

SUBJECT: Redesigning STAAR testing and studying curriculum standards

COMMITTEE: Public Education — committee substitute recommended

VOTE: 9 ayes — Aycock, Bohac, Deshotel, Farney, Galindo, González, Huberty, K. King, VanDeaver

0 nays

2 absent — Allen, Dutton

WITNESSES: For — Drew Scheberle, Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce; Dineen Majcher and Theresa Treviño, Texans Advocating for Meaningful Student Assessment; Buck Gilcrease, Texas Association of School Administrators; and 12 individuals; (*Registered, but did not testify*: Kevin Brown, Alamo Heights ISD, TASA; Ann Teich, Austin Independent School District; Julie Cowan, Austin ISD Trustees; Mike King and Gina Mannino, Bridge City ISD; Debbie Seeger, Corpus Christi ISD; Jodi Duron, Elgin ISD; Mary Whiteker, Hudson ISD; Howell Wright, Huntsville ISD; Betsy Singleton, League of Women Voters; Berhl Robertson, Jr., Lubbock ISD; Jimmy Parker, Lubbock Roosevelt ISD; Keith Bryant, Lubbock-Cooper ISD; Mike Motheral, Small Rural School Finance Coalition; Kim Cook, TAMSA; Ted Melina Raab, Texas American Federation of Teachers (AFT); Barry Haenisch, Texas Association of Community Schools; Paige Williams, Texas Classroom Teachers Association; Janna Lilly, Texas Council of Administrators of Special Education; Mark Terry, Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association; Sara Solomon, Texas PTA; Colby Nichols, Texas Rural Education Association; Maria Whitsett, Texas School Alliance; Portia Bosse, Texas State Teachers Association; Monty Exter, the Association of Texas Professional Educators; Grover Campbell, Texas Association of School Boards; and 15 individuals)

Against — MerryLynn Gerstenschlager, Texas Eagle Forum; (*Registered, but did not testify*: Betty Anderson, Montgomery County Eagle Forum; Cathie Adams, Texas Eagle Forum; and nine individuals)

On — Celina Moreno, MALDEF; Zenobia Joseph; (*Registered, but did not testify*: Gary Martel, Diboll ISD; Criss Cloudt, Shannon Housson, Monica Martinez, and Gloria Zyskowski, Texas Education Agency)

BACKGROUND: Education Code, sec. 39.023 requires that students in grades 3 through 8 be assessed annually in reading and math. Students in grades 4 and 7 take a writing test; students in grade 5 take a science test; and students in grade 8 take science and social studies tests.

Test items on the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) exams in grades 3 through 8 are developed to measure knowledge and skills based on readiness and supporting standards. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) defines readiness standards as concepts essential for success in the current grade or course. Supporting standards are concepts that are introduced in the current grade or course but may be emphasized in previous or subsequent years.

DIGEST: CSHB 743 would add new requirements concerning the design of STAAR exams. The bill would require TEA to conduct a study on the required state curriculum known as the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). The bill also would require TEA to audit and monitor performance by testing contractors.

Test design. The bill would require all statewide standardized exams administered beginning with the 2015-16 school year to be, on the basis of empirical evidence, determined valid and reliable by an entity independent of TEA and any other entity that developed the assessment instrument.

TEA would be required to ensure that all statewide standardized exams were designed primarily to assess the essential knowledge and skills identified by the State Board of Education (SBOE) for the subject and grade level being tested. The exams could assess supporting knowledge or skills from a different subject or grade level only to the extent necessary or helpful for diagnostic or reporting purposes.

The education commissioner would be prohibited from including student

performance on test questions that assessed supporting standards from being used as a performance indicator of student achievement for the purpose of determining state accountability ratings for districts and campuses.

The bill would require that exams be designed so that 85 percent of students in grades 3 through 5 could finish within two hours and 85 percent of students in grades 6 through 8 could finish within three hours. The amount of time allowed for test administration could not exceed eight hours, and a test would have to be administered within one day.

TEKS study. The bill would require TEA to conduct a study of the curriculum to evaluate:

- the number and scope of the TEKS standards identified as readiness or supporting standards, and whether the number or scope should be limited;
- the number and subjects of standardized exams that are required to be administered to students in grades 3 through 8; and
- how the exams assess standards essential for student success and whether the exams also should assess supporting standards.

The study would be required to include analysis of the portion of the TEKS capable of being accurately assessed, the appropriate skills that could be assessed within the testing parameters under current law, and how current standards compared to those parameters.

TEA would be required to submit a report with results of the study to the SBOE no later than March 1, 2016. The SBOE would be required to review the study no later than May 1, 2016, and to submit the report and its recommendations to the governor and Legislature. The requirement would expire June 1, 2017.

Testing contract. The bill would require TEA to develop a comprehensive methodology for auditing and monitoring performance under testing contracts to verify compliance with contractual obligations.

All new and renewed contracts would include a provision that TEA or a designee could conduct periodic contract compliance reviews, without advance notice, to monitor vendor performance.

This bill would take immediate effect if finally passed by a two-thirds record vote of the membership of each house. Otherwise, it would take effect September 1, 2015.

**SUPPORTERS
SAY:**

CSHB 743 would place restrictions on the length of time spent on STAAR tests and would redesign the exams to align with grade-level standards. This redesign could result in tests that had fewer questions, reducing the time spent both preparing for exams and taking them. This could reduce testing stress on students, teachers, and parents.

Although the exams would be designed so that 85 percent of students could complete them in fewer than three hours, students who needed more time would have the opportunity to complete the exams without facing pressure from other students who had already finished. It is not appropriate for third-graders to have to endure a four-hour test or for struggling learners to fail because they cannot complete the test within a specific time limit. The bill would accommodate both concerns.

STAAR exams should be redesigned to measure students' knowledge on grade-level content. The exams include some questions designed to intentionally test skills students have not yet mastered. By requiring the education commissioner to count only questions that measure grade-level standards, the bill would focus the accountability program on the critical skills in each grade and course.

The requirement for TEA to conduct a study on the TEKS could help determine whether critics are correct in saying that the required curriculum is "a mile wide and an inch deep." The bill would retain the SBOE's authority over the curriculum by allowing the members to review TEA's report and make recommendations to the governor and Legislature.

TEA's management of the state's multi-million dollar testing contract was

criticized in a 2013 state audit. The October 2014 Sunset report on TEA recommended that the agency should provide more centralized contract oversight and develop monitoring plans for all major contracts. CSHB 743 would require TEA to develop a process for auditing and monitoring testing contractors.

OPPONENTS
SAY:

CSHB 743 could weaken the rigorous curriculum standards that serve as building blocks to help students succeed in their education. The elected members of the SBOE have responsibility for developing the curriculum standards and should be the ones to determine whether the scope of those standards should be streamlined.

Students must be prepared to compete in a global economy, and Texas should not back away from a testing and accountability system that measures whether students are being prepared for their next grade or higher-level course.

The required TEA evaluation of the number and subjects of exams could lead to further reductions in testing. Some are concerned about the possible elimination of the 8th grade social studies exam. If students are not tested in social studies, there could be less emphasis on teaching students about America's unique role in the world and how to participate in the political process.

NOTES:

The Legislative Budget Board's fiscal notes estimates that CSHB 743 would cost an estimated \$1.1 million to general revenue-related funds for fiscal 2016-17.