

Misperceptions about STAAR End-of-Course Testing

Educators have been working diligently to prepare for end-of-course examinations (EOCs) since the legislation creating them was passed in 2007 as part of SB 1031. The school community generally supports the move to EOC tests because they capture content from students' current coursework rather than from multiple grade levels. The tighter "coupling" of what is taught and tested should pave the way to more rapid improvements in teaching and learning.

That said, educators and parents alike want to avoid undue burden on students, particularly the first ones to take the new exams: this year's ninth graders. Below are responses to some myths being carried in the media of late:

Myth #1. The tests "might not count for anything."¹ House Bill 3 was written to ensure that students will care about these tests. To graduate, students must hit at least a *minimum score* on each required test. In addition, students must achieve a *cumulative score* across the courses tested within each subject area (e.g., within mathematics, the cumulative score combines results from tests in Algebra I, geometry, and Algebra II – so every test taken counts in each of the four subject areas). Beyond that, to graduate on a higher diploma plan, students must perform at the *college ready* level on specific tests.

Myth #2. There will be no uniform standards applied to the tests. Each of the score requirements described above (minimum, cumulative, and college ready) will be set by the state. The standards apply to all students in Texas public school districts. The *only* aspect over which districts have control is the conversion of scale scores into grades for report cards.

Myth #3: There must be consistency from district to district in course grades. Students' course grades are largely determined by classroom teachers. These professionals evaluate performance based on the entirety of the students' work in a course. This is the first time that the state of Texas has decided to limit local authority in the grading process.

Myth #4: The statewide accountability system will not have uniformity of measurement. This is patently false. Both state and federal (AYP) accountability ratings for all schools and districts will be based on a consistent set of standards established by the Texas Education Agency. These results will enable us to determine progress made by schools, districts, and the state as a whole. Again, the only scores that district policies will influence are the scores used to calculate student grades.

So what have educators and parents across Texas been asking for? The Texas School Alliance supported House Bill 500 last session. That bill provided districts with discretion to determine whether, and how, to include state test scores in students' course grades. The bill also would have simplified the graduation requirements so that parents and students could easily understand them; and the requirements would have focused on final standards that all graduates should meet. This would mean, for example, that achieving the standard on English III would be sufficient for graduation regardless of performance on English I and II. Unfortunately, in spite of large support in the Texas House, this bill did not make it through the Senate.

¹Paid advertisement by the Texas Association of Business, February 2, 2012, in the Austin American-Statesman.

Common Misperceptions about STAAR End-of-Course Testing, cont'd.

As a result, school districts are working with their local communities to create policies to comply with state law. These policies will determine how state-set scale scores will be converted into classroom grades, and the decisions will be revisited once districts have received the first set of results from the new testing program. There is variation in these policies, and this variation largely reflects the different opinions of families, teachers and community members across districts. Failure to account for local context will erode support for the assessment system as a whole and could lead to the erosion of the state accountability system, which has contributed significantly to educational progress in Texas. The grades count – and so do our students.