

STAAR tests coming this spring with some details still unknown

By Ethan Fowler Special to the Abilene Reporter-News

Saturday, December 17, 2011

The State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness, or STAAR, debuts this spring as the state's test to determine student academic progress, and anxiety is running high for Texas public school educators.

STAAR replaces Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills, or TAKS, which had been used for nine years. TAKS followed Texas Assessment of Academic Skills, or TAAS, for the 2002-03 school year. The first TAKS test was administered spring 2003.

Only ninth-graders this year will tackle STAAR, though some end-of-course testing will be administered as field tests and not count as official assessments.

Tenth-graders and 11th-graders still will take TAKS, scheduled April 23-27.

The increased rigor of the new test is fueling much of the stress teachers and administrators are feeling as the start of the spring semester nears.

For example, this year's freshmen will complete high school taking 12 end-of-course tests, with three tests each in core areas of math, science, social studies and English. Previously, with TAKS, a freshman would have been tested 10 times — two tests — math and English — as a ninth-grader and four times each of the next two years.

Students in third through ninth grades will be timed for completion STAAR tests, compared to having unlimited time previously. Most likely, tests will take no more than four hours and be administered mornings for completion by noon.

Fourth- and seventh-graders also will take two writing exams over two days instead of one. One of those written tests will be narrative; the second for the first time will test students in expository writing, in which a student attempts to explain or share information with the reader.

New reading objectives for poetry and drama are being added.

"We have to cover more at a higher level of mastery," said Tina Enriquez, who teaches at the fourth-grade level at Long Elementary in the Abilene Independent School District. "We're asking a lot more of them. It's more difficult as a teacher and for the students. You must be flexible to be an educator, that's for sure."

Carol Footer, a freshman math teacher at Cooper High School, said the previous highest math area TAKS covered was geometry. The new test will cover Algebra II. Freshmen also will be tested in social studies, another area they weren't tested in previously.

"That's is a pretty big difference, so we're now pretty stressed," said Footer, a 10-year educator.

Not knowing enough about the test and what it will have proven unsettling for some.

Although the Texas Education Agency on its website has provided 15 sample questions per grade in each of subject areas to be tested, the questions are too general to be useful, Footer said — there simply aren't enough of them to gauge the new material and depth STAAR will encompass.

Cynde Wadley, assistant superintendent of curriculum and technology integration for the Wylie ISD, said the state agency's website is hard to navigate through when she's tried learning more about STAAR.

"We're kind of in the dark," she said. "Yes, they've given us the information and they're upping the standards. They've given us 15 test questions."

According to TEA spokesperson DeEtta Culbertson, the exam's passing standards or how it will be scored won't be released by the state to school officials until February for high school students' end-of-course tests.

According to AISD officials, the year-end STAAR tests and TAKS tests can be taken again in the summer (July 9-13). Eleventh-graders who fail a test required for graduation still have multiple opportunities to pass the following summer and senior years.

Making test questions hard could affect a district's ability to reach federal No Child Left expectations. Those standards have been escalating, particularly by increasing high school graduation rates by 5 percent each year. Next school year, the goal is 90 percent. By 2014, the nation's public schools are required to have 100 percent passing rates in all subjects for their students.

"Some of the obstacles are not knowing how they're going to count stuff," Footer said of the TEA. "We're not having finals anymore and not giving credit for completing a semester. Now, it's a collective unit passing two (semesters) at a time because it's (worth) 15 percent of the class (grade)."

Despite the questions with the changeover to STAAR, the test provides benefits.

One is that teachers will have as many as six additional weeks to teach material since the high school end-of-course tests will take place from in May. TAKS has been administered to students in April.

The University Interscholastic League has adjusted its spring competition schedules this year — the state tennis tournaments now are April 30-May 1, golf tournaments April 30-May 4 and track and field May 11-12. In the past, all three events would have fallen in the STAAR window of May 7-18; now, only one day of the track meet will be held on a school day.

The UIL state academic meet, which has been held in early May, has been rescheduled for May 21-22 — after the testing window closes.

Districts determine testing dates within the window, meaning there is flexibility to scheduled other athletic and academic events to work around tests, Culbertson said. If a student is absent, he or she can take a makeup exam during the testing window.

STAAR will test students on what they learned the current year; TAKS questions may have tested students' knowledge on subjects they learned possibly two years earlier.

"It's a change in direction to what we're really testing," Footer said. "Math and science previously tested on material from previous years for juniors and you'd go over the info again from eighth-grade science even though in 10th grade, they were in chemistry."

However, Footer said she believes the state went too far in remedying the problem of testing students on material they actually covered that year. She also doesn't like that no modification of grades and tests will be given to special education students, which TAKS provided.

"They may turn out more kids that won't graduate and contribute to society," she said. "We asked for a test that would go with each subject we're teaching, but not go crazy hard. To me, they need to know the basics of each subject.

"We're going to have to have a balance between reality and accountability," she added. "They're (state legislators) more out of touch with education. We just have to do what they tell us or what else can you do? The administration is stressed."

As a result of STAAR, Footer believes more educators will be forced to teach more to successful testing.

"I think it's an entire year of teaching to the test," she said. "That's good for the EOC (end-of-course test), but then they took that and made it a bigger hurdle than they needed to. That's at least how my students are feeling. The level of which the kids are tested are at such a level that kids aren't used to (it)."