

# Common Sense Testing in Texas

by Jim LeBuffe, EdD

## Introduction: A Call for Change

There are times when if enough people speak up, seemingly entrenched practices can be changed. We may be at such a tipping point concerning public school, state mandated, standardized tests. A groundswell seems to be forming that the amount of time spent on testing, and the weight given to test results, has gotten out of control. The State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) testing system could be in for a major overhaul.

## Strengths of Current System

There are some positives in the current testing system. More attention is probably being paid to economically disadvantaged and minority students in many districts than was done 20 or 30 years ago. Because weak test results for any one group can result in a poor rating for an entire campus, most schools scramble to try to prevent any group from scoring below acceptable limits. Groups include economically disadvantaged, White, African-American, Hispanic and students who speak English as their second language, among others.

Many elementary schools are doing a better job in identifying, as early as kindergarten or first grade, which students are falling behind in beginning reading and math skills. Teachers are then making thoughtful, planned and organized efforts to catch young students up to their peers. Districts and campuses are not waiting for third, fourth, fifth grade or even middle school to try to remediate students who are falling behind in basic skills. Many of these effective efforts are part of Response to Intervention (RTI) programs on campuses.

Further, most districts know the academic strengths and weaknesses of students at all grade levels in reading and math better than they did several years ago. Frequent district testing and analysis of test results in these subjects has led to this positive result.

## Long Term Learning Has Not Improved

A common mantra of the test-pushers is, “What is tested gets taught”. They are wrong. The saying should be, “What gets crammed in may be spit back out for a short time.” Things may be taught, but that does not mean they are learned.

After years of high stakes testing, with the difficulty of the state tests raised several times, some expected that graduates of the system would be doing better than they did before the testing movement gained strength, but this has not happened.

Let’s look at Texas, one of the bastions of state imposed, high stakes testing. The class of 2014 had an average score of 495 in math, which was the lowest score since 1992. In reading, they scored an average of 476, which was the second lowest score in 20 years. (Stutz, 2014) Granted, more students are taking SAT tests in recent years than was the case several decades ago, but SAT results suggest that the constant pressure and activities to teach and test reading and math skills is not working. Incessant testing has not resulted in long term learning.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results in U.S. History, Civics and

Geography for eighth graders show flat results (Brown, 2015). Could many states’ obsessions with standardized tests in reading and math be contributing to flat results in other subjects?

## Problems with the Current Testing System

There are several serious problems with the state imposed testing system in public schools. Let’s discuss a few of them.

### *The Biggest Problem: Rating Campuses on Test Results*

Of all the misguided elements of the Texas testing system, the rating of campuses based on test scores is the most damaging. Let’s examine the unfairness of the rating system itself, then several damaging results that are occurring due to the rating and ranking of schools.

#### *The Rating System is Unfair: The Effect of Poverty*

Look at the schools with the highest ratings in your school district or state. How many of these schools have relatively few economically disadvantaged kids? Many do. Now look at the schools with the lower ratings. How many of these have a mostly “economically disadvantaged” student body? Most. And we need a rating system to tell us that this was going to happen?

#### *The Rating System is Unfair: The Effect of Student Mobility*

Examine the scores of schools in your school district or state again, zeroing in on the rate at which kids move from school to school during the school year, which is called the “mobility rate” in schools. Students from middle to

upper class, usually single home neighborhoods, tend to move a lot less often than do students from poorer neighborhoods, which often include many apartments.

Schools with low mobility rates usually do well in rating systems; schools with high mobility rates often do poorly. Is it fair to expect schools with high mobility rates to compete with schools with low mobility rates? Is it fair to ask teachers of students who move in and out of their classrooms to get the same scores as teachers who mainly teach the same students in the same class for the entire school year? We think not.

*Damaging Result: Teacher Morale Is at an All Time Low*

The 29<sup>th</sup> Annual MetLife Survey of the American Teacher, conducted in 2012 and released in 2013 stated:

“Teacher satisfaction has declined 23 points since 2008, from 62% to 39% very satisfied... to its lowest level in 25 years”, and, “Half (51%) of teachers report feeling under great stress several days a week, an increase of 15 percentage points over 36% of teachers reporting that level in 1985.” (MetLife, 2013)

A 2014 survey in Chicago asked citizens about their perceptions of public school teachers and schools and found them both rated very poorly. Many Chicago public school teachers feel greatly underappreciated, to say the least. (Lynch, 2014)

Such information should give us pause. Assigning cause and effect is always a tricky business, but it is probably no coincidence that the morale of public school teachers has plummeted as the testing movement has gained hold. And the declines in morale are severe and shocking. Disgruntled, stressed out teachers

are not happy employees. Unhappy teachers do not bring joy to their classroom and students. And many teachers, burdened with the unfairness and pressures of run-away testing, are transferring from schools with a high number of poor kids to schools with fewer poor kids or are leaving the teaching field altogether.

*Many Schools Are Teaching to the Tests*

Ask a teacher, “Do you and your students know what the state tests look like? Do you teach to it? How much time do you spend doing “baseline” and “district” tests that show where students will probably do well and not so well on the state tests? How much time do you spend teaching just to those isolated skills needed for the tests?” The answers will probably be, “Yes we teach to the test and yes, we spend a lot of time doing that.

*Frustrated Children*

When doing well on a few high stakes standardized tests is the major goal on a campus, two bad things often happen. Many children who are doing poorly on the state test are asked to learn skills far above their current levels; they are forced to try to skip some learning steps in order to pass the state tests.

On the other end of the spectrum, other children, who know the test material very well, are forced to spend considerable time preparing for the tests, time that could have been spent learning something new, for example learning a foreign language, exploring science or researching a project.

Further, even schools that have most of their students doing very well on the tests are subjected to overly repetitive teaching and significant test stress on many teachers and pupils. Why was a rating system instituted whereby

students who score very well on a test are labelled “Commended”? This has resulted, in some districts, in competition to see which campuses can get the most students with a “Commended” designation. This has ratcheted up pressure on high-achieving students not to merely pass the test, but to do very well on it.

**Problem: Too Much Time on Math and Reading; Not Enough Time Teaching Other Subjects**

What is tested is getting taught, hour after hour, at the expense of subjects not being tested at all or as often. As the tested subjects of reading and math get more class time, time scheduled for other subjects has decreased. Further, students are routinely pulled out of classes in non-tested subjects such social studies for tutoring in math or reading.

In many elementary schools, successful science programs have shrunk or disappeared altogether. This is ironic, since many of the same people calling for more emphasis on science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) classes are the same critics calling for more high stakes testing. Do we want more kids taking science courses from an early age or not? Do we want more time in class for experiments, journals and learning about science? Do we want to kindle lifelong curiosity that may lead to more scientists and engineers being developed? If so, then let’s control the testing mania in reading and math that is stealing time from science and other classes.

Social studies? Some elementary students will ask you, “What is social studies?”

PE classes and recess time? So many elementary schools in Texas were severely reducing Physical Education (PE) classes and recess time in order to cram more academics into little

heads that the state was forced to require schools to schedule at least 30 minutes daily or 135 minutes weekly for PE or structured recess activities (Texas Classroom Teachers Association).

The ASCD, one of the foremost educational organizations in the world, has taken a position in favor of educating the “Whole Child.” They state, “Use accountability systems with multiple metrics that take into account student performance and growth across all core academic subjects, efforts in student engagement and access to varied opportunities.” (ASCD, 2015, “The Whole Child United States”)

This means exposing children to various disciplines in a sane and thoughtful manner, not concentrating too much on a few areas (like math and reading) and not putting too much emphasis on tests scores, especially in the early years.

#### **Problem: The Tests Are Too Long**

The length of the mandated state tests are ridiculously long and are not age appropriate. Have the test designers worked with children, ever?

We are giving high stakes tests to children as young as seven or eight. Should these tests last for four or more hours? Do reading passages need to be three pages long for third graders? Can we not assess student learning in much less time? The answers are “No”, “No”, and “Yes,” respectively. If a state is subjecting children to high stakes tests that routinely last four hours, with pages-long reading passages, that is a serious mistake.

#### **Problem: Young Children Taking High Stakes Tests**

“High stakes tests” are tests where results can determine student promotions to the next grade level, raises for teachers, teacher and

administrator renewal or firing decisions and campus ratings.

It is wrong to give high stakes tests to elementary age students. Japan, England, Germany, and Canada don’t do it. Why are we doing it?

#### **What Should State Tests Look Like?**

##### **No Ratings or Rankings**

State tests should produce no campus or district ratings or rankings. Tests results will be used solely to see what students are achieving, which students need more help, and to improve instruction.

##### **Tests Need to Be Much Shorter**

Third and fourth graders will take tests that last a maximum of 75 minutes; fifth through eighth grade students will take 90 minute tests; high school students will take 120 minute tests. The current marathon testing sessions, where student stamina is much too important of a factor, will be scrapped.

##### **Offer Diagnostic, Not “High Stakes” Tests**

Tests will not be “high stakes.” In elementary schools, they will be used solely for diagnostic purposes, to see how much children are learning and to help plan for better instruction.

Results will be shared with teachers, school administrators, parents and students.

#### **Who Takes the Test: Five Percent Can Be Exempted**

As many as five percent of students could be exempted from any test at any grade level. Special education students, at an Individual Education Plan (IEP) meeting decision with parents involved, may be exempted from taking the state tests.

#### **Fall Testing**

No ratings or rankings will result from test scores, but to even further reduce the testing mania that permeates many campuses, state tests will be given between the fifth and eighth weeks of the school year. This will allow students time to regain any summertime academic slippage and will also reduce the time teachers and schools have to “teach to the test.”

Campuses should give the tests, look at the results, make plans to help struggling students and then get back to the business of teaching and learning. The results from a few mandated, high stakes tests will cease to drive campus activities and culture.

### **Subjects and Grade Levels Tested**

#### **Proposed, Required Student Tests in Texas**

<b>Grade</b>	<b>Tests</b>	<b>Time Limit per Test</b>
3	Reading, Math	75 minutes
4	Reading, Math, Writing	75 minutes
5	Reading, Math	90 minutes
6	Reading, Math	90 minutes
7	Reading, Math, Writing	90 minutes
8	Reading, Math	90 minutes
9	Writing (exit)	120 minutes
10	Reading (exit), Math (exit)	120 minutes

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for Instruction

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Marketing and Communications

Cecilia Cortez de Magallanes  
Marketing and Communications Manager

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### Pre-School and Grades 1-5

There will be no high stakes testing at these levels. We should not continue to heap stress on young children and their teachers, principals and parents. Students in grades 3, 4 and 5 will take short reading and math tests; fourth grade pupils will also take a writing test.

### Grades 6-12

As in elementary schools, there will be no high stakes testing at these levels; no class, school or school district rankings will be produced from the results of these tests.

In grades 6, 8 and 10, students will be tested on basic reading and math skills. Reading comprehension and math tests will last 75 minutes for sixth and eighth graders and 90 minutes for tenth graders.

Writing tests will be given at seventh and ninth grades.

Students who do not pass Exit level tests will have the opportunity to re-take Exit tests at the end of tenth grade, and twice in each of their eleventh and twelfth grades.

### Difficulty Level

What is the purpose in giving state tests? This is a major decision in the testing arena.

Is it to document how many students are on the path to being ready for college, as the difficult STAAR test does now? If so, this will result in many students struggling with the test.

Or is it to show that virtually all students have achieved a basic level of learning while identifying the students who are falling behind in mastering basic skills? The Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) test, that was given by the state of Texas several years ago, accomplished this. TAAS was considerably easier than STAAR.

The TAAS option is preferable to the STAAR option. The STAAR test would fit well into writer Garrison Keillor's mythical Lake Wobegon community, where every child is above average (Keillor, 1985).

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## Common Sense Testing

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However, every child is not above average in Texas and continuing to subject hundreds of thousands of students to tests that are far above their academic level is a mistake.

### **Optional: More Information about Elementary Students**

If more information is desired about the progress of younger students than would be gleaned from a TAAS type test, Texas public school districts could start or continue to give an additional test, preferably in February or March, such as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, the Cognitive Abilities Test, or the Stanford Achievement Test.

For example, the Survey Battery of the Iowa Test could be given to elementary aged students in four, two hour sessions in one week, thereby providing diagnostic information about Math Computation and Problem Solving, Reading, Spelling, Verbal Expression and Grammar. Each

student receives a percentile score showing how he or she compares to all of the other students in the country who took the same test. A 70<sup>th</sup> percentile score in Math Computation for a third grader would mean that that student did better on the test than 69% of all test takers. Test results are seen by administrators and teachers at the school, who could use the results to help improve instruction. Parents are invited in for a conference to discuss their child's strengths and weaknesses as shown on the test.

### **Finally, a Warning and a Prediction**

An "Opt Out" of state mandated tests movement is stirring among parents of public schools students in the U.S. Leading the way is New York State which, in the 2014-2015 school year, had approximately 165,000, or one of six students who were eligible for state standardized tests, choose not to participate in at least one of them (*New York Times*, May 20, 2015).

Their parents are saying "enough" to a state testing system that they perceive is out of control.

Are you listening, Texas? Reform the current ponderous state testing system or watch as thousands of parents refuse to allow their children to participate in it and the system starts falling apart.

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### **Author**

Dr. Jim LeBuffe, a longtime educator, teaches in the Educational Leadership Program at the University of St. Thomas in Houston. He has been published in numerous professional publications, including two Phi Delta Kappa *Fastbacks*.