

Few Texas students will fail new STAAR test this year

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AUSTIN — Even with all the uncertainty surrounding the tough new testing program that debuts in Texas schools this spring, one firm prediction can be made — only a small fraction of students will actually fail the first year.

Because of a delay in setting passing standards for the test, the only grade where students can fail the new State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness is the ninth grade — and those students will have multiple opportunities to retake the exams.

Students in elementary and middle schools will take the STAAR, but there will be no passing standard in effect until 2013. No students will be required to pass the state exam to be promoted — a requirement in grades five and eight last year.

In high school, only ninth-graders are subject to the STAAR's end-of-course exams. Students in other grades will continue to take the old and easier TAKS test, which is being phased out.

Even the annual performance ratings for school campuses and districts — based mostly on test scores — have been shelved this year while the STAAR-based system is put in place.

So where is the high-stakes testing that school superintendents complained about when they urged the Legislature to delay the STAAR?

House Public Education Chairman Rob Eissler, R-The Woodlands, who heard complaints about the test during a public hearing of his committee last month, said he is not surprised by trepidation over the STAAR even though its impact will be softened this year.

“It’s really a fear of the unknown,” said Eissler, who authored the legislation creating the new system. “It happens every time a new test is put in place. Most people don’t like change when they have a lot invested in the current system. They’re worried that the new system will be worse than the devil they know.”

In the loop

Eissler said school districts have been kept in the loop about what the new testing program will look like.

“But whatever they’re told about passing scores and alignment of standards in the new test, they’re still skeptical. And that skepticism has kind of rippled through the school community,” he said.

Amy Beneski of the Texas Association of School Administrators said superintendents and principals don’t object to the new testing program, but they have problems with the way the test is being used and some of its requirements. Among the concerns is that the end-of-course tests count as 15 percent of final class grades.

“Their concern is about the overemphasis on testing and how the tests are being used, the perception that everything revolves around the test,” she said. “That’s what students, teachers, parents and principals are worried about.”

Even though the main effect this year is on ninth-graders, the testing program ultimately will have a massive impact on all students as the requirements are phased in, she said.

“At some point, we need to get away from the idea that the test is the end-all and be-all for what is going on in our schools,” she said.

State Education Commissioner Robert Scott won’t set passing standards for most students on the STAAR until December, after the initial test results from this year have been analyzed. Cutoff scores will then be determined for three levels of academic performance: Unsatisfactory (Level I), Satisfactory (Level II) and Accomplished (Level III).

Passing standards for the end-of-course exams for ninth-graders will be decided in March, according to recent advisories from the Texas Education Agency.

“Students and parents won’t get the usual report on their test results this year because there are no passing standards for the test,” TEA spokeswoman Debbie Ratcliffe said Tuesday. “School districts will get information on the results so they can see the skill areas where their students are succeeding and where they might need help.”

Raw numbers

That will generally entail how many questions students get right in each area, such as on the sixth-grade reading test, where they will be asked to read short passages and then answer several multiple choice questions about the content. The results will be in raw numbers and not indicate passing scores.

“It would be more confusing than helpful to parents if they were given raw scores on the STAAR,” Ratcliffe said. “There might be a tendency to try to calculate a passing grade when there is none.”

The last time the state introduced a new achievement test, the [Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills](#) in 2003, the State Board of Education adopted passing standards for the first administration — although school performance ratings were delayed for a year.

This time, Scott instead has responsibility for setting the passing standards, based on recommendations from various advisory panels. His decision was to set the standards for elementary and middle school students well after the first round of testing.

Ratcliffe said the difference between this time and 2003 is that there are more requirements in the law to make sure the exams are valid, rigorous enough and aligned with [college readiness](#) standards that are being installed in the upper grades.

Eissler said he has no problem with the commissioner waiting until the end of the year to set passing standards for elementary and middle school students.

“At some point, you have to trust that [Scott and the TEA] know what they’re doing to implement this kind of change,” he said.

Passing standards must be set for the end-of-course exams this spring because under state law, the scores must count as 15 percent of the final grades in the subjects tested. Ninth-graders are the first group of students subject to the end-of-course exams, which will test high school students in three courses in each of four subject areas: English, math, science and social studies.

Students must get a passing average in each of the four subject areas to receive a high school diploma.

“We have to set those first and then stairstep down to grade three to make sure all STAAR tests are aligned so that kids are gradually prepared for college once they finish high school,” Ratcliffe said.

The key end-of-course exams demonstrating college readiness are the Algebra II and English III tests. All students in grades three through eight will be tested annually in English and math — with other subjects tested periodically.

The first STAAR exams will be administered in late March and then continue in April for elementary and middle school students. The end-of-course exams for ninth-graders will be given in May.

AT A GLANCE

Key differences between TAKS and STAAR:

Test questions and performance standards will be more rigorous on the STAAR.

The total number of test items for the STAAR has been increased for most grades, subjects and courses.

A four-hour time limit has been established for STAAR tests; the TAKS was untimed.

Most STAAR math and science tests will have an increased number of open-ended questions that require students to answer independently without being influenced by multiple choice answers.

STAAR reading tests will give greater emphasis to critical analysis rather than literal understanding.

STAAR assessments in math and reading will be linked from grade to grade as well as to college readiness standards that are measured on Algebra II and English III tests in high school.

High school assessments are changing from grade-based to course-based tests. In all, 12 end-of-course exams will be given.

End-of-course tests for English I, II and III in high school will be administered over two days, with writing on the first day and reading on the second. Writing tests in grades 4 and 7 also will be extended to two days.

STAAR TEST: WHO TAKES WHAT

In grades 3-8: all students will be tested in math and reading. Students also will be tested in writing in grades 4 and 7, science in grades 5 and 8, and social studies in grade 8.

In high school: End-of-course tests will be given in English I, II and III, Algebra I and II, geometry, biology, chemistry, physics, U.S. history, world history and geography.

SOURCE: Texas Education Agency