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Educators go back to the drawing board on tests

End-of-course tests to replace TAKS in high school



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The Texas public school system knows how to test.

It has field tests, diagnostic tests, TAKS and reading proficiency tests, tests you take when entering kindergarten and tests you must pass to graduate from high school. Tests that were retired five years ago still appear from time to time, and this state even gave America the test-happy No Child Left Behind Act.

Once again, the Texas Education Agency is cranking up its test-producing machine. The Legislature has ordered educators to stop giving the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills in high school and replace it with 12 end-of-course exams. They'll be similar to final exams in a class, but they will come from the state instead of local teachers.

Students who will enter ninth grade in fall 2011 will be the first to take the new tests, and four years would seem more than enough time to make the switch. Yet the writing of the new tests has already begun. It will involve thousands of educators over the next few years and will cost the state \$168 million.

"Although it's an enormous amount of work and it's a three-year process for developing each test, it's a well-known process," said Criss Cloudt, associate commissioner at the Texas Education Agency. "We have a lot of experience and a lot of history developing tests."

End-of-course exams will differ from the TAKS in two significant ways. For one, students must average a passing score on the 12 tests to graduate instead of having to pass each major subject area. In other words, there's more room for a bad day, but only one or two.

Second, students will take the tests right after the material is taught to them, avoiding the lags between learning and testing that can now last a couple of years or more.

"What we're basically doing is breaking the TAKS test up into pieces and spreading it out over the high school career," said state House Public Education Committee Chairman Rob Eissler, R-The Woodlands. "If you're going to be tested on algebra I, the best time to be tested is right after you take it."

Constant change

The machine in Texas never really slows down. The state spends \$80 million per year to develop, administer and report the results of its tests.

Every year, the state asks every superintendent to nominate teachers and administrators to review and help develop test questions. That process continues even after exams are launched, because the state is always coming up with new questions and versions.

In 2005, two years after the launch of the TAKS, the state convened 141 test committees.

Some committees will review questions, and some will talk about what passing should mean; different committees are needed for tests written in English and Spanish, for instance, or for those given in special education classes.

The educator committees start by looking at the statewide curriculum in each subject and grade, and then establish a series of testing objectives. After that, educators from across the state who aren't on the committees can weigh in.

Committees will also talk early on about what format to use, such as multiple choice or open-ended. State law provides 10 days to grade nonwriting tests and return the scores to school districts, which is why multiple-choice questions are common.

From there, the private company that produces state tests, Pearson Education Inc., will develop as many as 500 possible questions for each test.

Teacher committees will discuss the questions, sometimes rewriting them or tweaking them, and leave a bank of about 300 that could be used. The questions go out on practice tests taken by Texas students, sometimes as standalone tests and sometimes embedded in existing tests. The practice tests trigger further review by teachers and statistical analysts. Officials at the agency ultimately choose about 60 questions for each exam.

"The teachers are fairly consistent in their view of the items," said Gloria Zyskowski, the education agency's director of student assessment. "But there have been times when we've had to take votes, and we've eliminated items if the teachers either tell us that they are not covered in the curriculum or, in some cases, they would not have been covered at the time at which we would have administered the test."

The state reviews exit-level tests, meaning the tests that students must pass to graduate high school, with advocacy groups such as the NAACP and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund to make sure they are free of racial, ethnic or other biases. College faculty also will check the accuracy of each test given in high school.

Identifying problems

Because there are so many committees to follow, keeping track of the test-development process can be tough for anyone who is not paid to do so.

"I'm very concerned about the rigor of the test, because if the test is really easy, we haven't moved forward," said Brooke Terry, who is paid to follow the process at the small-government Texas Public Policy Foundation. Terry said she'll monitor the test-writing process to push for an essay section on history exams, for example.

The Legislature has told the education agency to write tests that can be given on computers, although schools will not be required to do so immediately. And here's another wrinkle: Usually, educators working on the test with help from experts and outsiders such as businesspeople and parents discuss how many right answers should be required to pass. That decision then goes to the State Board of Education.

But the new law defines a passing score as 70 percent of questions answered correctly. This will force test developers to keep the difficulty of the test the same from year to year, whereas today's TAKS can change in difficulty because the score required to pass can change.

When the TAKS was developed, the state board decided to make the test easier to pass in the first couple of years than it is today by requiring fewer correct questions for a passing score. It's unclear, Cloudt said, whether the law calling for end-of-course tests gives them that flexibility. That question and others could be addressed in the 2009 legislative session, before schools start giving the new test.

As with the TAKS, the end-of-course tests probably will be used to give schools ratings such as "exemplary," "recognized" or "academically unacceptable." But because the current ratings system is tied to the TAKS, the Legislature has called for a new system before the new tests are given.

"I would like to make it focused to be more helpful than punitive," Eissler said, meaning he hopes the accountability system will help highlight schools' problem areas before the state hits them with a lower rating.

The new tests won't all be written from scratch. Gov. Rick Perry previously ordered the state to start developing end-of-course exams in six subjects, though most of those tests have not reached the final stages.

As for students who are or will be in grades three through eight, don't get too excited. You'll still be taking the TAKS for the foreseeable future. But this is Texas, after all, so the foreseeable future may not last too long.

The new exams

Starting with students who enter the ninth grade in 2011, high schoolers will be required to average passing scores on end-of-course tests in 12 subjects:

English I, II and III

algebra I, algebra II and geometry

biology, chemistry and physics

world geography, world history and U.S. history

- The score on the end-of-course test will count for 15 percent of the student's class grade.
- Students who score below 60 must retake the end-of-course test but do not have to retake the course.
- Students could count scores on tests that are deemed just as difficult as end-of-course tests, such as the SAT or AP tests.

Source: Texas Education Agency

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