blind students would be exempt from the program requirements.

The bill would take effect September 1, 1995.

SUPPORTERS SAY: Under the current law TASP test results take on far too much importance in a student's academic life. Students who fail a portion of the test must take remedial courses and must continue to take the TASP test until they pass. In many cases remedial courses have proved to be a waste of time and money both for higher education institutions and students. The focus of the TASP should be redirected to assessment and evaluation of student needs rather than a punitive measure blocking student advancement.

CSHB 2309 would give higher education institutions the discretion to review a student's TASP results and determine whether the student should take enrichment courses rather than require all students who fail any portion of the TASP test to enroll in a remedial class and keep taking the TASP test until they pass. The TASP would be an assessment tool; students would have to take the TASP only once.

The bill would destigmatize remediation and concentrate instead on individual student needs. A student's success in school would not depend on passing the TASP test. Enrichment courses would be designed not to repeat high school classes but to provide students the problem-solving and critical skills they need to perform at the college level. It would allow more students from traditionally low-achieving groups to advance.

Too many variables exist in a student's performance on the TASP for it to have the degree of influence it now carries. Factors such as perseverance, drive or the contribution of a student to society are not taken into account as they should be.

Nontraditional students (age 25 and over) make up a large segment of the student population at the state's community colleges and universities. Many of these students have not had exposure to courses in math and English for some time. The TASP may be useful for pinpointing deficiencies in these areas, but its results should not always be interpreted as indicating that a student lacks such skills.

The bill would save millions in extra costs for remedial courses at colleges and universities. The fiscal note estimates a savings to the state of \$5.5 million a year and \$3.2 million a year to community colleges as a result of the bill.

**OPPONENTS
SAY:**

This bill proposes a step backward for higher education in Texas. The TASP test has proven that students' success in college is enhanced by remedial assistance in basic subjects. Remediation courses prepare students for college coursework and have been a boon to students who were found to be not fully prepared by their high schools for college work.

This proposal would lower standards and concentrate on hazily defined goals and an amorphous curriculum for students who need real help. Allowing each university and community college to evaluate TASP results would produce widely inconsistent results. Schools under financial pressure would be less likely steer students to enrichment courses if they can save money by not offering them. Eliminating the requirement for retesting would remove any objective measure of how well a student has responded to enrichment or remedial courses.

Current law requires that students take a remedial course in a subject in which they have failed and then retake the test. Under this bill, students would not be retested on the subjects in which they are deficient, but would instead be exposed only to courses on "critical thinking," "problem solving" and "knowledge content." While these may be important, so are basic skills in math, reading and writing.

NOTES:

The committee substitute defined "enrichment course" and other terms required that reports not identify students by name and stipulated five-year exemption for students who achieve scores on the TAAS test.

HB 420 by Ogden, passed by the House on April 20 and referred to the Senate Education Committee, would make the TASP test and remedial courses optional for students who meet or exceed admission standards at state universities that set admission standards to assure that 90 percent of admitted students can do college level work.