

Implementing End-of-Course Examinations: *The new testing system at the high school level*

by **Brooke Dollens Terry**
 Education Policy Analyst

RECOMMENDATIONS

TEST DESIGN:

- Assess writing skills with essays on English and history exams.
- Assess student knowledge with an emphasis on short answer, free response, open-ended questions over multiple choice questions to encourage the teaching of knowledge over test-taking strategies.
- Don't reinvent the wheel by designing new tests from scratch.
- Seek assistance from entities like the College Board and ACT and from college professors to ensure exams are well-designed and rigorous.

TEST ADMINISTRATION:

- Provide teachers with a standard grading rubric.
- Have a panel of teachers who taught the course grade each exam.
- To prevent grading bias or cheating:

Assign teachers from other districts to grade exams; and remove all references to the student's name, hometown, and school district from the exam.

The Texas Legislature made significant changes to the current testing system in public high schools across the state during the 80th Legislative Session. State lawmakers passed Senate Bill 1031, by Senator Florence Shapiro, eliminating the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) tests in high school and replacing them with a series of tests at the end of each core course called “end-of-course exams.”

BACKGROUND

Lawmakers chose to eliminate the high school grade-level subject TAKS tests and the high-stakes cumulative TAKS tests for numerous reasons. The grade level subject tests had become watered down and lacked depth trying to measure student comprehension and learning in each subject as taught in a range of courses taken at various grade levels. Pressure to raise TAKS scores led to rampant allegations of cheating by teachers and students. And the required passage of the 11th grade exit exam to graduate led to howls of protests for its unfairness by parents and students—although the exam measures only 8th, 9th and 10th grade skills, and can be retaken multiple times before graduation.

Thus, lawmakers decided to wipe the slate clean and start anew with a “fairer” testing approach that better assesses student comprehension and achievement. End-of-course exams are a better assessment tool for several reasons. They allow schools to test students at the end of each course directly after they have studied the material and, if designed properly, provide a more in-depth assessment of skills and concepts than a cumulative multi-subject exam. End-of-course exams also allow the test to follow the

student, give educators a diagnostic tool to examine student comprehension—or lack thereof—after each course, and can link individual teacher performance with student achievement as well as reward all levels of student achievement. Research shows that end-of-course exams, if rigorous, can increase student achievement. Texas students will no longer need to pass one high-stakes test to graduate; instead they will be assessed over the course of their high school career on the basics of math, science, English and history.

COURSES

Beginning in the 2011-2012 school year, entering freshman on the recommended or advanced graduation plan will be assessed with 12 end-of-course exams in the core subject areas of math, science, English and history. The 12 courses will be: Algebra I and II, Geometry, Biology, Chemistry, Physics, English I, II, and III, U.S. History, World History, and World Geography. While the courses are primarily offered in the 9th, 10th, and 11th grade, students can take a course and the corresponding exam in eighth grade (i.e. Algebra I). Students on the minimum graduation plan will not be required to take all 12 end-of-course exams; rather they will be assessed in those courses they take that have corresponding end-of-course exams.

Courses Assessed by End-of-Course Exams

<i>Algebra I</i>	<i>English I</i>
<i>Algebra II</i>	<i>English II</i>
<i>Geometry</i>	<i>English III</i>
<i>Biology</i>	<i>U.S. History</i>
<i>Chemistry</i>	<i>World History</i>
<i>Physics</i>	<i>World Geography</i>

900 Congress Avenue
 Suite 400
 Austin, TX 78701
 (512) 472-2700 Phone
 (512) 472-2728 Fax
 www.TexasPolicy.com

GRADING AND GRADUATION

A student’s score on the end-of-course exam will count 15 percent toward their final grade in the course. Exam scores will be part of each student’s academic record and will be visible on their high school transcript. In order to graduate on the recommended graduation plan, students must achieve an average exam score of 70 or better in each core subject area. For example, student exam scores on the English I, II, and III exams will be averaged together and must equal an average score of 70 or higher. Students who fail an end-of-course exam will be provided with accelerated instruction and opportunities to retake the exam.

EXAM ADMINISTRATION

To prevent “teaching to the test,” school districts are prohibited from administering practice tests to students more than 10 percent of the instructional days in the school year. Since the exams test students over the entire course, schools should administer the exams as close as possible to the end of the school year and no earlier than the first full week of May. English I, II, and III were given an exception to this schedule, presumably to allow time for the grading of essays.

NEXT STEPS

In order to implement Senate Bill 1031 and give guidance to school districts, the Texas Education Agency will draft rules and work with an outside vendor to develop the end-of-course exams.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As policymakers move forward in implementing these exams, here are some policy recommendations to consider:

Test Design

- Assess writing skills with essays on all three English and all three History exams.
- Assess student knowledge with an emphasis on short answer, free response, open-ended questions over multiple choice questions to encourage the teaching of knowledge over test-taking strategies.
- Don’t reinvent the wheel by designing new tests from scratch. Many other states are using and designing end-of-course exams for the same subjects. Look for common ground in curriculum and work together.
- Seek assistance from entities like the College Board and ACT and from college professors to ensure exams are well-designed and rigorous.

Test Administration

- Provide teachers with a standard grading rubric for each end-of-course exam to ensure all exams are graded the same.
- Have a panel of teachers who taught the course grade each exam.
- To prevent grading bias or cheating:
 - Assign teachers from other districts to grade the exams, and
 - Remove all references to the student’s name, hometown, and school district from the exam. ★