

SUBJECT: TASP exemption based on high school GPA in college-prep courses

COMMITTEE: Higher Education — favorable, without amendment

VOTE: 9 ayes — Rangel, F. Brown, Farabee, Goolsby, J. Jones, Morrison, E. Reyna, Uher, West

0 nays

WITNESSES: For — None

Against — None

On — Linda McDonough, Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board

BACKGROUND: Under Education Code, sec. 51.306, most students at Texas’ public colleges and universities must take the Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP) exam or a correlated alternative test instrument to measure their reading, writing, and math skills prior to enrolling in upper-level classes. Students may not enroll in any upper-division course (one that would cause them to accumulate 60 or more semester credit hours upon its completion) until their TASP results equal or exceed the minimum standards in each skill area for which developmental education is required, or they earn a grade of “B” or better in a freshman-level credit course in the subject matter in which they fell short on the test.

Sec. 51.306(r) exempts six separate categories of students from this requirement. Also, secs. 51.306(l) and 51.306(m) exempt certain students from the TASP test based on their performance on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) exit test, the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT), or the American College Test (ACT).

Education Code, sec. 28.002 establishes the required public school curriculum. Sec. 28.025 authorizes the State Board of Education to set academic reporting standards for high schools sending transcripts of a student’s achievement under the minimum, recommended, or advanced curriculum.

DIGEST: HB 2109 would add Education Code, sec. 51.306(x) to provide an additional exemption from the TASP for certain students based on their high school academic performance. The bill would exempt students who graduated from a public high school or an accredited private high school in any state with a grade point average (GPA) of 3.0 or higher on a 4.0 scale and who completed the recommended or advanced public high school curriculum or its equivalent at an accredited private high school or at a high school outside of the state. The exemption would apply only to students who enrolled in a higher education institution within five years of their high school graduation.

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) would be required to establish standards, for purposes of this exemption, to determine whether a private high school was accredited and whether a person completed a high school curriculum at an accredited private high school or at a high school outside the state that was equivalent or similar to the recommended or advanced high school curriculum established under Education Code, secs. 28.002 or 28.025.

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, 2001. HB 2109 would apply only to students entering higher education institutions on or after September 1, 2001.

SUPPORTERS SAY: HB 2109 would rightly reward students who have successfully graduated from the recommended or advanced high school curriculum with at least a 3.0 GPA. The TASP is intended to ensure that students are sufficiently prepared to succeed in college. Students who have met the above standards already have demonstrated their ability to succeed in college and should not have to take the TASP or enroll in developmental education.

By providing an additional exemption from the TASP, HB 2109 would bring Texas in line with a national trend toward de-emphasizing the consideration of test scores in the admissions process. Standardized tests measure students' test-taking ability, not their aptitude for learning. Statistics show that minorities and economically-disadvantaged students do not perform as well on such standardized tests as Anglo, Asian, and economically-advantaged students. Furthermore, standardized tests do not measure a

student's work ethic, life experience, creativity, or potential for academic and professional success.

The exemption provided in HB 2109 would remove a significant obstacle to access and participation in higher education, thus helping to achieve one of THECB's goals in its "Closing the Gaps" study. Many students who excel in the classroom do not necessarily perform well on standardized examinations. Recent statistics from THECB indicate that only 34.2 percent of students taking the TASP or the four alternative placement tests passed all three sections of the exam the first time they took it.

HB 2109 would exempt highly-motivated students with strong academic backgrounds from the TASP and from potential developmental education courses that otherwise would be required if they failed a section of the exam. This would help students complete their university studies faster and also would ensure that they remain in Texas, rather than attend out-of-state institutions that may not require similar placement examinations. Also, the decreased need for developmental education would result in significant savings to students, the state, and local community college districts.

HB 2109 would reward eligible students for taking the more rigorous high school curricula and performing well in their classes. These students would have one less standardized test to take prior to commencing their college studies. Currently, students must pass the TAAS exit test to graduate from high school. In addition, they must take end-of-the-year subject tests in high school as well as either the ACT or the SAT to get into college or university.

HB 2109 also would provide an incentive for students to enroll in the recommended or advanced high school curriculum. This would result in an increased number of students enrolled in recommended, distinguished achievement, advanced, and advanced honors program. Enrolling in these demanding programs in high school would more effectively prepare these students for college as well as for the rigors of the workforce of the new economy.

According to the Governor's Special Commission on 21st Century Colleges and Universities, presently only 41 percent of Texas high school students graduate from either the recommended or distinguished diploma tracks.

However, 81 percent of these students go on to attend Texas universities or colleges. The Commission found that students enrolled in a college preparatory curriculum were more likely to attend an institution of higher education and were more likely to be successful in their academic careers at such institutions.

Education Code, sec. 51.306 already exempts certain students from taking the TASP examination based on their performance on the TAAS, the SAT, or the ACT. Like other students exempted on the basis of academic performance, these students also should be exempt from the TASP.

The bill is designed to reward students who complete the recommended or advanced curriculum with at least a 3.0 GPA. It should not be extended to students who still are in high school, even if it means that they still may have to pass the TASP in order to participate in certain dual enrollment courses.

OPPONENTS
SAY:

HB 2109 would not allow for adjustment based on whether a student graduated from a low-performing high school. Although empirical evidence indicates that academic performance in high school is a good predictor of academic success in college, several variables may produce an uneven quality among high school academic programs and their performance standards for students. For example, a student who completed the recommended or advanced high school curriculum with a 3.0 or higher GPA at a low-performing school might be less prepared for college than a student with the same or even slightly lower GPA at a high-performing school.

The TASP is needed to measure a student's need for extra preparatory work. Although the student from a lower-performing school might not require developmental course work, that could not be guaranteed without some measure of the student's level of preparedness, such as the TASP. Furthermore, accreditation status alone would not guarantee absolute uniformity among institutions with the same or similar accreditors. Accreditation criteria are minimum standards within which significant variance may occur.

HB 2109 would not address the possibility that some students would meet the cumulative GPA criteria but still could be deficient in one area tested by

the TASP. For example, this could occur if the student made a 3.0 GPA by achieving very high grades in most courses but low grades in a few of them.

If students are truly well prepared for college, the TASP test should be no problem for them, and they should pass it. If they have performed well on the SAT, ACT, or TAAS, they will be exempt anyway. If they do not pass the TASP, they need remedial course work; otherwise, they may fail to graduate. Requiring students to pass the TASP ensures that all graduates of Texas' public colleges and universities will possess a minimum level of basic skills and helps identify those who may need remedial help. By creating an additional exemption to the TASP, HB 2109 would shift much of the responsibility of evaluating students' preparedness for college to the higher education institutions.

OTHER
OPPONENTS
SAY:

The exemption in HB 2109 would not go far enough in terms of benefitting hard-working high school students who are interested in taking dual-enrollment courses. These students typically apply to take college courses in their junior year and are required to take the TASP to do so. Students only may enroll in courses that correlate to the sections of the TASP that they passed. Students who fail the TASP or a specific section are be precluded from enrolling in these classes. This creates a disincentive for students, including those with at least a 3.0 GPA who are enrolled in the recommended or advanced curriculum, from pursuing the dual-enrollment option while still in high school.

HB 2109 would not necessarily exempt students from taking developmental courses. Individual higher education institutions still could enroll students who would be exempted from TASP under HB 2109 in developmental or remediation courses depending on their performance on the institution's placement tests. For example, many institutions require their students to take placement exams in order to determine in which level of math they should be enrolled.

NOTES:

HB 1648 by Delisi and SB 1141 by West, both of which propose to eliminate the TASP, are pending before the House Higher Education Committee and the Senate Education Committee, respectively. HB 125 by West, which also would eliminate the TASP, was reported favorably as substituted by the House Higher Education Committee on March 29. HB

3620 by Delisi, which would replace the TASP with a new Developmental Education Program test, is pending before the House Higher Education Committee. Finally, HB 1645 by Delisi, which would provide an exemption to the TASP for certain transfer students, passed the House on March 22, and is pending in the Senate Education Committee.

Rider 11 in Article 3 of CSSB 1, the general appropriations bill for fiscal 2002-03, also on today's calendar, would address the SAT, ACT, exit-level TAAS score exemption from the TASP. According to this rider, students who score one point higher than the statewide average score achieved by Texas residents on the respective test in the academic year the student achieved the score would be exempt from the TASP for five years from the date the SAT or ACT was taken and three years from the date the TAAS was taken.

According to the fiscal note, HB 2109 would have a positive fiscal impact of \$4,850,400 through the biennium ending August 31, 2003, since students benefitting from the exemption no longer would take the TASP or enroll in developmental education. Also, the LBB estimates that local community college districts would see a corresponding decrease in developmental education enrollment and locally-incurred costs from this enrollment.