

# **AIISD outlines end-of-course exam policies**

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The beginning of state mandated end-of-course exams is near, but some educators fear the state's rules about how the tests will be used could frustrate parents and cause dropout rates to jump.

“I think it is going to drive some (parents) to flee public education and say, ‘I’m just not going to mess with this,’” Amarillo Independent School District board of trustees President Anette Carlisle said.

Students will start taking new State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness tests in March that will be tied to their course grades, as well as their graduation requirements, Amarillo ISD Superintendent Rod Schroder said. The new tests are designed to be more challenging for students than the current Texas Assessments of Knowledge and Skills, he said.

Carlisle said she thinks the new system will drive more students to drop out because they will think it is too hard to recover if they fall behind in their courses and can't pass end-of-course exams.

Texas Education Agency spokeswoman DeEtta Culbertson said state law requires the end-of-course exams to count for 15 percent of a student's final grade in a course, whereas students previously had to pass TAKS tests to graduate, but they didn't affect a student's grade in a particular course.

However, the law left the decision of how to use that 15 percent to each district, she said.

Carlisle, who is running for the District 15 seat on the State Board of Education, said nearly every educator she has spoken with throughout the state is frustrated with how the state requires districts to use the test.

Schroder recently outlined Amarillo ISD's proposed policies about STAAR end-of-course exams for the board of trustees. Those policies address issues such as how the district will calculate grades and how test retakes will affect grades.

“In general, I think the board is frustrated with the complexity that has been created by this law,” Schroder said.

The board will approve the policies at a future meeting, he said.

Carlisle said she believes the new system will hurt students regardless of what the board approves because it is based on law that focuses on testing more than the skills students actually learn.

“I think it’s going to take a system that’s overly emphasizing testing and make it emphasize it even more, to the detriment of our students and to the detriment of our workforce and the future of our economy,” Carlisle said.

Schroder said a student’s grade from the teacher will be added with their score on the end-of-course exams to calculate the student’s overall course grade.

For Amarillo ISD, the first and second semester grades will be added together and divided by two. He said 85 percent of that number will be added to 15 percent of the end-of-course exam grade.

That final number determines whether or not the student earned credit for the course, Schroder said. The student would pass the course and earn credit if his or her final grade is 70 percent or above, he said. That will also be the score that counts toward grade-point average and class rank, he said.

Schroder also said the district will no longer award half credits for courses that include end-of-course exams. All other courses will remain the same, he said.

Students will be allowed to retake end-of-course exams as many times as they want, but their score will not count toward their final grade after their original attempt unless their final grade is below a 70, Schroder said.

If students don’t pass a course, they have the option to either retake the course or retake the exam, he said.

Students’ final scores that count toward grade-point average and class rank will be frozen once they attain a passing grade in a course, he said.

Schroder also said students could have a passing grade-point average, but their scores on the end-of-course exams might be too low to graduate. Students must also have a cumulative score on all end-of-course exams of at least a 70 percent to graduate, he said.

“Not only do they have to pass the course with a high enough grade, but they also have to achieve a cumulative score on these three end-of-course tests in each of the core subjects to graduate,” he said. They might have the GPA, but if they don’t have that cumulative total, they won’t graduate. So it’s really double jeopardy for the student.”

Students also could retake a test if they don’t score high enough to qualify for a particular graduation plan such as the distinguished achievement program, he said.

Culbertson said the Texas Education Agency has received many questions from districts ranging from whether or not students will be allowed to use dictionaries to how a student who moves from another state fits into the end-of-course exam situation.

Students will be able to use dictionaries, and out-of-state students will not be required to take the exams for classes they have previously completed at another school, according to the agency.

Schroder said he thinks students and parents eventually will understand how the new process works, but it will be confusing at first.

“I do think that parents are going to say, ‘Does it have to be this complicated?’” Schroder said.

Carlisle said she believes the existing system needed to be changed, but the state has continued to move toward a system where everything is based on a test.

“This mandate to live or die by one test really drives the system in the wrong direction,” she said. “It doesn’t create the problem solvers, the innovative thinkers, the future leaders our state so desperately needs. It creates test-takers.”