

04/06/2007

## District official says he favors end-course exams

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**Everywhere you look in Texas education there are study guides, curriculum manuals, tutors and announcements for Texas' standardized test - the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills.**

There's also one little bill that could end it all.

Texas Sen. Florence Shapiro (R-Plano) authored Senate Bill 1031 that calls for the elimination of the TAKS test, replacing it with end-of-course examinations. Sen. Kyle Janek (R-Houston) co-sponsored the bill.

Rep. Rob Eissler (R-The Woodlands) authored a twin bill in the House, HB 2236, but it has been stuck pending in committee since March 20.

"End of course assessments, I believe, will provide a better way for students, for schools and for the state to measure and test our students," Shapiro said.

Shapiro's bill calls for the incoming freshman class of 2009 to be guinea pigs for end-of-course exams. Students would take tests on four core curricula areas - math, science, English and social studies - every year of high school. Those tests would then make up 15 percent of a student's final course grade each year.

As the bill reads currently, the tests would also apply to students in grades three through eight in math; grade three in reading; grades four through eight in reading and writing; grades five and eight in social studies and grades four and eight in science.

The bill also allows for students to retake end-of-course exams multiple times if he initially fails.

It also states the tests must be designed so they can be graded by computer-most likely making them multiple choice-and makes schools administer the PSAT to sophomores.

The Texas Classroom Teachers Association, the leading teacher association in Texas, said on its Web site it supports a smooth transition from the TAKS, and it is not alone in its support.

Darrell Brown, Katy ISD assistant superintendent for curriculum, staff development and accountability, said the TAKS test is a step above the state's former standardized test, the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills or TAAS, which it replaced in 2003.

"I think end of course exams are very appropriate for high school, as it will better ensure an alignment between what students are taught and what they are tested on in a given school year," Brown said. "I do believe that moving to end of course tests in high school is a better measure to hold students and educators accountable in a more effective manner."

While the debate is brewing across the state, especially in districts with poor test results, Katy ISD students generally don't have a hard time passing the test.

TAKS scores for Katy ISD students are among the highest in the state. At every grade level in every area tested, more than 90 percent of Katy ISD students passed. The passing rates are most impressive in writing (96 percent), social studies (95 percent) and reading and language arts (94 percent).

The district's schools also fared well individually. Ten of the district's 45 campuses are rated as "Exemplary," 25 are "Recognized" and seven are "Acceptable." The ratings are partially based on TAKS scores.

Brown also said that data from other tests, such as the SAT and ACT college entrance exams, along with College Board data, show that the district's curriculum is not based solely on the TAKS test.

That opinion varies amongst teachers, some of whom claim the TAKS creates pressure to teach to the test. Critics also claim it places a burden on students who do not test well.

Deepak Thadhani is the owner of Cram Crew, a Katy area network of 36 tutors - which Thadhani calls consultants - who have seen both sides of the TAKS equation. They make in-home visits to students in seven school districts and eight private schools across Greater Houston. His organization was even nominated for a West Houston Chamber of Commerce STAR award in 2006 for its work.

Thadhani, 33, started the business in 1994 and said that while TAKS keeps teachers and students accountable, some of his clients just can't adapt to the pressure of TAKS.

"On the bad side, I've had students we've worked with that get on with reputable schools, scored well on the SAT but failed the TAKS test. It's a good system if it's implemented properly."

Thadhani said he's noticed that clients attending private schools do better on other standardized tests "because the teachers are not so burdened by the TAKS curriculum."

The pressure is much higher for students in public school systems, he said, and more so when teachers don't teach to the TAKS curriculum.

"TAKS can work. It just means the curriculum needs to be altered a bit, but with not so much emphasis on (the test)," he said.

"Katy is very family oriented and education is very, very important. I think we're very fortunate that we have a very well-to-do school district."