

TEA might relax test rules

By Ericka Mellon - San Antonio Express-News - Wednesday, February 15, 2012

Momentum built Tuesday for Texas Education Commissioner [Robert Scott](#) to delay for a year a controversial mandate that students' scores on new, tougher state exams count toward their course grades.

Scott had said he was unclear if he had the legal power to postpone the grade requirement, but key lawmakers this week said he has the authority — and they want him to use it.

School superintendents and parents have complained in recent months that counting the test scores as 15 percent of students' course grades would negatively affect their grade-point averages and their chances of getting into top colleges.

The intent of the law was to ensure that students took the exams seriously. Not only would they have to pass the tests to graduate, but for the first time in Texas their grades would be affected.

The first indication that students may get a break came Monday when Scott received a letter from the chairman and three members of the [Senate Education Committee](#) urging him to grant a one-year delay of the grade requirement.

On Tuesday, the chairman of the [House Education Committee](#), [Rob Eissler](#), told the [Houston Chronicle](#) he agreed with his Senate counterparts and was working with colleagues to send Scott a letter this week.

Eissler, R-The Woodlands, led a charge last year to make the grade requirement optional for each district. His measure stalled in the Senate Education Committee.

Eissler said he made his opinion clear to Scott in a phone call Monday.

“I said, ‘You remember what we passed in the House. We should be fine with this,’” Eissler said.

Not everyone is happy about the idea, however. [Bill Hammond](#), president of the [Texas Association of Business](#), said delaying the grade rule would render the tests nearly meaningless for students this year.

He faulted Scott for stirring fear among school officials by failing to offer more details about the new tests.

“And then the superintendents scared the mothers into thinking that Johnny wasn't going to get into UT because of the end-of-course exams,” Hammond said. “That case is without merit and is shameful on the part of the superintendents.”

Spokeswoman [Suzanne Marchman](#) said Tuesday that Scott was waiting on a written opinion from the House before making a decision.

No matter what Scott decides, Texas public school students, starting with ninth-graders this year, will have to pass 12 end-of-course exams to graduate. The tests are supposed to be harder than the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills but more aligned with course content. The new exams are called the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness, or STAAR.

Florence Shapiro, chairwoman of the Senate Education Committee, said Tuesday that she wrote Scott urging the one-year delay after hearing so much concern from parents. She said the Legislature had clearly given Scott the authority to grant a transition period to schools — they will not get accountability ratings this year — and that break should extend to students.

“In my mind, this is a fairness question,” said Shapiro, R-Plano.

Sen. [Dan Patrick](#), who also signed the letter to Scott, agreed the Legislature was not trying to backtrack on high standards.

“This isn't a change in policy,” said Patrick, vice chairman of the Education Committee. “It's a clarification of what was always intended going back to 2007.”

Although the law was passed five years ago, most school districts only recently started crafting policies on the grade rule. Students were set to take the exams for the first time this spring.

“Part of the furor over the 15 percent rule is the unknown,” said [Jackie Lain](#), a lobbyist for the [Texas Association of School Boards](#). “It's the fear factor. What is the test going to look like? Students don't know what to expect yet they're going to be held accountable.”

District officials have struggled with how to implement the law, as some don't calculate final course grades (only giving semester grades), and there's not a uniform way to translate the exam scores into a grade.

They shouldn't expect any legislative guidance on the details. “I don't want the state mandating that,” Shapiro said.

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