

Let's make new exams fair for students and schools

By Karen Peck, Jeanmarie Stevenson and Susan Kellner

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As parents who support the public schools and demand high educational standards from our children and our schools, we take issue with [Bill Hammond](#)'s recent opinion piece about the new Texas [STAAR](#) accountability program ("Let's make new exams count," Page B11, Jan. 24.)

In this first year of administration, our 9th grade students are being held accountable for state-issued end-of-course, or EOC, exams - as part of their class grades and in their grade point averages on their report cards and transcripts. In addition, students must achieve certain (as yet undetermined) scores on the exams (12 in total, in contrast to four TAKS exams) in order to graduate from high school. However, our school districts and schools will not be judged on EOC scores until after the first year of testing, leaving our 9th graders in the unfortunate position of being graded while their school districts are not.

Exacerbating the concern, the STAAR tests are brand new and have never been reviewed by districts, teachers or parents. The [Texas Education Agency](#), which is not writing the tests but is instead purchasing them at significant cost, has only released a limited number of sample questions, even though the tests are being administered this spring. In addition, the legislature authorized the TEA to develop study guides for the STAAR assessments, yet it appropriated no funds and thus no study guides are available.

Undoubtedly, the requirement that students must pass 12 EOC exams in order to graduate gives students a genuine incentive to take the test seriously. So then why would it also be necessary for the test score to count for 15 percent of a student's final grade? This is the first time in Texas history that a standardized state test is counting towards a student's final class grade and toward their GPA. Even apart from the tremendous time, expense and logistical difficulties for our school districts to administer these tests, the fact remains that these accountability programs are at heart intended to ensure school accountability, not affect student GPAs.

As parents of children in the public schools, we support our local schools and want the best for our children. Sadly, Hammond's comments suggest that he does not have such faith, either in our schools or in our children. This is evident in his comment that students might just write their name on a test and leave it blank, and still get a 69. Of all the problems facing public education today, he is worried that students will deliberately flunk significant tests required for graduation - just to flaunt the system? And is he not worried about those students who really might fail by one point? (He says that won't happen "for most."). His view of Texas schools and students is cynical and dire. As parents and school volunteers, we find this view alarming.

In this regard, we applaud state Rep. [Rob Eissler](#), R-The Woodlands, the chairman of the [House Public Education Committee](#), and members of the [Texas House](#) for their attempts to redress these issues last session in H.B. 500, which would have removed the 15 percent grade requirement.

Although this bill overwhelmingly passed in the House, state Sen. [Florence Shapiro](#), R-Plano, opposed the changes and held the bill in committee, so the Senate never had the opportunity to vote on it.

We encourage and support our educators for their hard work to hold students to a high standard, but the bottom line is that school and student assessment must be administered fairly. Essentially, the state has put the cart before the horse by placing new high stakes accountability on our students while deferring accountability on our schools.

Moreover, the new accountability assessment is unfair to students, as it is untested and has no independent quality assurance behind it. We urge Texas lawmakers and the TEA to agree that the scores from these tests should not count toward student grades and GPAs until the Legislature can meet again in 2013 to address these issues.

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