

# New end-of-course tests will challenge students, schools

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Freshmen in Texas public high schools are gearing up for new standardized tests come springtime while teachers and administrators struggle with murky rules about how to use the results.

Having sharpened pencils is the least of students' worries. For the first time, the exam scores will influence their grades - possibly affecting overall grade-point averages, class rank and, ultimately, admission into college.

The practical fallout of the 2007 state law mandating end-of-course exams starting this spring became clear to the [Houston school board](#) Thursday as the chief academic officer explained the major changes districts across Texas are struggling to adopt.

"We've never had that kind of accountability on the individual students," said [Alicia Thomas](#), the academic chief of the Houston Independent School District. "It's been on the school. It's been on the district. Now we're moving to the actual students. And in my opinion, it's a lot."

The ninth-graders will have to pass a dozen end-of-course exams over their high school career, taking four tests a year in math, English, science and history. In past years, high school students had to pass four tests total.

State law says each exam must count for 15 percent of a student's final grade but doesn't spell out the details, causing confusion among school leaders.

## *'This is like college'*

Many districts don't award final annual grades, so they must decide whether to start calculating them or to include the exam scores in each semester grade.

HISD, like many districts in the area, plans to calculate a final grade - meaning each semester grade will count 42.5 percent and the end-of-course test will count 15 percent.

"This is like college," [HISD board](#) president [Paula Harris](#) said, referring to exams having significant weight.

Students could pass both semesters but fail the course if they score poorly enough on the state exam. Conversely, a good test score could make up for a bad grade.

"I'm kind of nervous," said [Michelle Jackson](#), a ninth-grader at HISD's [Jones High School](#) who makes A's and B's. "I study a lot so I should be able to pass."

Further complicating the situation, the test scores won't be in a traditional grade format - such as 80 points out of 100 - so districts have to decide how to convert them. The TEA does not plan to issue a standard method.

TEA spokeswoman [Debbie Ratcliffe](#) said some districts have decided to give 100 points to students who pass and 69 to those who fail. Others will go beyond a pass/fail model, giving a range of grades. The TEA has not yet set the passing scores, so districts remain in limbo.

Students in districts that automatically give 100 points for passing would have an easier time earning a higher GPA than their peers in districts with a stricter sliding scale.

"At the end of the day, you're going to have no consistency," HISD Superintendent [Terry Grier](#) lamented Thursday.

Students in grades 10 through 12 this year will continue to operate under the old requirements of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills. The new rules will apply to freshmen this year and to middle school students taking high school courses such as algebra. The new exams are called [STAAR](#), for the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness.

Class rank and grade-point averages are not mentioned in the law. Some school officials say they don't want the exam scores to count in those important measures, especially because the test is new.

The [Texas Education Agency](#) issued a memo saying "a relationship should exist" between the exams, GPA and class rank but did not define it.

HISD, Aldine and Klein plan to include the exam scores in the GPA calculations, while officials in other districts such as Alief and Spring Branch haven't decided.

### ***Uncertainty about GPA***

Spring Branch Superintendent [Duncan Klussmann](#) said he'd rather not count the test scores in the official GPA for now.

"When you have a brand-new test that no one has given before, there's a lot of uncertainty about how that will affect a kid's GPA," he said. "Their GPA's going to be a significant factor in universities comparing our students to students across the country."

State Rep. [Rob Eissler](#), who chairs the [House Public Education Committee](#), said tying the exam scores to grades was an attempt to ensure students took the tests seriously. After hearing concerns, he tried to change the law this year so it was an option instead of a mandate, but the change didn't get a Senate vote.

Eissler, a Republican from The Woodlands, has scheduled a hearing in late January to discuss the looming issues. "As in any new system, things like this come up," he said.

Here's another twist: If students retake the end-of-course exams - because they failed or want a higher score - which score will count in the GPA?

HISD's proposal is to count the first score.

In Aldine, Superintendent [Wanda Bamberg](#) said her district plans to recalculate GPAs for students who retake exams. Because students who rank in the top 10 percent of their class are guaranteed admission into a Texas public college, some might retake the exam to boost their GPA.

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