

A BIG WIN FOR TEXAS STUDENTS



The Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills

In 2013, Texas' on-time high school graduation rate was 88%, an all-time high for the state. That same year, high numbers of 4th and 8th grade students demonstrated proficiency on the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR).

Unfortunately, there was another story to be told. On the Nation's Report Card, also known as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), less than half of those students demonstrated proficiency in reading and math. Students were graduating high school, but not with the skills that were most important for success. To address this disconnect, in 2008, the State Board of Education incorporated a set of college- and career-ready standards into the existing Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) standards.

Texas' Proficiency Performance on the 2013 NAEP and the 2013 STAAR

Assessment	4th Math	4th Reading	8th Math	8th Reading
STAAR	68%	72%	77%	84%
NAEP	41%	28%	38%	31%

According to a 2010 report by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, Texas' English language arts (ELA) standards were "clear, rigorous, and specific." By contrast, the state's math standards were cited as being somewhat minimal and lacking specificity. Although they adequately covered necessary content at the high school level, they lacked sufficient coverage of some content in the earlier grades, including arithmetic and geometry.

With the adoption of higher standards, Texas is one step closer to ensuring that students will have the opportunity to reach their full potential. By 2020, 60% of jobs in the state will require a postsecondary credential. However, only 31% of adults currently have such a credential, resulting in a 29% skills gap. Higher standards are essential to helping close this gap.



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Better Standards Deserve Better Assessments

The next phase of this work is to implement an improved test that is more meaningful to students, teachers, and parents in determining which skills a student has or has not yet mastered. The state needs a test that can measure the critical thinking and problem solving skills that our students need to succeed—and existing state tests only partially evaluate this level of learning. Improved assessments present an opportunity to move beyond tests that simply measure rote memorization skills to ones that mirror the higher standards and provide teachers with valuable information on how effectively they are teaching and students are learning.

Putting better assessments in place needs to be part of a larger system of accountability that supports student achievement and holds schools accountable for successfully teaching the content outlined in the standards. At the heart of accountability is the need to ensure that all students across Texas receive the same high-quality education. Meaningful tests serve as school-wide academic checkups that can identify struggling students and schools in need of extra support and interventions. In addition, improved assessments can identify high-achieving students who require support to maintain their academic engagement and provide them with the resources necessary to continue to excel.

In 2012, Texas implemented a new testing program, known as STAAR, to measure how well students understand and can apply the knowledge and skills outlined in the standards. The STAAR tests focus on measuring how well students master “readiness standards”—the expectations in each grade level that are the most essential for success and preparedness in the next grade or course. The assessments were intended to be more rigorous than previous assessments since they emphasized critical thinking

and problem solving skills. Students in grades 3–8 take these tests in math and reading every spring. Students are also tested in writing in grades 4 and 7, in science in grades 5 and 8, and in social studies in grade 8. High school students take STAAR end-of-course tests in Algebra 1, English 1 and 2, Biology, and U.S. History.

Despite the intent for the STAAR assessments to accurately measure the skills students need to be college and career ready, the earlier comparison of the 2013 STAAR and NAEP results illustrates that the assessments may only be partially fulfilling this promise. At every grade and subject, there were large discrepancies in student proficiency, with many more students achieving proficiency on the STAAR. The STAAR assessments were created with the intention that passing marks would be eventually be described in terms of levels along a path to college and career readiness. Since STAAR’s implementation, scores have remained flat, and some leaders have criticized the assessments for not being an accurate measure of what students are learning. The assessments also lack the provision of useful information about student progress that teachers can use to guide learning. In winter 2015, the state began accepting requests for proposals for a new vendor to develop the STAAR assessments. The state’s selection is expected to be announced in April 2015.

During this transition it is important to advocate for key criteria that will make the state assessments a strong measuring stick of how Texas students are doing on the path to college and careers at the state and national levels. Although the STAAR assessments have been revised to align to the state’s standards, they provide an inaccurate picture of college and career readiness and do not provide detailed feedback to teachers. As advocates, we need to ensure that the new assessments have the characteristics of a high-quality assessment that will serve as a useful tool to benefit students.

A High-Quality Assessment:

- Is developed with input from academic and testing experts, as well as teachers.
- Is field tested and reviewed before full implementation.
- Assesses a wide range of real-world skills using a variety of question formats.
- Provides detailed and timely feedback that acts as an academic checkup.
- Sends an early warning signal to teachers if students are not on track so that interventions can be put in place.
- Is comparable across states.

1. What is the difference between standards and curriculum?

- Standards are a set of guidelines for what students are expected to know and be able to do at specific points in their education. Standards provide the foundation for key components of the education system, including curricula, instructional materials, teacher training, and assessments.
- A curriculum is the course of study covering the standards. It is set by local school districts and includes the lesson plans, programs, and textbooks that teachers use to teach the content and skills outlined in the standards.

2. Do test scores impact schools and districts?

- School-wide test results will be used as one measure for school accountability. Just as we use tests as academic checkups for individual students, they are also checkups for our schools. We need to identify schools in need of extra support so that interventions can be put in place to ensure that all students across a district and in the state will receive a high-quality education.

3. How do test scores impact students?

- Students must meet the minimum score for “satisfactory academic performance” in all five end-of-course high school assessments (Algebra 1, English 1 and 2, Biology, and U.S. History) to earn a high school diploma.



The Texas College and Career Readiness Standards

- Are designed to represent a full range of knowledge and skills that students need to succeed in entry-level college courses.

Better Assessments

- Give an honest, objective report of how our students are doing.
- Ensure all students are held to the same expectations.
- Identify struggling students so they can get the help they need.
- Identify high-achieving students to provide them with the resources necessary to continue to excel.

PARCC

- A group of states working together to develop high-quality, computer-based assessments that measure college and career readiness in both math and English language arts.

4. What kind of data is collected? Is it released?

- Under the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Texas is required to collect data on school performance. Aggregate data collected includes student test scores and information such as attendance, support services, and academic growth. *The state will not release any personally identifiable student information.* Only individuals who interact with students on a daily basis, such as teachers and parents, are allowed to see student-specific information.
- Federal law protects the privacy of student information and education records through the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). The only information that will be publicly available will contain aggregate data for schools, districts, and subgroups.

5. Where can I go for more information?

- tea.texas.gov/student.assessment/staar/
- www.BusinessForCore.org

