

# A Review of the Texas Public School Accountability System Is it Working?

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By Jeff Judson

It is important to have a clear understanding of public test scores and the reality of what the testing data tell us.

With the lives of our children at stake, we must face the reality of what they are learning in our public schools, and how well our schools are really doing. Accurate data in this area is critical to pinpointing problems and developing solutions.

Defenders of the current public education accountability system tell us that TAAS (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills) test data *is* reality and accurately reflects students.

But a *dispassionate* review of the research shows that many well credentialed and reasonable people have a lot to say about this subject. The research raises many questions, many yet unanswered questions.

Some believe the TAAS test has brought about a miraculous healing of our Texas schools, others think it is more like a blood letting. It isn't what it is cracked up to be, doesn't do much good, and can be harmful in certain circumstances.

Still others believe it is akin to using radioactive radium in face cream – that it is used to create a mask of success but that it is really destructive in every instance.

We may not answer these questions today but we will certainly know the issues that we need to get to the bottom of to arrive at the answer.

## How High is the TAAS Standard?

Let's begin with the question of, how rigorous is the TAAS? It is a minimum proficiency test, not an achievement test. A perfect score means the student has met minimum expectations. In Texas, only 50 percent of a school's students must pass to be deemed an acceptable school.<sup>1</sup> *Passing* the TAAS is achieved at a 70 percent standard.<sup>2</sup> In other words, one is allowed to miss 30 percent of questions (ostensibly the hardest 30 percent). This is not so much of a problem with an achievement test. Those are the questions most people can't answer on the Scholastic Aptitude Test or the Iowa Test of Basic Skills.

But it is particularly problematic with a minimum proficiency test. By allowing students to miss 30 percent of the hardest questions, students are passing the test even though they are only able to answer questions that are one, two, or three years below grade level.

The Dallas Independent School District conducted a recent analysis indicating that passing the TAAS in reading in grades 3-8 was equivalent to the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile on the Iowa Test

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<sup>1</sup> 2000 Accountability Manual, Texas Education Agency, [www.tea.state.tx.us](http://www.tea.state.tx.us).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

of Basic Skills (ITBS).<sup>3</sup> The 50<sup>th</sup> percentile is considered the minimum grade level score on the ITBS.<sup>4</sup>

With the math portion of the TAAS in grades 3-5, passing was equivalent to the 40<sup>th</sup> percentile on the ITBS. Math grades 6-8 was equivalent to the 33<sup>rd</sup> percentile.<sup>5</sup>

The report also noted that *“it is possible to score well enough on the lower level objectives of the TAAS to pass mathematics without mastering the higher order objectives – the top 30 percent of the questions.”*<sup>6</sup>

The report goes on to say *“This last point is important since a school committed to inexorable drill of lower level objectives will probably be accredited via the TAAS.”*<sup>7</sup> It pointed out that schools are frequently targeting lower level skill TAAS objectives and failing to put enough emphasis on higher order TAAS objectives.

### **Which children benefit/lose under the TAAS regime?**

Schools are also frequently paying less attention to students who will safely pass the TAAS and are spending more time with certain other students to assure a minimum response level.

The Texas accountability system ranks schools as *low performing* if fewer than 50 percent of students pass the TAAS; *acceptable* if at least 50 percent pass, *recognized* if 80 percent pass; and *exemplary* if 90 percent pass.<sup>8</sup>

The Dallas report points out that many believe that an “exemplary” school denotes a more rigorous curriculum for all students. But it is really only more rigorous for low performing students in a school.<sup>9</sup>

Put this in the hopper as the first problem we should fix in our public schools.

### **Who Falls Outside the TAAS Accountability System?**

Students can currently take the TAAS test up to eight times to pass<sup>10</sup> and at a 70 percent performance standard. It is important to note that this does not mean that 70 percent of the questions were answered correctly since questions are scored differently.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, not all students are tested. The number of students not tested in Texas was up 20 percent from 1998. 10.7 percent of public school students were not tested last year (1999).<sup>12</sup> 13.4 percent of African American students were

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<sup>3</sup> “TEA Position on Using TAAS Data and TAAS-Norm Referenced Comparisons,” Dallas Public School Education Committee Page 1.

<sup>4</sup> “TEA Position on Using TAAS Data and TAAS-Norm Referenced Comparisons,” Dallas Public School Education Committee Page 4.

<sup>5</sup> “TEA Position on Using TAAS Data and TAAS-Norm Referenced Comparisons,” Dallas Public School Education Committee Page 1.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. page 6.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. page 6.

<sup>8</sup> 2000 Accountability Manual, Texas Education Agency, [www.tea.state.tx.us](http://www.tea.state.tx.us).

<sup>9</sup> TEA Position on Using TAAS Data and TAAS-Norm Referenced Comparisons,” Dallas Public School Education Committee page 7.

<sup>10</sup> Walt Haney, *The Myth of the Texas Miracle in Education: Problems with TAAS*, [www.epaa.asu.edu](http://www.epaa.asu.edu), Page 5.

<sup>11</sup> *A Guide to the Texas Learning Index*, Texas Education Agency, [www.tea.state.tx.us](http://www.tea.state.tx.us)

<sup>12</sup> 1999 TAAS Participation Profile for All Students, Texas Education Agency, [www.tea.state.tx.us](http://www.tea.state.tx.us).

not tested. 14.6 percent of Hispanic students were not tested. 15.9 percent of economically disadvantaged students were not tested. 6.6 percent of white students were not tested.<sup>13</sup>

Why? Because schools labeled these children as special education, or limited English proficient (LEP), they were absent, or for other reasons comprising 10 percent of the total.<sup>14</sup> 222,735 students fell outside the Texas accountability system, ironically the students who most need accountability from the system.<sup>15</sup> Special ed enrollment in Texas has increased by 32 percent since 1991, mostly through increases in minority students.<sup>16</sup>

But even if a student takes the test, their score does not necessarily count towards a school's accountability rating. In 1997 and 1998, only 76 percent of the TAAS scores in schools counted toward their accountability ratings.<sup>17</sup> In the Dallas ISD, only 40 percent counted in 1997.<sup>18</sup>

### **Another TAAS Avoidance Mechanism – The GED -**

Aside from the exemptions and other loopholes, there is another – the General Equivalency Diploma or GED. The GED is a national normed achievement test. It is considerably more rigorous

than the TAAS. But Texas chooses the minimum passing standard a state can choose – a 40 on a 20 to 80 scale.<sup>19</sup>

What this means is that, if one cannot pass the exit level TAAS, the GED will provide that person a diploma at the low standard Texas requires. Indeed, according to Professor Walt Haney of Boston College, Texas has one of the highest rates of completion of GED in the country.<sup>20</sup>

### **Further Evidence of Low TAAS Standards**

Low standards of the TAAS are supported by further independent evidence. Only one percent of Texas students scored at the “advanced” level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress in 1998, only 31 percent at or above proficient.<sup>21</sup>

Further evidence lies in the scores on the Texas Assessment of Scholastic Progress (TASP) test, the test many students must take when entering Texas colleges and universities. In the 1998-99 school year, 50.7 percent of entering freshmen failed the TASP test.<sup>22</sup> These are people ostensibly just out of high school who are not capable of doing college level work. When one looks at the TASP failure rate in our community colleges, one will find failure among more than 90 percent of entering students.

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<sup>13</sup> *Academic Excellence Indicator System Report*, Texas Education Agency, [www.tea.state.tx.us](http://www.tea.state.tx.us).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> *Snapshot 1999*, Texas Education Agency, [www.tea.state.tx.us](http://www.tea.state.tx.us).

<sup>16</sup> “Some Texas school district milking social funding, study says” Fort Worth Star-Telegram. Michele Menedez. June 26, 1999.

<sup>17</sup> *1997 & 1998 TAAS Participation Profile For All Students*, Texas Education Agency, [www.tea.state.tx.us](http://www.tea.state.tx.us).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>19</sup> *Annual GED Statistical Report*, GED Testing Services, Table 12.

<sup>20</sup> *Fewer Texans are Finishing High School*, San Antonio Express-News, November 16, 2000.

<sup>21</sup> *The Nations Report Card*, National Assessment of Educational Progress page 111.

<sup>22</sup> *Texas Academic Skills Program Summary of TASP/Alternative Test Results Academic Year 1998-1999*, Table B. Center for College Readiness, Division of Educational Partnerships, Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board..

Given that our tax dollars pay to remediate these failing students, we are, in essence, re-teaching high school classes in our colleges and paying for these high school classes at least twice with our tax dollars. Even worse is the evidence indicating that a fair number of these students have graduated from high school with an A or B grade point average.<sup>23</sup>

Apparently our University Chancellors concur with this assessment of preparedness for college. Last February (1999) in testimony before the Senate Finance Committee, the Chancellors of six university systems (University of Texas system, Texas A&M system, Texas Tech system, University of Houston system, North Texas system, and the State University System) pointed out that only 6.3 percent of Texas Hispanic 18 year olds were ready to undertake college level course work.<sup>24</sup>

### **Dropouts**

One also has to consider dropouts and their effect on TAAS performance figures. The Texas Education Agency reports a longitudinal dropout rate of 14.7 percent (class of '98)<sup>25</sup>. However, other sources report dropout rates much higher. The National Center for Education Statistics at the United States Department of Education reports that Texas had a 21 percent non-completion rate in the period 1997-99. 37 percent of Hispanics did not complete high school.<sup>26</sup>

In 1998 the State Auditor reported that the actual dropout rate was more than double the official 1994 rate reported by the TEA.<sup>27</sup>

The Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) has documented a 42 percent dropout or *attrition* rate in Texas public schools. The rate is 49 percent among African Americans, 54 percent among Hispanics.<sup>28</sup>

This is more than double what the TEA admits to. The IDRA also reports that the number of dropouts nearly doubled between the 1985-1986 school year and the 1997-1998 school year.<sup>29</sup>

The bottom line is Texas is growing in population, our school systems are growing in population, yet, essentially half of our 12<sup>th</sup> graders are missing when compared to their enrollment numbers four years earlier.

### **Conclusion & Recommendations**

Now if half of our lowest performing students are dropping out of school, and another group is exempted from taking the TAAS because they are LEP and Special Ed, and another group of LEP and Special Ed test scores are not counted toward the accountability rating, then what are our TAAS test scores really telling us?

It is hard to tell.

It is, however, clear from the above evidence that our measuring devices are far from perfect

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<sup>23</sup> *Paying for Public High School Twice : Remediation in Texas Public Higher Education Executive Summary*, Texas Public Policy Foundation, [www.tppf.org/twice/texascsu.htm](http://www.tppf.org/twice/texascsu.htm).

<sup>24</sup> *Texas University Chancellors Reveal Shocking Failure of K-12 Education*, Texas Justice Foundation.

<sup>25</sup> *Pocket Edition*, Texas Education Agency, [www.tea.state.tx.us](http://www.tea.state.tx.us).

<sup>26</sup> Dropout Rates in the United States: 1999, National Center for Education Statistics, [www.nces.ed.gov](http://www.nces.ed.gov).

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<sup>27</sup> *A Combined Report on the Texas Education Agency*, State Auditors Office, [www.sao.state.tx.us](http://www.sao.state.tx.us).

<sup>28</sup> *Missing: Texas Youth - Dropout and Attrition in Texas Public High Schools*, Intercultural Development Research Association page 13, [www.idra.org](http://www.idra.org).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* page 1.

and are being manipulated for political purposes at the expense of our children.

In conclusion, there are ways to fix this problem.

We should measure success in our schools using national norm referenced *achievement* tests and a state criterion referenced *achievement* test. We must measure the full range of achievement among our students, not just minimum proficiencies. We must also begin measuring the "delta," the value added by each school with each child each year. The current system leads to gimmicks, fraud, and deceit and leaves the lowest performing students out of the accountability system.

By measuring the amount of knowledge the school imparts to a child over a given year in relation to the student's entering achievement level, one can assess the job being carried out by

the school without mistreating our low performing students as some TAAS critics allege is taking place. In short, we should measure accomplishment against *expected* accomplishment.

Finally, we should remove the *central* regulatory sanctions and replace them with decentralized and expanded regulatory sanctions enforced by parents. Let millions of Texas parents regulate the education of their children. We must let parents choose other options for their children using the tax dollars designated for their children. Rather than trying to create the perfect centrally regulated system, which historically always fails in all instances of business and government regulation, we should incentivize schools to strive for excellence in a market of concerned parents.

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