

Parents, officials decry new Texas school testing

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January 24, 2012

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — Parents, school and business leaders — and even an ex-lawmaker who once voted for it — expressed alarm Monday about new, more-rigorous standardized testing for Texas schoolchildren, whose results will represent 15 percent of high school students' grades in English, history, math and science courses.

Supporters say the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness, or STAAR test will increase accountability for state public schools and that making the results count toward grades ensures high school students take the tests seriously.

But during a five-hour meeting of the [Texas House Public Education Committee](#), lawmakers raised concerns that some youngsters could see their grade-point averages dip if their teachers fail to adequately prepare them for the new tests. Others quizzed school administrators on how they planned to evaluate test results — since doing so will be up to individual school districts.

Then the committee opened the floor to the public, consisting of a long line of parents worried that the new tests could keep their children from getting into good colleges, as well as education and community officials complaining that a lack of statewide standards for scoring and weighing tests could let districts manipulate the results.

The new testing system, mandated by the Legislature in 2007, replaces the much-maligned Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills test beginning this school year. It includes tests for grades three to eight, but in high school, 12 tests will be given at the end of courses in Algebra I and II, geometry, biology, chemistry, physics, English I, II and III, world geography, world history, and U.S. history.

This year's seventh-graders will be the first class required to meet STARR testing requirements to graduate.

Some districts have decided that while high school STAAR tests will affect grades, they won't change GPAs or class ranks, which can be calculated without STAAR scores. Others have withheld GPAs for high schoolers, however, until the test results are in at the end of the year.

That's what happened to former Rep. [Jim Dunnam](#)'s daughter Rachel, a ninth-grader. Dunnam, a Waco Democrat who wasn't re-elected in 2010, said the committee must modify requirements so that students receive GPAs and don't have to wait months while test results are tallied.

"I voted for it, but I believe it's improper that Austin determine the criteria for giving a student a GPA," he said, referring to the Legislature's approval of STAAR testing.

"What you're going to do to these freshman is impact severely getting into the college of their choice, and a lot of it will depend on what school district they use, how they score the exam, how they implement it into the 15 percent," Dunnam said. He added, "this requires action and not just discussion."

Committee chairman Rep. [Bob Eissler](#), R-The Woodlands, said it wasn't fair to beat up on education authorities implementing the new testing, since the Legislature "pushed them into making the policy."

Bill Hammond, President of the [Texas Association of Business](#), said without uniform standards on how test results should be graded and weighed toward graduation, STARR scores would be almost worthless.

"Teachers, even students could game the system," Hammond said.

Rep. [Todd Smith](#), R-Eules, said he is more concerned about students doing poorly because they aren't adequately prepared. He pressed testifying education officials, who told the committee school authorities have had access to test preparation materials and even sample test questions since 2010.

Donna Wallace, an administrator for the Van Independent School District, said she supported including test results in students' grades, but wondered, "is it going to hurt our students if another school is grading different?"

"We need more clarification," Wallace said. "We need more black and white."