HOUSE RESEARCH ORGANIZATION

focus report

Texas House of Representatives

September 29, 1998

The TAAS Test: How Much Should It Count?

The Texas Assessment of Academic Skills – more commonly called the TAAS test – has become a focal point of the Texas public education system. Students are tested in every grade from the third through the eighth. In addition, they must pass an exit-level test first given in the tenth grade in order to receive a high school diploma. Because TAAS results now are used to determine school performance as well, the test affects a range of other educational issues, from whether students are eligible for public education grants to attend school outside their district to how many state rules a district must follow. At least one major school district, the Waco ISD, now weighs test results in deciding whether to promote students in grades three through eight. Gov. George W. Bush similarly has proposed using TAAS scores to eradicate social promotion statewide.

Questions remain, however, about whether Texas relies too heavily upon the test. TAAS and its predecessors originally were meant to be a means of measuring the performance of individual students and to alert teachers to academic problems. Many wonder if the test has exceeded this original intent by now serving as a basis for also measuring school performance and determining high school graduation and student promotion. Use of the TAAS test as a performance measure is compromised, say other critics, when large numbers of students are exempted from taking the TAAS because they are classified as having limited English proficiency or as special education students. Because of the heavy emphasis placed on the test, some say, the TAAS creates incentives to cheat.

Additional questions about the test itself also have been raised: Is the basic design rigorous enough or is it too difficult? Does it accurately reflect the curriculum? Is it biased against minority students? Do steady improvements in TAAS test results over the past four years really mean students are learning more or are they just learning more about how to pass the test?

Test objectives

The primary purposes of the TAAS are to test individual student achievement and to determine if students preparing to graduate from high school possess the academic skills expected for a high school diploma. Each question of the test is geared toward a particular objective in the curriculum. Some questions are fact-related, such as determining ability to multiply three numbers together, while others are more subjective, such as evaluating reasoning skills. Because each test question can be directly related to an element of the curriculum, TAAS results help indicate where in the curriculum a student needs additional help. Teachers can use the TAAS to pinpoint the objectives in the curriculum needing additional emphasis and then tailor lesson plans to focus on those areas. The fact that results are figured on an index (see box, pp. 4-5) means that the TAAS also can help parents and teachers judge student performance across time and determine where and when adjustments are needed.

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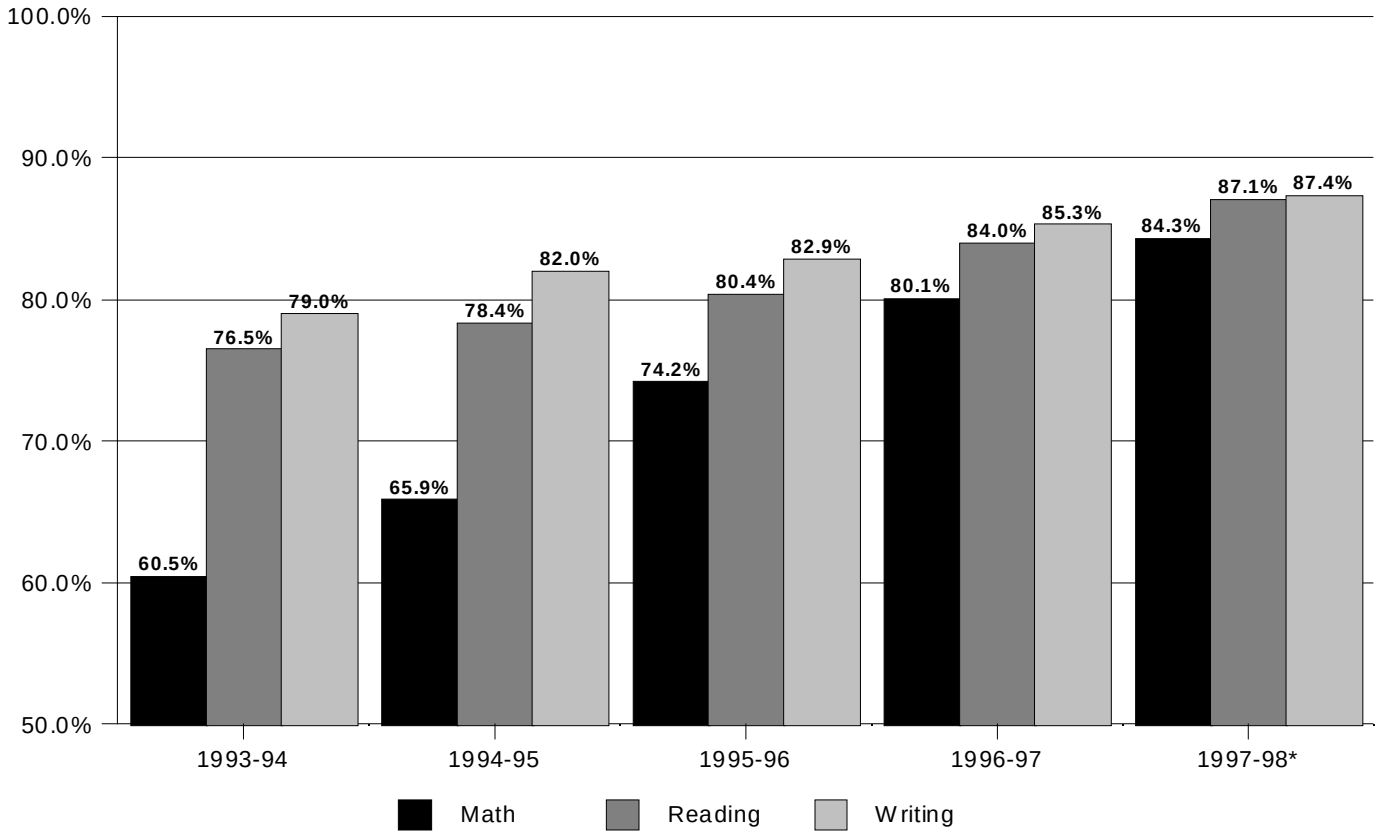
In most cases, students are required to pass the exit-level TAAS test in order to graduate from a Texas high school. A student may take the exit-level TAAS up to seven times prior to the normal graduation time at the end of the 12th grade. Students may continue to retake the exit-level test as many times as is necessary to pass it.

The State Board of Education (SBOE) requires schools to provide remediation programs for students who do not pass the TAAS exit test. A Texas Education Agency (TEA) committee of educators disseminates information on successful remediation programs. Several private companies also teach TAAS remediation courses or publish TAAS study guides and other materials, including workbooks, practice exams, and software. Much of this material is purchased by schools and districts to help improve student scores, but increasingly individuals are purchasing such materials for their own children.

There are alternatives to the exit-level TAAS. Special education students can receive their high school diplomas without passing the exit-level TAAS if they complete the individual education plan (IEP) developed for them. Effective in the 1998-99 school year, other high school students can opt out of passing the exit-level TAAS and still receive a diploma by passing end-of-course subject examinations in English II and Algebra I and either Biology I or U.S. History. The algebra and biology exams have been administered since 1994. The English and history exams have been developed and field tested and will be administered in the current school year.

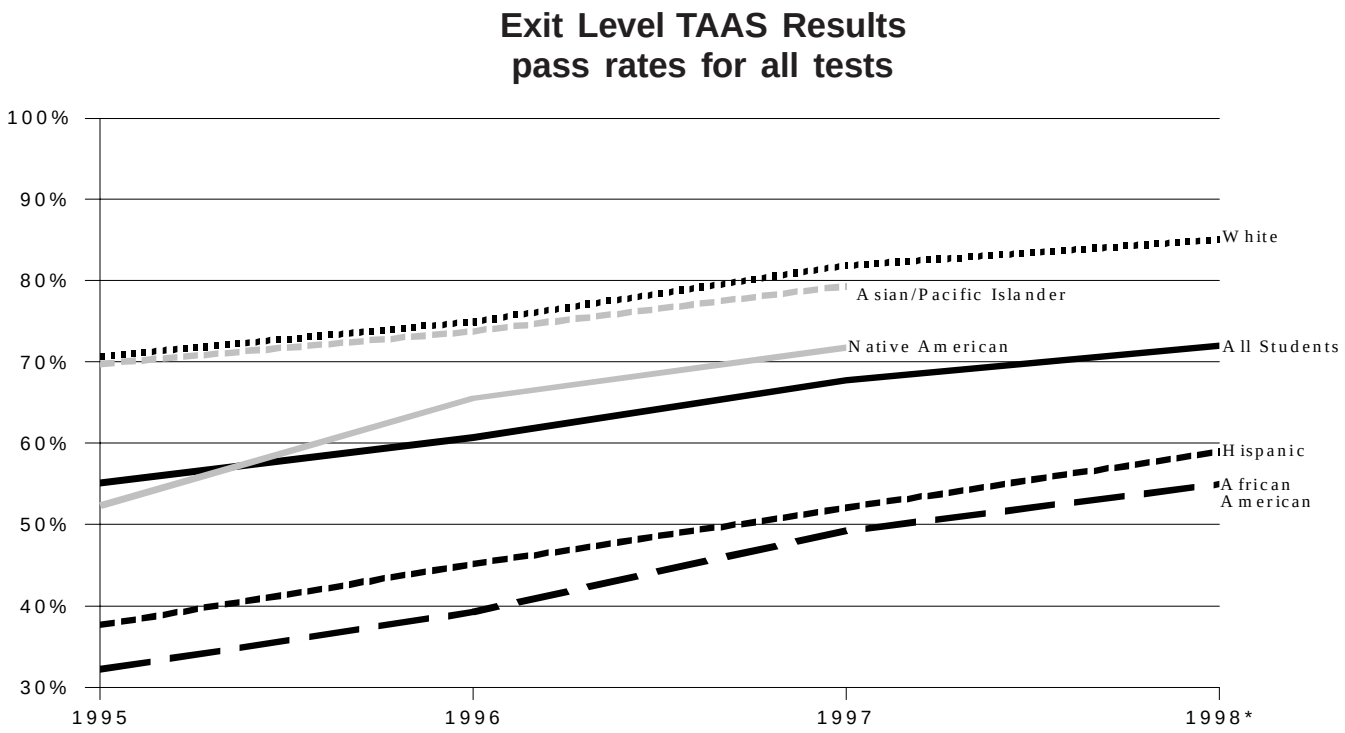
In 1997, the percentage of students passing the algebra exam varied between 20 percent in the fall and 35 percent in the spring; the percentage of students passing the biology exam ranged from 70 percent to 78 percent.

Statewide TAAS Results
pass rates



*1998 TAAS results are preliminary and do not include year-round schools. Writing tests are included in the 4th, 8th and exit level TAAS exams.

Source: Texas Education Agency



*1998 TAAS results are preliminary and do not include year-round schools. Data for Native American and Asian students is not available for the 1998 TAAS test at this time.

Source: Texas Education Agency

Performance ratings

Individual student performance may be the primary purpose of the TAAS, but the test has evolved into a measure of group performance as well. The TAAS now figures prominently in the accountability system used to evaluate the Texas public education system. Schools and school districts are categorized as exemplary, recognized, acceptable or unacceptable (often called low-performing) based on three primary factors: the percentage of students passing the TAAS test, the dropout rate, and the attendance rate.

Texas is not alone in using testing as a basis for school and district evaluations: according to the Education Commission of the States Information Clearinghouse, 43 other states also use some form of testing as part of their school accountability systems. Nearly all also include other factors such as attendance or graduation rates. Some 14 states base rewards on accountability system performance; 34 states provide for sanctions based on performance.

In Texas, schools and districts that achieve exemplary ratings can earn rewards. For example, they are exempted from most state regulations specified in the Education Code. Section 39.112 of the code retains for these schools only those regulations pertaining to such matters as criminal behavior, due process, federal requirements, curriculum requirements, school accountability, employee benefits and rights, and competitive bidding. In addition, the SBOE distributed $2.5 million in rewards to the 2,668 schools classified as exemplary or recognized during the 1997-98 school year. Another $2.5 million is budgeted for the current school year.

Schools rated as unacceptable, on the other hand, can face serious repercussions. The Commissioner of Education has broad statutory authority to intervene with these schools by appointing a campus intervention team or a board of managers to replace the administration of the school or district or even closing the school or program. A low rating generally heralds a change in leadership at the school or district level; the Education Code also specifically authorizes performance ratings to be used as the primary factor in determining the performance of school administrators.

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Mechanics of the TAAS

Nearly every state requires some form of standardized testing for students in certain grades. In Texas, state-administered standardized testing in public schools has been required by statute since 1980. The current testing requirements are set out in Chapter 39, subchapter B, of the Education Code.

The Texas Assessment of Basic Skills was the first of such tests. In 1985, it was replaced by the Texas Educational Assessment of Minimum Skills (TEAMS), which, in turn, was replaced by the TAAS test in 1990. According to the Texas Education Agency (TEA), the TAAS was implemented to provide a more comprehensive assessment of curriculum objectives. This effort was undertaken in response to criticisms that the TEAMS made teachers focus on "minimum skills" to the detriment of "academics." The TAAS test was designed to cover all skills included in the curriculum as well as test higher order thinking skills and problem-solving ability.

The TAAS is a criterion-referenced test (CRT), *i.e.*, it compares students not to one another but to a predetermined standard of achievement, such as a passing grade of 70. CRTs can measure broad knowledge of an entire curriculum or simply test minimum skills in a particular subject. All students or none may meet the expectations on a CRT, unlike in norm-referenced tests (NRTs), where students are compared to a "norm" or average for achievement set by a representative sample of others taking the same test. The SAT is an example of an NRT, with scores expressed as percentile rankings. As long as the norm is updated periodically, one-half of students should score below that average, one-half above.

Each version of the TAAS test is developed through a lengthy process that involves Texas educators and administrators and testing professionals from National Computer Systems and its subcontractors. The goal is to develop questions that match curriculum objectives. Questions under development are often included in current tests in order to screen them for accuracy and objective measurement, but are not counted in determining a student's score.

TEA officials say this process helps accommodate changes to the state curriculum. For example, the TAAS now is undergoing revisions to reflect the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), the new curriculum adopted in 1997 by the State Board of Education (SBOE) to replace the old Essential Elements. In tracking the new curriculum, test creators have removed those questions relating to objectives not reflected in the TEKS. Over the next two years, they will develop new test questions related to new objectives and then slowly incorporate those questions into the TAAS. Gradual incorporation over time rather than sudden, complete revision means the test can be used to gauge student performance from one year to another.

Administration

The TAAS "test" actually is a series of different tests given at various stages throughout a student's academic career. The current testing schedule is as follows:

3rd grade - Reading, math
4th grade - Reading, math, writing
5th grade - Reading, math
6th grade - Reading, math
7th grade - Reading, math
8th grade - Reading, math, writing, science, social studies
Exit-level (10th grade) - Reading, math, writing

Reading, math, science, and social studies exams are multiple choice tests; writing tests are essay questions graded by teams of readers looking for various objectives, including mastery of language, responsiveness to the audience, organization, and effectiveness of the essay's central ideas. Tests in Spanish are available through the sixth grade for Spanish-speaking students with limited English proficiency.

TEA is currently examining a number of options for changing the TAAS test. These include moving the mandatory exit-level test to the eleventh grade and adding sections on science and social studies. By incorporating material taught up to the junior year, the test would give a more accurate assessment of whether a student had an appropriate level of knowledge. Adding exit-level sections for science and social studies would round out the test and ensure that graduates were academically competent in all major subject areas. While the intent would not be to make the test more difficult, say TEA officials, more students would be likely to fail a portion of the test.

Results

Scores on each TAAS section are variously computed.

Raw scores indicate the number of items answered correctly on a test. This measure has limited utility; scores are not comparable across tests or administrations because they are not scaled to the difficulty of the particular test.

Scaled scores allow comparisons to a passing standard of 1500. The scale ranges from approximately 400 to 2400 and varies depending on the test and the administration. The passing score of 1500 does not represent the same amount of achievement at each grade or subject tested, but does accommodate for variations in test difficulty. Scaled scores are not computed for every test. During 1996-97, scaled scores were only computed for fourth grade, eight grade, and exit-level tests.

Percentile scores, reported as the Texas Percentile Rank, indicate the percentage of students scoring at or below a certain reference point. This score can be used to assess student achievement over time in relation to other students in the state and to compare achievements on reading and math tests.

The Texas Learning Index (TLI) allows for comparisons within a subject area across both years and grade levels, enabling educators to judge consistency in achievement from one year to the next and track a student's progress toward passage of the exit-level test. The passing score of 70 is determined depending on test difficulty; students' scores are ranked in relation to that passing level. The passing score represents the same amount of achievement in each grade, so that a TLI of 70 in the fourth grade means competency of fourth grade material and a 70 in the fifth grade means the same level of competency with respect to fifth grade material. Thus, students' TLI scores should remain constant from one grade to the next in order to reflect expected progress. Increasing TLI scores from one year to the next would represent significant improvement.

For example, a student who receives TLI scores of 84 and 86 on the seventh and eight grade TAAS tests is maintaining progress and is well poised to pass the exit-level exam on the first attempt. A student with scores well below the minimum expectation score of 70, however, will need to post significant improvement to pass the exit-level test on a first attempt.

Additional tests

Nearly every Texas student takes standardized tests in addition to the TAAS. TEA annually compiles a list of approved tests — all NRTs — that may be purchased by school districts and given to students. The SBOE is authorized by law to adopt one nationally recognized NRT to be given to a sample of students, but has not chosen to adopt such a test. Any additional tests given to students must be purchased by the school or district.

State-Approved Achievement Tests for the 1997-1998 School Year

Publisher/Test	Grades
CTB/McGraw-Hill	
Terra Nova (CTBS/5)	K-12
Complete Battery	K-12
Complete Battery Plus	1-12
Basic Battery	K-12
Basic Battery Plus	1-12
Survey	2-12
Survey Plus	2-12
Harcourt Brace Educational Measurement	
Metropolitan Achievement Test 7th Ed.	K-12
Stanford Achievement Test Series 9th Ed.	K-13
Stanford Diagnostic Reading Test, 4th Ed.	1.5-13
Stanford Diagnostic Mathematics Test 4th Ed.	1.5-13
Riverside Publishing	
Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) Complete	K-3
ITBS, Core Battery	1-3
ITBS, Four Part Language, Complete & Survey	3-9
ITBS, Integrated Writing Skills, Complete & Survey	3-9
Tests of Achievement and Proficiency, Complete & Survey	9-12
Iowa Tests of Educational Development, Complete & Survey	9-12

Source: Texas Education Agency

TAAS sample questions

3rd grade math

1. What is the missing number in the number pattern? 2, 6, 10, 14, 18, ___ , 26
a. 20 b. 21 c. 22 d. 24

5th grade math

2. A watermelon weighs 7.8 kilograms, a bag of potatoes weighs 4.1 kilograms, and a large pumpkin weighs 9.7 kilograms. How much do the watermelon and the pumpkin weigh together?
a. 1.9 kg b. 11.9 kg c. 17.5 kg d. 21.6 kg

3. Henry completed several chores on Saturday. He spent 20 minutes on each of the chores. What additional information is needed to find out the total time Henry spent on chores?
a. How much Henry earned for doing each chore b. How much time Henry spent between chores
c. The amount of Henry's allowance d. The number of chores Henry completed
e. The kinds of chores that Henry did

7th grade math

4. A rectangular box is 4 inches long, 3 inches wide, and 2 inches high. What is the volume of the box?
a. 9 $in.^3$ b. 24 $in.^3$ c. 26 $in.^3$ d. 52 $in.^3$

5. For a display, a store arranged some lights in rows. There were 8 lights in the first row, 11 lights in the second row, 14 lights in the third row, and 17 lights in the fourth row. If the pattern continues, how many lights would be in the seventh row?
a. 20 b. 23 c. 26 d. 29

8th grade social studies

6. Kuwait, a wealthy desert country in the Middle East, has very little agriculture but plentiful oil. The citizens of Kuwait buy clothes from the United States and Europe and eat foods from around the world. They are able to do this because Kuwait —
a. exports natural resources and imports goods and services b. profits from its colonies
c. uses its natural resources to maintain subsistence d. has rich allies that give it surplus goods and services

7. Delegates to the Constitutional Convention from states with relatively small populations would most likely have supported —
a. a strong central government with three branches
b. a national legislature with each state having equal representation
c. an independently elected chief executive
d. a two-house national legislature based on population

8. One of the most famous Texans was Stephen F. Austin. Here are three facts about his life:
• He brought the "Old 300" to Texas and started the first colony of American immigrants.
• He took a petition to Mexico City in 1833 and got many reforms approved by Santa Anna.
• His arrest by Santa Anna turned most Texans against the dictator.
Which conclusion could be reached from this information?
a. Santa Anna had the right to arrest Austin.
b. A petition was not the best method Austin could have used to gain reform.
c. Austin was responsible for major steps in the development of Texas.
d. Austin planned a rebellion against Mexico even before he established the American colony.

8th grade science

9. Riders on cattle drives had to watch over the cattle at night. They kept track of their duty time by watching the position of the Little Dipper. The position of these stars changes because of the —
a. Earth's rotation b. atmosphere's composition c. moon's revolution d. Earth's shape

10. Alcohol evaporates quickly at room temperature, and the evaporated gas is dangerous in a closed room. Which of these is the best way to control the evaporation of alcohol?
a. Shake the bottle before opening b. Use cotton balls to transfer the alcohol
c. Wear gloves while using alcohol d. Recap the bottle after every use

Exit level writing

"You're early today," said Mrs. Ramos when Patty and (11)
Rachel two girls from the Austin Teen Volunteer Program arrived in her room at the nursing home. (12)
"We brought you a surprise." said Rachel, holding up a brightly colored package with a bow. The girls

helped Mrs. Ramos unwrap the box. Inside were framed photographs of the girls in their graduation gowns. (13)
"You both look lovely in your graduation pictures. what a thoughtful gift." said Mrs. Ramos. "I'm going to (14)
put them on the dresser across from my bed."

"Now I have something special for you," Mrs. Ramos continued. "the nursing home activities (15)
director has planed to take me to see my two favorite volunteers walk across the stage." (16)
"That's great" exclaimed Patty. "Now all of our friends will be at our graduation." (17)

11. a. Spelling error b. Capitalization error c. Punctuation error d. No error
12. a. Spelling error b. Capitalization error c. Punctuation error d. No error
13. a. Spelling error b. Capitalization error c. Punctuation error d. No error
14. a. Spelling error b. Capitalization error c. Punctuation error d. No error
15. a. Spelling error b. Capitalization error c. Punctuation error d. No error
16. a. Spelling error b. Capitalization error c. Punctuation error d. No error
17. a. Spelling error b. Capitalization error c. Punctuation error d. No error

Exit level writing

Your school board is considering having a four-day school week instead of a five-day school week. Each school day would be longer so that students would spend the same total amount of time in classes each week. What is your position on this issue? Write a letter to the president of your school board stating your position and supporting it with convincing reasons. Be sure to explain your reasons in detail.

Exit level math

18. The average number of hairs on a person's head is 150,000. How is this number expressed in scientific notation?
a. 15.0×10^3 b. 1.5×10^4 c. 1.5×10^5 d. 15.0×10^6

19. A bag of potato chips has a label on it that reads "50% more potato chips than regular 16-ounce size." How many ounces of potato chips does this bag contain?
a. 5 oz b. 8 oz c. 21 oz d. 24 oz e. 32 oz

20. The daily production costs for a skate factory cannot be more than $5200. It costs $15 in materials to make each pair of skates, and the daily operating costs are $900. If r represents the number of pairs of skates produced, which inequality best represents this situation?

a. $(900 - 15)r \leq 5200$ b. $900 + 15r \leq 5200$ c. $(900 + 15)r \leq 5200$ d. $900r + 15 \leq 5200$
e. $900 - 15r \leq 5200$

21. The admission price to enter an amusement park is $13.50 per person plus $5.00 per car for parking. Which equation could be used to calculate the total cost, T, for a group of n people who arrive in the same car?
a. $T = 13.50n + 5.00$ b. $T = 13.50 + 5.00n$ c. $T = (13.50 + 5.00)\ n$ d. $T = 13.50 + 5.00 + n$
e. $T = 13.50n - 5.00$

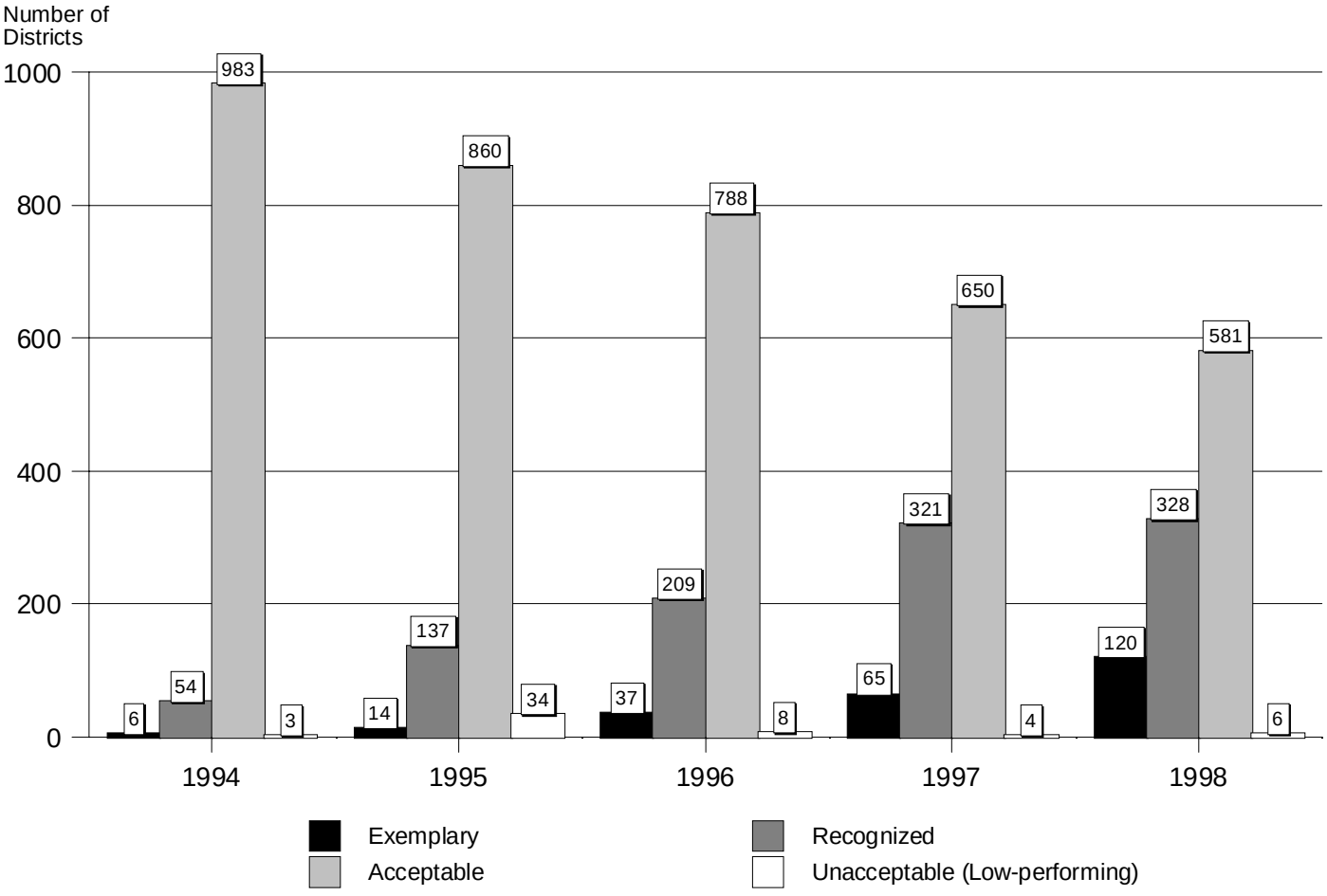
Answers: 1.c 2.c 3.d 4.b 5.c 6.a 7.b 8.c 9.a 10.d 11.d 12.c 13.d 14.b 15.b 16.a 17.c 18.c 19.d 20.b 21.a

Source: Texas Education Agency Spring 1997 released TAAS tests

continued from page 3 —

Low school ratings also directly affect individual students. Under SB 1 by Ratliff enacted in 1995, students in low-performing schools may receive public education grants (PEGs) to transfer to districts rated as acceptable or better. For purposes of the PEG program, a school is considered low-performing if more than half of its students failed the TAAS test in two of the last three years or if the school was rated unacceptable under the accountability system in any of the last three years. Students accepted for transfer out of low-performing districts take with them the state aid their old district otherwise would have received because of their enrollment. Data from TEA indicate that many schools have not accepted PEG transfer students because they already are overcrowded. New financial incentives, such as additional facilities assistance, approved by the 75th Legislature under HB 318 by Cuellar encourage districts to accept PEG transfers.

District Performance Ratings



Source: Texas Education Agency

Texas School Accountability Rating Standards for 1998

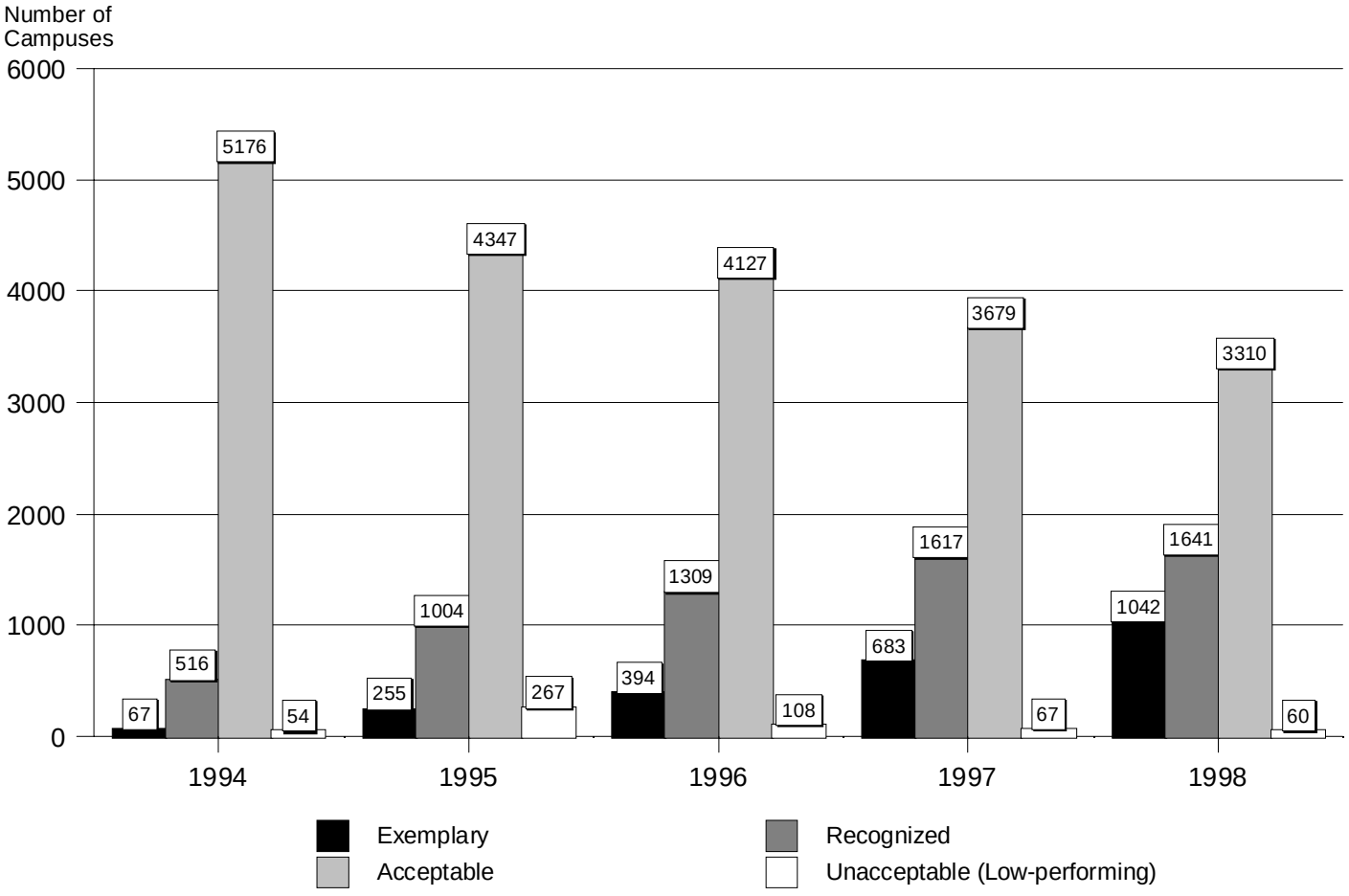
	Exemplary	Recognized	Acceptable	Unacceptable
TAAS test*	90% or more	80% or more	40% or more**	less than 40%
Dropout rate	1% or less	3.5% or less	6% or less	6% or less
Attendance rate	at least 94%	at least 94%	at least 94%	at least 94%

* TAAS test passage rates must be met for each subject area by all students and by specific student group. TEA defines students groups as African American, Hispanic, white and economically disadvantaged.

** Passage rates for acceptable performance will be raised to 45 percent in 1999 and 50 percent in 2000.

Source: TEA 1998 Accountability Manual

School Performance Ratings



Source: Texas Education Agency

TAAS at issue

The TAAS has come under criticism for a variety of reasons. In general, the issues boil down to problems with the emphasis of the test or concerns about its uses.

A matter of emphasis. The TAAS test is most commonly criticized for the emphasis it receives in the school system. Some parents and teachers alike have complained that excessive amounts of class time are spent on TAAS drills and preparation — "teaching the test." Critics charge that steady improvements in TAAS results over the past four years (see p. 2) mean that students are simply learning how to pass the test rather than actually learning the curriculum upon which the test is supposed to be based. And, say others, the emphasis on the test limits educational opportunities for students with higher proficiencies. These students could be covering advanced skills, but are forced to review and be drilled on the basic TAAS skills because teachers must spend an inordinate amount of class time on making sure that as many students as possible pass the test.

Critics also complain about the weight the TAAS is given in the state's system of school accountability. Because so much is dependent on performance ratings, teachers and administrators have a strong incentive to focus attention on the test and other factors measured under the accountability system. Students would receive a broader spectrum of instruction absent such a high-stakes accountability system, they claim.

SBOE debates validity of the TAAS

Ongoing debate at the State Board of Education illustrates the intense controversy in Texas concerning the TAAS test. Over the last year, several members of the board have questioned the test's validity. According to SBOE member Robert Offutt, the TAAS has driven classroom instruction, spawned a cottage industry of test preparation companies, dumbed-down the curriculum, and usurped the authority of local school districts. At a September 10 meeting, some board members also cited concerns with the number of exemptions to the test.

The debate erupted in January 1997, when then-board member Donna Ballard and current members Offutt, David Bradley, and Randy Stevenson called for replacing the TAAS with a norm-referenced test (NRT) that would judge only student achievement and progress. An NRT would grade students based on their performance relative to a sample of students. According to Ballard, the importance of TAAS in the school accountability system has led to unhealthy competition, pressure on students, and fraudulent behavior. An NRT, on the other hand, would allow schools to teach the curriculum instead of the TAAS test and would provide a statistically accurate accounting of how Texas students are learning compared to their peers nationwide. A statistically valid test also would indicate true improvements in mastery of skills rather than of test-taking procedures.

SBOE Chairman Jack Christie, Education Commissioner Mike Moses, and other supporters of the TAAS point out that the TAAS-based accountability system has received national accolades. The TAAS, they say, has significantly improved students' mastery of the Texas curriculum and is ensuring that all students have core academic capabilities in reading, writing and mathematics. The Legislature specifically required the adoption of a criterion-referenced test like the TAAS that can be tailored to specifically measure student achievements against the objectives of the Texas curriculum.

TAAS supporters say an NRT will not produce a more accurate accounting of learning. For one thing, such tests are not linked to any curriculum and thus they give no indication of a student's mastery of the Texas curriculum. For another, the "norms" of such test are often several years out of date and do not take into consideration the makeup of the Texas student population, which may be different from the norm sample in percentage of minorities or economically disadvantaged students. The "norm" constantly changes as a function of the students taking the exam, so that a student can actually improve academically and fare worse on the test because other students have improved at a faster pace. Such results may actually discourage a student from trying to progress.

The reliance on TAAS also has created a cottage industry of test preparation programs, critics note. While districts and schools seeking to boost their ratings in the accountability system buy most of the preparation materials, parents increasingly are sending their students to private courses or hiring TAAS tutors. Some observers have pointed out that the benefits accrue to schools and parents with greater financial resources, while students in poorer districts must rely on fewer state-supplied resources.

The high stakes placed on the test even promote fraud, critics charge. TEA must employ a full-time investigator to look into irregularities in test administration. During the 1997-98 school year, the agency conducted more than 200 investigations, finding several instances of cheating on individual and group levels. Recently, TEA lowered the accountability ratings of three Austin ISD elementary schools because some student identification numbers assigned to low-scoring tests allegedly had been altered, in effect invalidating the scores. TEA also is conducting an ongoing investigation in the Houston ISD because of a high incidence of erasures on tests.

Supporters of the TAAS say the incidences of fraud are minimal compared to the vast numbers of students taking the test every year. A few problems receive widespread attention precisely because they are so rare. TEA has appropriately directed adequate resources to ensuring that test scores reflect actual student skills, they contend.

The TAAS and the other objective measures that the state uses to assess school performance are necessary to provide statistically reliable data upon which to base policy decisions about the effectiveness and efficiency of local school programs. The accountability system must include rewards and sanctions in order to promote behavior that generates improvements, say supporters. The TAAS is one tool used to pinpoint deficiencies that need to be addressed and account for how well or poorly the billions of taxpayer dollars for public education are being spent.

The preparation provided in many school districts helps allay students' nervousness about such an important test. Students routinely enroll in test preparation courses before major tests like the SAT; prepping for the TAAS is a similar means of preparation. Teachers who use the additional preparation materials in the classroom say they help provide variety in teaching material. Not all students learn in the same way; different techniques help some students learn new concepts and reinforce those concepts for others.

Furthermore, say TAAS supporters, test preparation does stress the knowledge that will be tested. Every objective on the TAAS is a skill that Texas students should master. Just learning the techniques for answering multiple choice math questions will not help if the student lacks the basic knowledge required to solve the problem. Rising test scores on national tests confirm that Texas students are improving academically. In fact, supporters maintain, the uniform improvement across a range of different tests shows that students are learning more of the knowledge and skills tested, not simply how to take the TAAS. Other indicators of academic performance, such as the number of students taking advanced placement courses and the SAT test, are improving as well.

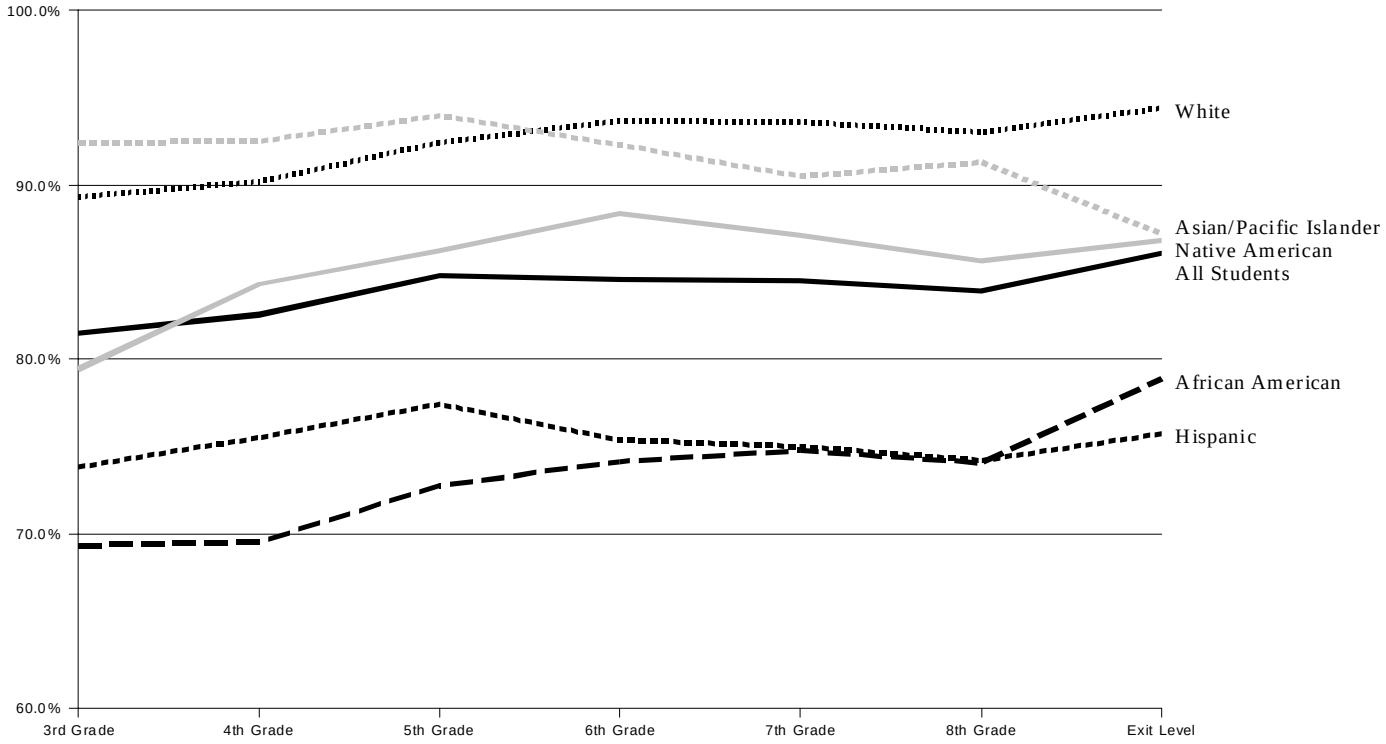
Uses of the test. The TAAS recently has been criticized for not testing the kinds of skills that students should have to succeed. From this perspective, the test seems focused predominantly on rote or lower-order skills that simply involve learning a particular procedure and applying that to slightly different problems. For example, once students learn how to add two numbers, they typically are able to add any other two numbers. Higher order skills that involve more reasoning and problem-solving abilities, say critics, are infrequently tested on the TAAS.

Supporters of the test respond that some higher order reasoning skills are included in the test, but only so much can be included in a multiple-choice exam. The writing tests are scored on objectives such as organization and effectiveness of the essay's central ideas. Other higher order skills must be tested in the classroom on a daily basis.

The exit-level TAAS has come under particular attack in this regard. Critics say the test — now designed for tenth grade students and covering reading, writing and math — should include science and social studies components, like the eight grade test, and be designed for high school seniors, not sophomores.

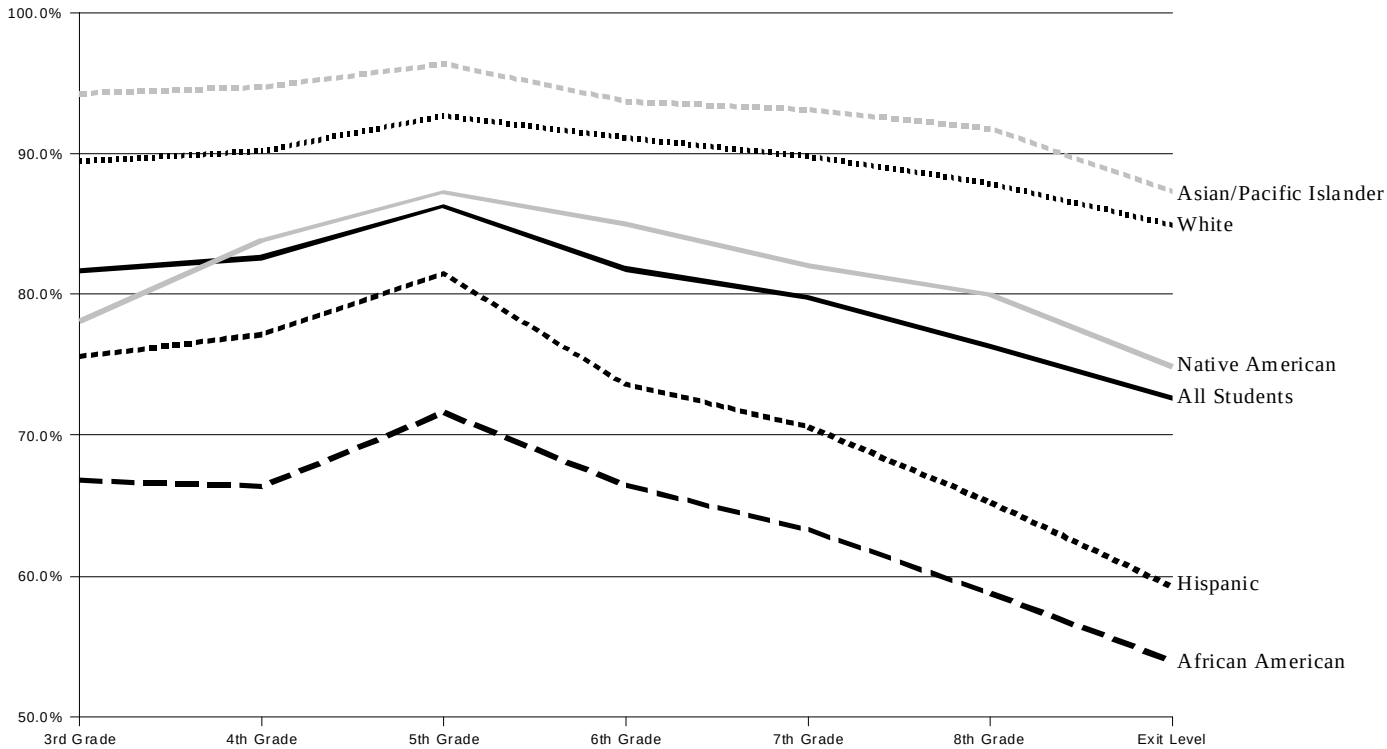
Other observers believe the TAAS test is already creating a barrier to graduation and may erect hurdles to advancement between grades as well. Hundreds of students each year are denied the ability to graduate based solely on their performance on the TAAS. Any push to make the test more difficult would simply hurt students more than it would help them, say these critics.

Others charge that using the TAAS test as the criterion for graduation is discriminatory and illegal (see p. 13).



Comparative Performance on TAAS — 1997 reading test pass rates (above)

Comparative Performance on TAAS — 1997 math test pass rates (below)



Source: Texas Education Agency

Minority performance

In general, minority students tend to perform more poorly on the TAAS than do Anglo students (see p. 12). Thus they are more at risk of not passing the exit-level test and being denied a high school diploma, an essential competent of continued success in employment or the pursuit of higher education. The Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund has filed suit to keep the TAAS test from being used to bar minority students from obtaining a high school diploma. The suit does not directly claim that the TAAS test itself is biased, but instead contends that the policy of denying students the right to graduate based on their test performance is wrong. The suit is pending in federal district court and could go to trial as early as March 1999.

The TAAS test was reviewed by the U.S. Department of Education over a two-year period after the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People alleged that the test was biased, not on the basis of any particular questions but on the disproportionate number of minority students failing the test. The review board did not determine whether the test itself was discriminatory, but found that the test procedures, from creation to field testing to scoring, had sufficient safeguards to prevent bias. The Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights plans to continue reviewing yearly TAAS results until 2000.

Supporters of the TAAS test and the TEA respond to charges of bias by pointing out that the extensive review process conducted for each test question is so thorough as to weed out any hints of racial, gender or ethnic bias. Test developers make a conscious effort to create questions that do not favor a particular group, they say.

Other observers trace gaps in minority performance not to the test but to the system of education itself. Under current methods of school finance, local property tax revenues play a significant role in how much money a school district can spend. Those in richer areas can usually spend more per student than those in poorer districts, where minority students are disproportionately concentrated. While the state has attempted to level financial resources among school districts, wide gaps remain in funding per student, with clear effects on the quality of education. Additionally, equalization of district wealth does not ensure that every student within a district will receive the same level of education. Particularly in large urban districts, students may receive significantly different educational resources depending on the school that they attend in the district.

Nevertheless, some studies have shown that the amount of money spent per student does not necessarily correlate to performance on standardized tests. One such study was conducted on the TEAMS test (predecessor to the TAAS) by the National Center for Policy Analysis. The 1989 study found no relationship between spending and test performance despite differences of as much as $1,500 in per pupil spending among districts.

Grade-level promotions across Texas would be influenced by TAAS results under a December 1997 proposal of Gov. Bush. The proposal would eliminate social promotions by requiring third, fifth, and eight graders to pass certain sections of the TAAS in order to advance to the next level. These include reading for third grade; reading and math for fifth grade; and reading, math and writing for eighth grade. Students failing those portions would have to attend summer school at state expense and re-take the test. The plan would begin with next year's kindergartners, who would face their first must-pass TAAS in 2003.

Estimates of the number of students who would need summer schooling vary widely. Thus, cost projections for the program range from $436 million for the first five years, according to Bush, to $13 billion over ten years, according to gubernatorial candidate Garry Mauro. While Mauro also has campaigned on a promise to end social promotion, he has stated that the TAAS should not be the gatekeeper. Mauro says he would give teachers final say on promoting students to the next grade level.

Supporters of the governor's proposal argue that social promotion only exacerbates a child's failure to master basic skills and can actually hurt other students, forced to sit through a teacher's remedial attempts to help those promoted beyond their capabilities. Students who continue to fall further and further behind because of social promotions either eventually drop out of school or inevitably fail the exit-level test for high school graduation, they say.

Basing promotion decisions on the TAAS would remove some of the subjective criteria that can influence such decisions, supporters contend. Although Texas law prohibits social promotion, teachers and school administrators may move unqualified students to the next grade level to avoid negative performance assessments or stave off parent anger. Using the TAAS to determine advancement would deflect some of the ire directed at the teacher and place the onus of promotion on the student as objectively measured by their test performance, say supporters.

The intent behind using the TAAS test to determine promotion is not to fail students, supporters say, but to ensure that all students who are promoted have the basic skills to succeed in the next grade level. Students lacking those skills would be identified and receive additional instruction over the summer in order to move on to the next grade level. Using the test early is not only appropriate but essential. Students who fail to learn basic reading and math skills are ill-prepared to move on later in their academic careers. Requiring TAAS testing as early as the third grade would allow for the earliest assessment of problems and quick correction in a summer program.

Opponents respond that using the TAAS as a sole basis for promotion would place even more emphasis on this

The Waco experiment

During the 1997-98 school year, the Waco ISD instituted a policy of using the TAAS test as a requirement for promotion. Under the policy, students in the third through eighth grades must pass all core classes, maintain a 90 percent attendance rate, and score a combined average of 70 on the reading and math portions of the test as measured by the Texas Learning Index. First and second grade students are subject to the same requirements, with the exception that they are tested using the Iowa Test of Basic Skills.

Of the 9,700 students subject to the policy, about 2,150 failed to meet the criteria by the end of the school year. All those students were required to attend and pass a six-week summer program in order to be promoted. More than half of the students – 1,166 – either did not pass the summer school course or did not attend it.

Parents have challenged the policy through the TEA administrative hearings process and in state district court, contending that the TAAS test was not meant to be used to determine student promotions. They maintain that using TAAS test scores to determine promotion violates rules keeping individual scores confidential because holding students back reveals whether they passed the TAAS test. The TEA has acknowledged that the TAAS was not designed specifically for promotion considerations. However, the agency says, nothing prohibits the test from being used to judge academic proficiency, the standard required for promotion. Waco school district officials also say their policy does not compromise the confidentiality of scores because students also must meet other criteria to be promoted.

The administrative law judge has recommended dismissal of the complaint on procedural grounds; Education Commissioner Mike Moses has until late October to decide to accept or overrule that decision. Following a hearing in Waco, Judge Alan Mayfield decided August 13 that evidence was lacking to warrant a temporary injunction.

The TAAS is used as a basis for promotion by only one other Texas school district, the Royal ISD in Waller County, whose 1,500-member student body is one-tenth the population of the Waco ISD. Over the course of three years, the Royal ISD has fine-tuned its promotion policy for second through eighth grades to consider the TAAS test in conjunction with grade-level placement test results on the Stanford Achievement Test, grades and teacher recommendations. The district, said Superintendent Tom Tasma, found that a single measurement instrument was inadequate for determining promotion. Tasma added that the greatest challenge was aligning teacher grading with test results: some teachers were awarding high grades for effort to students who had failed the standardized tests. Tasma said adjustments to grading and student and parent support for the policy have led to dramatic improvements in TAAS test performance. Retention rates, however, are still high, ranging upwards of 20 percent.

already overly weighted test and cause large numbers of students to attend summer school or be held back without good cause. The decision of whether or not to promote a student should be left solely to the discretion of the teacher and the local school administrator, who are best positioned to evaluate the full range of that student's proficiency and capabilities, rather than on an inflexible standard mandated by the state.

Using one test to determine promotion can have serious consequences, especially when failure on that test can override an entire year of good grades, say opponents. Subjecting students as young as eight years old to a must-pass TAAS is unfair because many may not appreciate the consequences of failing the test. Standardized testing has not been definitively proven to be an accurate means of judging the academic proficiency of younger students.

The TAAS also has serious shortcomings that make it unfit as a true indicator of student performance, say these critics. The test now covers only a portion of what is taught in the classroom; the Bush proposal would limit even further the subjects that would carry weight in promotion decisions. Also, since many believe that requiring students to pass the TAAS in order to graduate from high school discriminates against minority students, using the test as a requirement for promotion would likely result in additional charges of bias and discrimination.

Exceptions to the TAAS. Not every Texas public school student takes the TAAS test, and not all of those who do have their scores reported into the accountability system used for school and district ratings. Most students exempted from the TAAS test are special education students and limited English proficiency (LEP) students. The number of exceptions to TAAS testing and score reporting has prompted critics to claim that the test is not a true measure of learning in Texas. The 75th Legislature enacted HB 1800 by Hochberg to reduce the number of exemptions and eventually bring all students into the accountability system.

HB 1800 requires an alternative assessment to the TAAS test for special education students, to be administered no later than the 2000-01 school year. The scores of students who take the alternative test will be included in school accountability ratings beginning in the 2002 school year.

The national debate

In 1997, the U.S. House of Representatives voted against funding a proposal by President Clinton for a national testing program that would gauge reading skills of fourth graders and math skills of eighth graders. The federal government would have paid to develop and initially administer the exams; local school districts would have paid the costs of subsequent testing. States could have elected not to participate in the program.

Supporters claimed national testing could be used not only to assess state and regional variations in education but also as a basis for comparing American students to those in other countries. Detailed test scores could help teachers strengthen instructional plans by pinpointing areas where students had the greatest difficulties as well as indicating possible problems with programs or system-wide changes, such as new curricula. Critics argued that the authority of states to manage education within their boundaries would be usurped by this federal intrusion. States would have to teach all areas covered by the national test or risk looking bad in the standings, giving the federal government indirect control over curricula. Some also feared that the test could stigmatize minority children, who are less likely to attend high performing schools and whose scores on standardized tests tend to be lower.

The test most widely used today to judge national standards is the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP). That test, funded by the federal government, is given to a representative sample of fourth, eight and twelfth grade students. While the test covers a variety of subjects, it focuses on reading, mathematics, writing, science, history and geography. Numerous education professionals have criticized the NAEP because tests are given to only a sample of students instead of all students and results are only available on a state-by-state basis. Critics also charge that the assessment system for judging the proficiency of students is set too high. For example, the Third International Math and Science Survey showed performance of fourth graders in 1996 to be significantly above the international average; the NAEP, however, rated only 20 percent of fourth graders proficient or advanced in math.

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