

- SUBJECT:** Changes to state assessment program for students in grades 3-8
- COMMITTEE:** Public Education — committee substitute recommended
- VOTE:** 11 ayes — Aycock, Allen, J. Davis, Deshotel, Dutton, Farney, Huberty, K. King, Ratliff, J. Rodriguez, Villarreal
- 0 nays
- WITNESSES:** *(On original bill:)*  
For — Harley Eckhart, Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association; Laurie Hitzelberger, Dawson Orr, and Ericca Vandagriff, Highland Park ISD; *(Registered, but did not testify:)* Portia Bosse, Texas State Teachers Association; Nan Clayton, League of Women Voters; Monty Exter, Association of Texas Professional Educators; Lindsay Gustafson, Texas Classroom Teachers Association; Janna Lilly, Texas Council of Administrators of Special Education; Ken McCraw, Texas Association of Community Schools; Casey McCreary, Texas Association of School Administrators; Ted Melina Raab, Texas AFT; Jeff Miller, Disability Rights Texas; Andra Penny, Penny Trammel, and Jeff Turner, Coppell ISD; Don Rogers, Texas Rural Education Association; Christy Rome, Texas School Coalition; Guy Sconzo, Humble ISD; Julie Shields, Texas Association of School Boards; Rona Statman, The ARC of Texas; Theresa Trevino and Laura Yeager, Texans Advocating for Meaningful Student Assessment; Paula Trietsch Chaney; Maria Whitsett, Texas School Alliance; Howell Wright, Texas Association of Mid-Size Schools)
- Against — Zenobia Joseph; *(Registered, but did not testify:)* Bill Hammond, Texas Association of Business; Justin Yancy, Texas Business Leadership Council)
- On — Gloria Zyskowski, Texas Education Agency; Kathi Thomas; *(Registered, but did not testify:)* David Anderson, Texas Education Agency)
- BACKGROUND:** The 81st Legislature in 2009 enacted HB 3, which replaced the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) with a new series of assessments in grades 3-8. The State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) exams were administered for the first time in the

spring of 2012. Students are assessed every year in reading and mathematics. Students in grades 4 and 7 take a writing test; students in grades 5 take a science test; and students in grade 8 take science and social studies tests.

Test items on the STAAR exams in grades 3-8 are developed to measure knowledge and skills based on readiness and supporting standards. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) defines readiness standards as concepts required for students to succeed in the current grade and to be prepared for the next grade. Supporting standards are concepts that are introduced in the current grade but may be emphasized in previous or subsequent years.

**DIGEST:** CSHB 2836 would eliminate the grade 7 writing and grade 8 social studies STAAR tests, beginning with the 2013-14 school year.

The bill would require all statewide standardized tests to be determined valid and reliable by an entity that was independent of TEA and any other entity that developed the assessment instrument.

TEA would be required to ensure that all statewide standardized tests were designed to primarily assess the state curriculum for the grade level being tested. The tests could assess supporting knowledge or skills from a different subject or different grade level only to the extent necessary or helpful for diagnostic or reporting purposes.

CSHB 2836 would require that STAAR tests be designed so that 85 percent of students in grades 3 through 5 could finish in two hours and 85 percent of students in grades 6 through 8 could finish in three hours. The amount of time allowed for test administration in a single day could not exceed eight hours.

The bill would prohibit the commissioner of education from including student performance on test questions that assess supporting knowledge or skills from being used as a performance indicator of student achievement for the purpose of determining state accountability ratings for districts and campuses.

The bill would take immediate effect if passed by a two-thirds record vote of the membership of each house. Otherwise, it would take effect September 1, 2013.

SUPPORTERS  
SAY:

CSHB 2836 would take an important step toward aligning public school assessment and accountability with what students know and can do in terms of grade-level standards essential to their success. It would enhance the role of teachers and help nurture a sense of inquiry and love of learning in students.

The bill would reduce the high-stakes nature of STAAR exams for students in elementary and middle school by eliminating tests in grades 7 and 8, requiring TEA to focus test questions on essential curriculum standards for the grade and subject being tested and designing the tests to be completed in a reasonable amount of time. It has become apparent from the first administration of the STAAR tests that adjustments are needed. There is no reason to wait for further administrations of the test to consider changes.

More testing does not equal more rigor. Eliminating the grade 7 writing and grade 8 social studies tests would allow teachers more time to help middle-school students develop their writing skills and learn social studies instead of focusing classroom lessons on test preparation. The tests that would be eliminated are not required under the No Child Left Behind Act, and they only add to an environment of high-stakes testing and “teaching to the test.” Students in grades 3-8 still would take 15 STAAR exams. CSHB 2836 would reduce state testing requirements while still keeping the assessment program in line with federal requirements and preserving the grade 4 writing test, as requested by the education community.

Refocusing the tests primarily to measure grade-level readiness standards would result in deeper instruction, increased student learning, and the development of exams that assess knowledge instead of test-taking skills. This approach also would increase accountability for that grade level and the associated teacher. Holding a teacher accountable for curriculum that is not in that grade’s readiness standards decreases accountability and dilutes the curriculum.

For example, the STAAR science assessment for grade 5 also includes content standards from grades 3 and 4. As a result of all the standards that have to be covered, a fifth grade science teacher testified that she often has as little as one day to cover major concepts. A classroom environment driven by testing limits time for students to engage in more meaningful work, including conducting science experiments or discussing interesting current events, such as the Mars rover .

The STAAR exams still could include questions that measured supporting standards, but those questions would be used only for diagnostic and reporting purposes, not for accountability. That would relieve teachers and students from having to worry as much about those test items so they could focus on the grade-level readiness standards.

Four-hour timed tests are too long for elementary school students. The pressure and build-up to the tests are increasing student stress — some complain of trouble sleeping the night before the test, and more parents are reporting that their children do not enjoy school. CSHB 2836 would ensure that most elementary school students could finish the test in two hours, with most middle schoolers spending no more than three hours on a STAAR test. At the same time, the bill would recognize that some struggling learners may need an entire day to complete the tests. The tests should measure what students know, not what they can complete within a specified time limit.

Texas spends too much on its testing contractor. CSHB 2836 would save \$9.57 million in fiscal 2014-15 by eliminating the two tests, according to the fiscal note. While other provisions in the bill would require the modification of tests, that expense would be minor and well worth it to increase accountability and decrease student stress.

Teachers, students, and parents report that many of the STAAR questions appear to be “trick” questions that do not necessarily measure student knowledge but rather test-taking skills. An independent review of the validity and reliability of the tests would help confirm that they appropriately measured and reflected the attainment of student knowledge and skills in each grade and subject assessed.

In addition, some school districts are using STAAR results to evaluate teachers, even though the tests have not been deemed valid for that purpose. An independent review could determine whether the exams were valid for uses other than to measure student progress. The estimated \$20,000 annual cost for the independent review could help protect Texas from litigation other states have faced over the use of statewide assessments for teacher evaluations.

**OPPONENTS  
SAY:**

The STAAR exams are being administered this spring for only the second time, and it is too soon to retreat from the assessments simply because the

exams are more difficult than the TAKS tests. The history of the Texas accountability system is that students have improved their performance as standards have risen.

Eliminating the grade 7 writing exam could mean that more students would start high school without an essential skill they need to be successful. Discontinuing the grade 8 social studies exam could mean that students would not be assessed on this important subject before high school. Texas schools should be doing more, not less, to ensure that students understand history and government so they can become good citizens.

One of the primary goals of the STAAR program is to increase the rigor of the assessments so students have the academic knowledge and skills they need to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Teachers need to make sure students retain content from previous years and are exposed to concepts they will need to succeed in future grades. Emphasizing supporting standards as well as readiness standards on the tests helps strengthen the alignment between what is taught and what is tested for a given course of study.

Placing time limits on the STAAR tests is another way the new testing system has increased rigor over the TAKS program, in which the tests were not timed. There would be an estimated cost of \$90,000 in fiscal 2014 associated with modifying STAAR assessments to fit within certain time limits.

There is no need for the state to spend an estimated \$20,000 per fiscal year to contract with an entity for an independent evaluation of the reliability and validity of STAAR exams. TEA already follows established procedures — including a U.S. Department of Education peer review process — to ensure fairness, accuracy, validity, and reliability of the Texas assessment program. Currently, all state-developed tests meet established reliability and validity guidelines set forth by the American Educational Research Association, the American Psychological Association, and the National Council on Measurement in Education.

**OTHER  
OPPONENTS  
SAY:**

CSHB 2836 would not go far enough in reducing the high-stakes nature of the STAAR tests for students in elementary and middle school. Students still would be tested a total of 15 times in grades 3 through 8. The bill should eliminate all tests in all grades that are not required under federal

law.

**NOTES:**

The committee substitute differs from the bill as filed in that it would retain the grade 4 writing test that would have been eliminated in the original.

According to the Legislative Budget Board (LBB), CSHB 2836 would result in a savings of \$9.57 million in fiscal 2014-15. The state would save money from eliminating grade 7 writing and grade 8 social studies exams but would spend \$90,000 to modify remaining tests to fit within the bill's required time limits, as well as \$20,000 for an annual, independent review of the STAAR exams' validity and reliability.

In its analysis of the bill as introduced, the LBB projected savings of \$16.87 million in fiscal 2014-15, but has since lowered its estimate based partly on retaining the grade 4 writing test.