

BILL ANALYSIS

Senate Research Center
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AUTHOR'S/SPONSOR'S STATEMENT OF INTENT

For many school administrators, teachers, and parents, standardized testing provides an objective means to determine whether schools are doing their job of educating students to the level required by state standards, and for the individual student, standardized testing also has great value as a diagnostic tool, helping teachers pinpoint specific areas in which that student needs improvement and helping both the student and the appropriate teachers measure the student's progress toward specific academic goals.

The mandated use of standardized testing in Texas public schools began in 1979 when the Texas Legislature passed S.B. 350, which required the Central Education Agency to adopt and administer appropriate criterion-referenced tests for students in grades three and five and a secondary exit-level test for students in grade nine; because the legislature also required the reporting of the aggregate results of this test, which became known as the Texas Assessment of Basic Skills (TABS), the test marked the beginning of accountability for school campuses and districts. Conceived partly as a diagnostic tool for both students and schools, TABS was superseded by a series of other tests, each more rigorous than its predecessor, with the current Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) being administered for the first time in spring 2003; in addition to raising the bar for measuring student academic performance, the succession of tests repeatedly raised the stakes for students, teachers, school administrators, and even school board members as testing became a cornerstone of the state's nationally recognized public school accountability system in 1993.

Not only have the stakes been raised as a result of the state's use of TAKS results in its accountability system, but the proliferation of other tests has raised concerns about the amount of time being spent on testing students and preparing them for the various tests and about the actual benefits of such extensive testing relative to the expenditure of resources. While the TABS was designed to measure basic skills competencies in reading, writing, and mathematics for students in grades three, five, and nine, today's TAKS is given to students in grades three through 11 and requires students to demonstrate proficiency in science and social history as well as reading, writing, and mathematics. In addition to the state-mandated TAKS, some districts administer certain national norm-referenced tests such as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills or the Stanford Achievement Test; many Texas schools also participate in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) program, which administers tests in various subject areas at regular intervals to students in Texas and across the country.

During the Fourth Called Session of the 78th Texas Legislature, legislation was proposed that would have expanded a school's burden with regard to the testing of students by requiring each school district to administer a college preparation test such as the SAT or the ACT to every student in the recommended or advanced high school programs in grades eight, nine, and 10. Although the measure failed to pass, Texas educators must be mindful of the testing schedule as well as of the level of test-readiness among those students in their charge who are candidates for those tests because the set of performance indicators used to evaluate the quality of learning on a campus and to determine a district's accreditation includes student participation in and performance on those two tests; cognizant of that fact, some districts encourage students to participate in testing and test preparation programs as early as eighth grade.

While many of the stakeholders in public education, including teachers and members of the legislature, believe that standardized tests are helpful, appropriate, and desirable, it nevertheless is true that teachers are becoming overwhelmed by the increasing number of standardized tests for which they must prepare their students. The possibility that more school districts may add to

this burden by requiring further benchmark testing threatens to compound the problem; it is time therefore to consider whether schools can achieve their desired outcomes as well as those desired by the public and the legislature by reducing or consolidating testing instruments.

RESOLVED

That the 79th Legislature of the State of Texas hereby request the lieutenant governor and the speaker of the house of representatives to create a joint interim committee to examine the impact of public school assessment instruments on the quality of instruction, teacher morale, and students' motivation to learn;

That the study shall include the following analyses:

- (1) the usefulness of the various tests in elementary and secondary schools as predictors or indicators of student success;
- (2) the impact of testing on the amount of instructional time and on the content of instruction offered at the elementary and secondary school levels;
- (3) the amount of classroom time required to prepare for and administer multiple tests in public schools;
- (4) whether teachers would benefit from a reduction in the paperwork requirements associated with mandatory testing in public schools;
- (5) whether there is a need to adjust the timing of the tests' administration in the public schools to optimize student success; and
- (6) the extent to which teachers and students might benefit from a reduction or consolidation of the current number of mandatory tests administered at the elementary and secondary school levels; and

That the committee's proceedings and operations be governed by such general rules and policies for joint interim committees as the 79th Legislature may adopt and that such rules and policies supersede the provisions of this resolution to the extent of any conflict; and, be it further That the committee submit a full report, including findings and recommendations, to the Texas Legislature not later than September 1, 2006.