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Mirror Index
Page 1 News
Youth / Sports
Place Ads
Opinions
Communities
Obituaries
Weather
Classifieds
Subscribe
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Contact Us
Home
Archived News
Search

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Improving the quality of Texas public education

By **BROOKE DOLLENS TERRY**

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For too many Texas students, a high school diploma signifies little more than a certificate of attendance.

While today's high-tech, global economy demands students to have a rigorous education and a high level of skills to succeed, too many students are graduating without the basic skills needed in the "real world." Part of the problem is a poor assessment for measuring subject-area mastery and student progress in high school. With billions of dollars spent each year on Texas schools, students and taxpayers deserve better.

End-of-course exams can move us in the right direction.

Inflated grades, inflated course titles, and lack of rigor in the high school curriculum fail to prepare Texas students for success in college or a career. Regrettably, students in disadvantaged and low socio-economic areas tend to suffer the most.

An analysis by the U.S. Department of Education found that students in poor schools typically receive A's for work that would earn a C- in wealthy schools. Imagine the surprise and frustration when these "honor" students get to college and are placed in remedial reading and math classes!

Some teachers admit they are pressured to inflate grades. According to an American Federation of Teachers' survey, 30 percent of American teachers admitted to feeling pressure to give higher grades than deserved and to decrease the difficulty and amount of work assigned.

Grade inflation does not benefit the student; instead, it gives students an inaccurate representation of their skills and abilities and sets them up for future frustration.

As schools enroll more students in advanced courses, course inflation is also becoming a problem. According to the National Center for Educational Accountability, "high percentages of students receiving credit for advanced courses are not learning the content implied by their course titles." Their research found a startling 60 percent of low-income Texas students who received course credit for Geometry and Algebra II failed the Texas exit exam covering Algebra I and Geometry.

Texas must ensure that students are given an accurate assessment of their comprehension and skill levels in each subject area as they progress through school to immediately identify where and when improvement is needed. The current testing system, which assesses students in the spring of 11th grade with a multi-subject cumulative test, does not provide parents and students with timely information to identify and remediate problems.

Texas should replace the TAKS test with a series of end-of-course exams in math, science, social studies and language arts in each grade of high

school. End-of-course exams are statewide finals given at the end of each course to provide an in-depth measure of comprehension and skill attainment. As a result, educators can evaluate subject mastery, determine if the student is ready for the next level of the course, and more accurately measure student progress. Most importantly, end-of-course exams can diagnose weaknesses in academic curriculum and teaching before it is too late.

Research shows that end-of-course exams increase academic standards and student achievement. Researcher John Bishop found that students in both New York and North Carolina, states with end-of-course exams, are about half of a grade level ahead in math and science and almost two-thirds of a grade level ahead in reading among comparable students without such exams. New York's examinations are so well regarded for their rigor that the City University of New York uses their English end-of-course exam in place of their own placement test.

Moving to end-of-course exams would put Texas in good company. There are as many as 15 states across the country and several countries in Europe and East Asia using end-of-course exams to evaluate student learning.

Ultimately, the rigor of Texas' academic curriculum is only as tough as the tests used to measure performance. If Texas lawmakers want to improve the quality of a high school education and ensure that all Texas students are taught a rigorous curriculum and have an incentive to learn, Texas should adopt end-of-course exams to better assess student learning and achievement.

Brooke Dollens Terry is an education policy analyst at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a non-profit research institute based in Austin.
bterry@texaspolicy.com.

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