

In Texas, a Backlash Against Student Testing

by [Morgan Smith](#)

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When Christopher Chamness entered the third grade last year, he began to get stomach aches before school. His mother, Edy, said the fire had gone out of a child who she said had previously gone joyfully to his classes.

One day, when he was bored in class, Christopher broke a pencil eraser off in his ear canal. It was the tipping point for Chamness, a former teacher, and she asked to observe his Austin elementary school classroom. What she saw was a “work sheet distribution center” aimed at preparing students for the yearly assessments that they begin in third grade and that school districts depend upon for their accountability ratings.

Now, with Christopher in fourth grade, Chamness will take a more drastic step: She intends to pull him out of standardized testing altogether this spring, in protest of the system that she said had sapped her son’s love of learning.

Chamness’s approach is more radical than what most parents are willing to do — and district officials are quick to point out that school policy does not permit students to miss test days for any reason. But it is part of a budding backlash against standardized testing in the state that spawned [No Child Left Behind](#) and its assessment-driven accountability requirements.

It is a precarious time for Texas school districts. Faced with roughly \$5.4 billion less in state financing, districts this year will administer new, more rigorous state exams called the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness, or STAAR. And for the first time in high school, the assessments are linked to graduation requirements and final grades.

There is anxiety among school leaders, educators and parents about meeting the increased standards with fewer resources. In the Panhandle, the Hereford Independent School District superintendent may withhold her district’s test scores from the state. An Austin parent is considering a lawsuit to stop the rollout of the tests. Some legislators are mulling how to postpone some of the tests’ consequences for students.

In a high-level turnaround, [Robert Scott](#), the commissioner of the Texas Education Agency, said Tuesday that student testing in the state had become a “perversion of its original intent” and that he looked forward to “reeling it back” in the future. Earning a standing ovation from an annual gathering of 4,000 educators that has given him chillier receptions in the past, Scott called for an accountability process that measured “every other day of a school’s life besides testing day.” ([Here](#) is a full version of his remarks.)

Many viewed the speech as a reversal for Scott, who has rarely spoken publicly against the role of standardized testing in public schools. He declined to talk about his remarks for this article.

“I think he sees that we are at a cusp of philosophical changes in the Legislature and across the state over what we’ve been doing the past few years with accountability and whether there’s been any worthwhile gain from all the testing we’ve done,” said Joe Smith, a former superintendent and an education community fixture who runs the website TexasISD.com, a clearinghouse of school-related news.

Kelli Moulton, the superintendent of Hereford ISD, is considering an outright rebellion. She said that she was still exploring the repercussions of refusing to send her students’ test scores to the agency but that she was encouraged by Scott’s remarks.

“We talk a lot, but nobody’s stepped off to do anything really bold,” she said. “Clearly now as a state, at least with a leader who is willing to say testing has gone too far, when do we put a stick in a wheel and say, that’s enough, stop? Because we are going to spend the next 10 years trying to slow that wheel down, and we’ve got 10 years of kids that are suffering.”

It also may be a sign of shifting political tides. State Sen. [Florence Shapiro](#), the powerful chairwoman of the Senate Education Committee and a primary architect of the legislation that enacted the new assessment system, announced in September that she would not seek re-election. Shapiro, R-Plano, has been a staunch opponent of any retreat from the standards established by the 2009 bill. But her House colleagues, particularly [Rob Eissler](#), the chairman of the Public Education Committee, have been more receptive to changing course.

During the last legislative session, Eissler, R-The Woodlands, attempted to ease some of the more stringent requirements of the new assessments, including how many exams high school students had to pass in order to graduate and how the tests had to count for 15 percent of their final grades. Eissler recently held a hearing on how school districts were fulfilling the requirements, and many parents and educators in attendance asked for a delay in the effects on students.

“I am very concerned about performance on the test. My expectation is for most students this would have the effect of lowering their grade,” said Dineen Majcher, a high school parent who has called on lawmakers and the education agency to find a way to waive the 15 percent rule for the first year of testing.

School districts have been given a one-year reprieve from having the test scores factor into their accountability ratings, and Majcher said it was “completely unreasonable and inappropriate” that the same was not happening for students and their grades. Majcher, an Austin lawyer, said she and other parents were considering a lawsuit, but she declined to elaborate on its grounds because she still hoped for a resolution outside the courtroom.

That may not come in time. Scott’s Tuesday speech, while popular with the state’s superintendents, inspired a flurry of reaction from members of the education community who favor moving forward with the new assessment system. Bill Hammond, the president of the

Texas Association of Business and an accountability advocate, said he was disappointed in the commissioner's remarks.

"It's not going to be the end-of-the-world scenario," he said. "The kids and educators in Texas are up for it. Every time we've gone through this, the standard has been met, and it's resulted in a better-educated work force."

Shapiro said that once the transition to the new exams occurred, students would be left with a much better assessment system, one that eliminated the need for educators to teach to the test because it was based on courses, not subjects. It was never lawmakers' impression that they would have to change anything about the rollout of the exams, she said, because the planning had been in the works for the past five years.

She also questioned what Scott meant by calling the testing system a "perversion."

"That's a direction I've never heard him take," she said. "He's been the one that's been talking about school accountability over the years. We've all been a part of this. School accountability is something we started many, many years ago, and we believe in it."

Meanwhile, Chamness, who praised Scott's remarks, said she has reached out to other parents at her elementary school about opting their children out of standardized testing — to mixed results.

"They are waiting to see what happens to us," she said. "Nobody wants to get on the outside of the administration. I'm not excited about being out there alone, but that's not going to dissuade me from doing what I know is right."