

"An Exposé of Students' Tests"

by Donna Garner

April 15, 2008

The TAKS tests send chills up people's spines. At the present time, the Texas Legislature's Commission on Accountability is carefully reviewing all aspects of the TAKS tests (Texas' mandated tests given in all public schools, Grades 3 - 11 -- Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills). Perhaps this is a prime time to make sure that the Commission hears all of the facts.

SUMMARY

Does this group of appointed Commission members know that the scoring of the English / Language Arts (ELA TAKS) section is suspect? Do these members realize that the essay prompts go up and down in difficulty from one test to the next? Do the Commission members understand that the ELA TAKS grading system produces unreliable and at times inflated scores? Does the Commission realize that a conflict of interest exists within both the *Texas Education Agency (TEA) and the company that produces the TAKS tests (Pearson Educational Measurement)? Most importantly, do the members of this Commission understand that the ELA TAKS tests actually hurt a student's chances of getting a quality education?

These are strong allegations, but I believe I have supported each one of them with the factual information that follows.

*This misdirected ELA TAKS system has been in existence for at least thirteen years. I am confident that when alerted to the problem, the new Texas Education Commissioner, Robert Scott, will work with the Commission on Accountability to establish a far better system.

POINT #1 -- QUESTIONABLE SCORING OF THE ELA TAKS

Questionable scoring practices are used on the English Language Arts TAKS. I have investigated the way the raw scores are related to scale scores. When the TAKS results are placed on a percentage scale (0-100) similar to report card grades, a completely different picture emerges.

The Spring 2007 TAKS Tests for English Language Arts, Grades 10 and 11, include 48 multiple-choice items, 3 short answer items, and one written essay. Each of the multiple-choice items counts as one point. Short answer items are rated on a scale of 0 - 3 and are equal to a maximum of three score points for each item (maximum score of $3 \times 3 = 9$). The written composition prompt is rated on a scale of 1-4, and the written composition score is multiplied by four (maximum points = $4 \times 4 = 16$). The Total Score Points Possible are as follows:

Type	Weight Calculation	Total Score Points Possible
Multiple-Choice (objectively scored)	48 x 1	48
Short Answer (subjectively scored)	3 x 3	9
Written Composition (subjectively scored)	4 x 4	16
Subtotal (Objectively scored)		48

Subtotal (Subjectively scored)		25
TOTAL		73

This means that 34 % of the ELA TAKS test is subjectively scored.

The Spring 2007 Performance Standards for English Language Arts followed these Panel Recommendations:

Performance Category	Grade 10 Raw Score	Grade 10 Scale Score	Grade 11 Raw Score	Grade 11 Scale Score
Did Not Meet Standard*		Below 2100		Below 2100
Met Standard	44	2100	42	2100
Commended Performance	64	2400	62	2400

* Did not pass test

The Scale Scores needed to pass the TAKS were established by the Texas State Board of Education. Because the Scale Scores of 2100 and 2400 are fixed, the conversion from raw scores to scale scores becomes very important. Various TEA tables show the relationship between raw scores and scale scores. "A scale score is a conversion of the raw score onto a 'scale' that is common to all test forms for that specific grade and subject area. The scale score takes into account the difficulty level of the specific set of questions." (from TEA *Frequently Asked Questions*)

We must caution people not to compare raw scores from year to year. The questions on the TAKS test change from one year to the next and one test administration to the next. "This means that no two versions (or forms) of the TAKS test are the same. The set of questions on one test may be slightly easier or slightly harder than the set of questions on another test. Because the overall difficulty of the tests may vary, the raw scores cannot be directly compared to indicate differences in student performance." (from TEA *Frequently Asked Questions*)

Normally classroom teachers and parents view testing in terms of percentages (i.e., report card grades from 1 to 100). Let's apply this to the ELA TAKS. For the Grade 10 ELAR test, it takes 44 points out of a possible 73 points to earn a passing grade. This means 60 % is considered a passing score. That would be an "F" in most schools. For the Grade 11 ELAR test, 42 points out of 73 possible points is 58 %. That also would be a failing grade in most schools.

POINT #2: THE "2 RULE" AND CONJUNCTIVE SCORING POLICY

The "2 Rule" and the conjunctive scoring policy have been in place at TEA and Pearson for many years. The "2 Rule" basically states that no student will receive below a "2" on the essay. The conjunctive scoring policy gives undue weight to the essay by counting it twice. Because the essay itself is not equated, the "2 Rule" and the conjunctive scoring policy cause the ELA TAKS to be more difficult to pass in some years than in other years. This, in effect, means that the ELA TAKS cannot really be said to be equated in terms of the performance required to pass the test.

Recently a person with close ties to the TEA told me that he personally knew of instances where one

essay prompt should have been chosen psychometrically as the live test prompt but instead an easier essay prompt was chosen by non-psychometricians. The prompt chosen was one which guaranteed that the pass rate on the essay would increase from the previous year's pass rate. The ELA TAKS essay is graded subjectively and counts 16 points out of 73 total points on the exam. In addition, the conjunctive "2 Rule" also applies. What exactly is the conjunctive rule?

Texas grades the ELA TAKS using the "conjunctive pass policy." This means that the subjectively scored essay is not only graded by the "2 Rule" that may and sometimes does cause grade inflation, but the essay also counts twice: The subjectively scored essay counts 16 points, and a student must get an essay score of "2" or more to pass. The "2 Rule" is based on a student's performance on ONE item (the essay). Putting this much scoring emphasis on ONE item and then inflating that ONE item with the "2 Rule" is not psychometrically sound policy.

Please note that each scorer spends approximately three minutes to read, decipher, and score each student's handwritten essay. (Having been an English teacher for over 33 years, I have often spent over three minutes just trying to decipher a student's poor handwriting.) Imagine spending three minutes to score an entire two-page essay that counts for 22 % of the total score and determines whether a student is allowed to take dual-credit courses. A student cannot take dual-credit classes unless he/she makes a "3" or a "4" on the ELA TAKS essay.

On the conversion table from the April 2007 Grade 11 ELA TAKS, the passing raw score is 42 (the raw score associated with the scale score of 2100). Now suppose a student got a "4" on the subjectively scored essay and "3's" on all three subjectively scored short answer items. In this case, the student would have only needed to get 17 multiple-choice questions correct on the ELA TAKS in order to have passed the test. Why? [$17(1) + 3(3) + 4(4) = 42$]

Also, please remember that the objectively scored questions only have four choices. Generally two of them are easily eliminated, and students then have to decide basically between two answers. This gives students a 50/50 chance of choosing the correct answer.

On each grade 11 ELA TAKS, there are 48 objectively scored multiple-choice questions, 3 subjectively scored short answer items, and 1 subjectively scored essay. A student's performance on the 4 subjectively scored items makes a big difference in how many of the 48 objectively scored multiple choice items a student must get correct in order to pass the test.

The Grade 10 and 11 ELA TAKS tests contain 20 objectively scored revising and editing questions (i.e., grammar/usage). If a student were to get 28 of the other multiple-choice questions correct, he/she could get all of the objectively scored revising/editing questions wrong, get a nominal score on the short-answer items, make a "3" or a "4" on the subjectively scored essay, and still pass. In other words, a student could pass the ELA TAKS without being required to know and/or use correct English grammar, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization, particularly because of the "2 Rule."

The scorers spend only about three minutes scanning the essays and do not grade students down for incorrect grammar, punctuation, spelling, and capitalization unless the errors interfere significantly with the communication of ideas. Students are allowed to use an English language dictionary and a thesaurus throughout the composition portion of the test, and they can spend as much time on the essay as they so choose.

The "2 Rule" and the conjunctive policy unduly influence the overall scores. In combination, they

allow students who write poorly and who know very little English grammar/usage to pass the ELA TAKS.

The "2 Rule" is psychometrically indefensible. Why? For one reason, it is based on the performance on one item. Perhaps even more serious than that, however, is the fact that **the essay prompts themselves are not equated**. That means they are not equal in difficulty from one test administration to the next. If a student happens to take the ELA TAKS on the "wrong year" and does not get a "3" or a "4," not only does the student's overall score suffer, but the student cannot take dual-credit classes unless he/she makes a "3" or a "4" on the ELA TAKS essay.

Do other states equate their essay prompts? Three years ago, Michigan had a problem with its essay prompts. Martin Ackley of the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) admitted that the essay prompts used in 2005 were more difficult than in previous years, thus skewing the results. The MDE also decided to get rid of the conjunctive policy because the essay was too unreliable an instrument to count so heavily (subjectively scored). Now the ELA score is figured by counting a student's reading score as 2/3 and the writing score as only 1/3. (from *Frequently Asked Questions*, MEAP)

An unidentified source told me that in a national meeting of psychometricians (psychologists who devise, construct, and standardize tests), a psychometrician (PM) from Michigan asked, "Texas has been testing for a long time. How have they gotten away with not equating essay prompts for such a long time?" Nobody could answer the question.

POINT #3: EQUATING

Texas does not equate one ELA TAKS essay prompt with another. What exactly is "equating"?

The TEA's Technical Digest (Chapter 18, 2006, 2007, pp. 185-186, <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/student.assessment/resources/techdig07/Chapters/Chapter18-Equating.pdf>, provides this example to explain the way equating is supposed to work if done properly:

Consider the following example. Suppose two different forms of a 50-item test (for example, Form A and Form B) are administered to the 5,000 grade 6 students of a large district. The test forms are spiraled so that every other student sitting in a classroom is administered Form A, and the other students are administered Form B. The result is two randomly equivalent groups of 2,500 students taking each form.

After scoring all the tests, the mean raw score on Form A is 32 and the mean raw score on Form B is 34, even though the two test forms were constructed to be parallel in content (i.e., measure the same content in the same manner).

Since the two groups taking the forms are assumed to be randomly equivalent, it would be natural to conclude that Form A is 2 items more difficult than Form B. As such, the score of 32 on the more difficult Form A is equivalent to the score of 34 on the easier Form B. Hence, both the 32 on Form A and the 34 on Form B are assigned the same scale score (for example, 2100); in doing so, the two raw scores have been equated.

Both raw scores represent the same achievement, or performance level. Therefore, a score of 32 on Form A would receive a scale score of 2100, and a score of 34 on Form B would also receive a scale score of 2100. Obviously, the equated scale scores are comparable even though the raw

scores are not (i.e., a raw score of 32 on Form A does not represent the same achievement, or performance, level as a raw score of 32 on Form B).

From this example it is evident that the principle behind equating is very simple: equitability. The how to of equating, particularly for every possible raw score on two forms, is not always so mathematically simple, but the basic principle of equitability still drives the process. For a more detailed explanation, see Kolen and Brennan (2004) or Petersen, Kolen, and Hoover (1989).

In general, equating is performed on tests that contain multiple items. Equating of a single item such as an essay is problematic; and even if it can be done, one would not expect the equating to result in both tests having the same score points (such as the integer scores of 0 - 4 on both tests). With this being the case, it is impossible to set a single cut score standard that represents equivalent performance over all test administrations.

Let's consider a typical example, using Performance Results from the TAKS.

Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills
Met Standard and Commended Performance Results
All Students
ELA, Grade 11, Panel Recommendation
Spring 2003 to Spring 2007

<http://www.tea.state.tx.us/student.assessment/reporting/results/swresults/taks/2007/g11.pdf>

Year	Met Standard			Commended Performance		
	Percent Met Standard	Increase in % Year to Year	Increase in % From 2003 to Stated Year	Percent Commended	Increase in % Year to Year	Increase in % From 2003 to Stated Year
2003	61 %	--	--	5 %	--	--
2004	83 %	22 %	22 %	10 %	5 %	5 %
2005	87 %	4 %	26 %	20 %	10 %	15 %
2006	88 %	1 %	27 %	21 %	1 %	16 %
2007	90 %	2 %	29 %	25 %	4 %	20 %

These results illustrate that there is a major problem with equating in Texas! The huge increase of 22 percentage points (83 % - 61 % = 22 %) in the students who Met Standard between 2003 and 2004 is indefensible. There is a whopping 29 percentage point increase (90 % - 61 % = 29 %) between 2003 and 2007! Between 2004 and 2005, twice as many students (20 % vs. 10%) achieved Commended Performance; there was a 20 percentage point increase (25 % - 5 % = 20 %) between 2003 and 2007. These scores indicate that psychometrically abnormal increases have occurred in Texas and that the ELA TAKS may have become more of a "people pleaser" than a true indicator of students' improvement.

On the other hand, Texas students may actually have improved their performance 22 percentage points between 2003 and 2004 and 29 percentage points between 2003 and 2007. How? It seems that teachers have quit teaching the state ELAR standards and have been forced to narrow their curriculum to "TAKS-prep." In a *Houston Chronicle* article (August 2, 2007), "Gayle Fallon, president of the Houston Federation of Teachers, said she is not surprised so many schools made progress. 'That's what happens when you just teach to the test,' she said."

What is wrong with "teaching to the test"? For one thing, students begin to think that every problem in life has only four simplistic answers: A, B, C, or D. Students are taught to work backwards from the answers to the questions rather than reading and assimilating text and then critically analyzing and evaluating it. Teachers now have almost no time to encourage students to think creatively because students must constantly take some new benchmark test or work through another TAKS-prep packet. Students are taught how to make a "3" or a "4" on the personal essay by "playing the TAKS game" rather than developing their skills to write persuasive and expository papers.

On April 5, 2008, a worried parent sent me the following e-mail:

Hi Donna,

Our 3rd graders are taking a district wide 4th grade writing benchmark this week...Because (name of her daughter) was sick, I got to see her initial work because the teacher sent it home to be redone. What do you know... the comments on it were "not catchy enough"; "how did this make you feel"; and "needs more adjectives." The only thought organization was a "word web" (looks like a wheel w/different paragraphs relating to the main topic on the spokes...At this point (3rd grade) the kids should be learning how to do research for papers, how to organize their thoughts for the papers, and how to draft the papers. My kids know none of this. But they sure are learning about flowery, descriptive writing (with little organization behind the writing)! I will be tutoring them over the summer on how to put together and write both research and persuasive essays in order to get them ready for private school in the fall since this is what they are learning in the private schools.

POINT #4: LACK OF EQUATING OF PROMPTS

Victoria Young is the Director of Reading, Writing, and Social Studies TAKS in the Division of Student Assessment at the TEA. The Senior Director of Student Assessment is Gloria Zyskowski. Student Assessment is under Associate Commissioner Criss Cloudt.

Ms. Young has been at the TEA for many years. She selects the essay prompt for each live ELA TAKS from a number of essay prompts that were previously field tested. Each essay is scored either "0," "1," "2," "3," or "4" based on a scoring rubric developed by Young. The essays are **not** equated to each other; thus, the distribution of student scores on each essay may and often does differ appreciably.

The pass rate on the live essay prompt is, consequently, affected by which essay prompt Ms. Young selects among the different field-tested essay prompts. A student has to make a score of at least "2" on the ELA TAKS essay (remember the "2 Rule" giveaway) to "pass" and a score of at least "3" in order to qualify to take "dual-credit" English courses.

POINT #5: CONFLICT OF INTEREST

A conflict of interest exists with the Texas Technical Advisory Committee (Texas TAC) and Pearson Educational Measurement, the test contractor to TEA.

The Texas TAC is an advisory group of (mostly) psychometricians (PM) from around the country. They meet for twelve hours over a two-day period three times per year to offer psychometric review and advice to the Student Assessment Division. Since Pearson actually performs the psychometrics for the Student Assessment Division, one of the major roles of the Texas TAC is to review/critique the psychometric work and recommendations of Pearson.

Guess who pays the Texas TAC members to review/critique Pearson's psychometric work and recommendations? Answer: Pearson! The pay for each Texas TAC member is in the vicinity of \$250 per hour. Many of the PM's also serve on the TAC's of other states. Not only does Pearson pay the Texas TAC, Pearson even has two of its own employees on the Texas TAC including the moderator of the Texas TAC meetings. This means Pearson has undue influence (to say the least) on the Texas TAC agenda and meeting proceedings.

In addition, some of the Texas TAC members also have a contract with Pearson for other projects. Given all of this, is it possible that Texas TAC members might be hesitant to disagree with what Pearson recommends?

The cozy relationship could conceivably tempt PM to "go-along-to-get along" because they do not want to lose out on what most people consider to be quick-and-easy money. The PM's do not have to prepare for the Texas TAC (although some do), and some work for as many as eight different states. In all probability, no PM is going to stand strongly against what Pearson wants.

In relation to the ELA TAKS, Victoria Young attends the Texas TAC meetings. From what I have been told, neither a Texas TAC member nor a Pearson psychometrician has ever been known to question Young's support of the "2 Rule" during a Texas TAC meeting even though a number of the PM's have expressed privately to one another that they agree the "2 Rule" is psychometrically invalid.

In addition, Pearson itself may not stand strongly against what it perceives certain TEA Student Assessment directors want. (After all, Pearson has a multimillion dollar contract with TEA!)

To make sure that there is no appearance of wrong doing, I believe Pearson needs to remain at arms length from the Texas TAC.

POINT #6: SHORT ANSWER QUESTIONS

The latest TEA TAKS Exit Level Scoring Guide for Reading and Written Composition describes the short answer items. They are graded holistically with a scale from 0 to 3; and again, they are graded very quickly by the scorer. (As one high-school English teacher told me, "Why can't the grading scale

be from 0 to 4 as it is on the written essay? Why must we confuse the students by having two different sets of numbers?")

POINT #7: A CONVERSATION WITH A SCORER

Several years ago I had a unique dialogue with an experienced ELA TAKS scorer (grader). In the course of our e-mails, she revealed that she had never been a teacher. In fact, she said that most of the scorers were not teachers because the ELA TAKS is given in February. She stated that 200+ scorers were usually required per grade level (4th, 7th, 9th, 10th, and exit level). She said that she had a degree in English, but her e-mails to me were filled with grammatical/usage errors. She told me that she worked for Pearson Educational Measurement which had a contract with the TEA to score both the multiple-choice and short-answer portions and that the graders were hired and trained based upon TEA requirements.

POINT #8: WRITTEN COMPOSITION ABUSES

More important than any other problem with the ELA TAKS is that the test drives classroom instruction. "Whatever is tested is what teachers are going to teach." Because the TAKS essay is overly weighted (i.e., "2 Rule" and conjunctive policy), students and their teachers do not see a real reason to spend much time on correct grammar, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. Therefore, in their compositions and in their speaking, students are not being expected to follow standard English. Playing the "TAKS game" has become more important than paying attention to basic writing skills.

Texas public-school English teachers used to teach their students the four different modes of paragraph writing -- expository, persuasive, descriptive, and narrative. Students could easily understand these terms: expository exposes facts; persuasive persuades; descriptive describes; and narrative tells a story. Students learned how to weave smoothly all four modes of writing into their compositions as needed.

Along came the ELA TAKS, and personal victimization narratives became the norm. Instead of students' writing solid fact-based persuasive essays with good argumentative content and a substantial amount of expository information based upon actual knowledge, students are now taught to emote.

"Voice" has become the big factor toward a student's receiving a "4." Voice is a literary term that basically means "personality." Students have learned the way to "play the TAKS game" is to reveal something personal about themselves, give their opinions and feelings, and tap into an emotion usually through explaining how they have been a victim of society. Students' compositions have to demonstrate uniqueness in order to catch the grader's eye, and many students have learned to fabricate persona. This informal style welcomes dialect, poor grammar, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. I have received e-mails from experienced teachers who have told me they had minority students with serious syntax problems who made passing grades on the TAKS essay yet had other students with good writing skills who failed.

This is an example of an essay prompt from the TAKS Released Version, Exit Level, July 2006: "Write an essay explaining the value of the small, everyday events of life." The more students can spin their tales of adversity, the higher their TAKS essay grades will be -- even if students have to make up examples. In essence, Texas schools are teaching students to lie.

Then when Texas students get to college and have to write their first formal expository or persuasive compositions, they simply saturate them with "voice," personal opinions, experiences, and emotions --

no real fact-based substance or deep content. It is no wonder that college professors think our Texas high-school graduates are not ready for college. The brutal fact is that they are not ready.

One concerned parent of a college student told me recently that she is very worried about the dumbing down of her daughter's college course. The daughter is a student in a major Texas university. So many of the students in her class have not written formal research papers that the professor has been forced to lower his expectations. Now the students present their research in a poster format. The student puts together his/her poster, displays it, and answers questions orally.

Just a few weeks ago, an assistant superintendent in a Central Texas school district sent me the following e-mail:

Donna,

Our students had to score a "3" on the ELA Exit Level essays in order to be eligible for English 1301/dual credit at MCC. Last Monday the professor came to school to sit down with each individual and explain why he had scored their papers so low. They were covered in red marks, and our students were crushed by the grades. He wanted no flowery and fluffy language but wanted substantive persuasive and expository content!

These students take the ELA TAKS in February, school ends in May, and in August they have to be ready to write to a new style under much more rigorous expectations. This school year, the teachers will have less time to prepare these dual-credit students because the TAKS ELA has been moved to March...

On October 23, 2007, the *Houston Chronicle* ran a story telling about a writing program between the University of Texas and college-bound seniors at Houston Jack Yates High School. Jim Warren, a University of Texas postdoctoral fellow, is coordinating the program. "Jim Warren...noted even accomplished writers can be in for an unpleasant surprise when they hit a mandatory freshman writing course at UT. 'We were getting a lot of students who were under-prepared to read and write as we asked them to do...Warren said most high school students have little experience with analytical writing because they're coached to master narrative skills needed to score well on TAKS tests. But narrative sentences...won't cut the mustard in college rhetoric courses.' "

This is a comment posted by "A Parent" on EdNews.org on April 3, 2008:

Comment #15 (Posted by A Parent) Rating:

...My daughter is a public school student, and we plan to pull her out of school at the end of this year. We will enroll her in a highly respected and rigorous private school. While her English class is very "fun" and she likes her teacher, we feel she is learning almost nothing about writing and the class reads very little. Nearly all of the writing she does is something called an "OP". She basically just writes about her feelings on anything of her choice and often is encouraged to just make things up as long as it is flowery and emotional. This is apparently what they look for on TAKS. We're not experts, but this doesn't seem to teach her how to think logically (but then again she is a teenager). We have not seen a single essay that is persuasive or expository, and we are worried that she will not learn how to write papers correctly for college someday. We have not seen any instruction that teaches her to organize her thoughts or support a thesis coherently. I wish I could say that this is an off year, but most of her English classes have been like this. When we see that so many college students need remediation in English, reading and math it is a little scary...

POINT #9 -- NAEP WRITING SCORES (2007) -- 8TH GRADE -- TEXAS

<http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/main2007/2008468.pdf>

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) released its 2007 eighth-grade writing scores on April 3, 2008.

On the 8th grade NAEP Writing (2007), Texas has the highest exclusion rate (7%) of any state in the country. The national average is 3%. The exclusion rate includes students with disabilities and English language learners. (Table A-3, p. 54)

By leaving out so many eighth-grade students who have disabilities and those who are struggling with English, one would think Texas' NAEP writing scores would be some of the highest in the nation.

Instead Texas' eighth-grade writing scores are some of the lowest and rank very poorly compared to other states' scores: 33 states ranked higher in At or above Basic; 32 states ranked higher in At or above Proficient; 17 states ranked higher in Advanced. (Table A-6, p. 56)

If we in Texas are really serious about helping our public school students to write better (and speak better), substantive changes must be made in the ELA TAKS system.

TEXAS

At or above Basic -- Texas, 86% -- (87% -- national ave.) -- 33 states scored higher than did Texas.

At or above Proficient -- Texas, 26% -- (31% -- national ave.) -- 32 states scored higher than did Texas.

At Advanced -- Texas, 1% -- (2% -- national ave.) -- 17 states scored higher than did Texas.

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Table A-8, p. 58, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/main2007/2008468.pdf>

Florida Hispanics compared to Texas Hispanics:

150 -- Average scale score -- Florida

142 -- Average scale score -- Texas

16 -- Below Basic -- Florida

19 -- Below Basic -- Texas

84 -- At or above Basic -- Florida

81 -- At or above Basic -- Texas

28 -- At or above Proficient -- Florida

16 -- At or above Proficient -- Texas

2 -- At Advanced -- Florida

0 -- At Advanced -- Texas

POINT #10: ACT (AMERICAN COLLEGE TESTING PROGRAM), TEXAS, GRADUATING CLASS OF 2007

How did the students in Texas do on the 2007 ACT?

(<http://www.act.org:80/news/data/07/statemenu.html>)

How did our Texas students do on the English and Reading sections on the 2007 ACT?

The National Average for English was **20.7**. The average for Texas students was **19.5**. Students in **46** states scored higher than did our Texas students; only **4** states scored lower.

The National Average for Reading was **21.5**. The average for Texas students was **20.6**. Students in **43** states scored higher than did our Texas students; only **6** states scored lower; **1** state had the same average as did our Texas students.

Can Texas use the excuse that a higher percentage of our students took the ACT, and that is why our students' average scores were so low?

The National Percent of Graduates Tested on the ACT this year: **42**

The Percent of Texas Graduates Tested on the ACT this year: **30**

What do the ACT 2007 test scores tell us about the college readiness of our Texas students in the field of English? (<http://www.act.org/news/data/07/map/index.html>)

% of Texas Students ready for College English Composition: **62**

This means that 38% (more than 1/3) of our Texas graduates are not prepared to take college English courses.

Total number of Texas students who took the ACT: **76,542**

Texas students who took the ACT and who are not ready for college English courses: **29,085**

POINT #11: THE COLLEGE BOARD, SAT SCORES, TEXAS

To see the 2007 SAT Writing scores of Texas high school students posted **by name of high school**, please go to:

<http://www.tea.state.tx.us:80/collegeboard/PubWriTest.html>.

* The SAT Writing section has two sub-scores -- MC and essay. MC refers to the 49 multiple-choice

grammar/usage questions. The multiple-choice grammar/usage questions count 70% of the total Writing score. The MC sub-score is figured on a scale of 20 to 80. This means that a person needs to add 20 points to the average score to get a percentile (0 - 100). For instance, in 2007, Texas' public school students (college bound) scored an average of 48.2 on the grammar/usage section -- $20 + 48.2 = 68.2$. The essay sub-score counts 30% of the Writing score and is figured on a scale of 2 - 12. For students to raise their Writing scores significantly, they need to raise their grammar/usage scores because of the 70% weighting factor.

COMPARISON BETWEEN 2006 AND 2007 SAT -- NATIONAL AND STATE

Number of states with higher MC scores (all students) than Texas:

36 states (2006) -- **40** states (2007)

Number of states with higher essay scores (all students) than Texas:

43 states (2006) -- **41** states (2007)

AVERAGES

National – MC – all students – **50** (2006) -- **49.5** (2007)

Texas – MC – all students – **49** (2006) -- **48.6** (2007)

National – MC – public schools – **49** (2006) -- **48.9** (2007)

Texas – MC – public schools – **49** (2006) -- **48.2** (2007)

National – MC – non-public schools – **52** (2006) -- **52.7** (2007)

Texas – MC – non-public schools – **52** (2006) -- **52.2** (2007)

National – Essay – all students – **7.3** (2006) -- **7.3** (2007)

Texas – Essay – all students – **7.0** (2006) -- **7.0** (2007)

National – Essay – public schools – **7.2** (2006) -- **7.2** (2007)

Texas – Essay – public schools – **7.0** (2006) -- **6.9** (2007)

National – Essay – non-public schools – **7.5** (2006) -- **7.6** (2007)

Texas – Essay – non-public schools – **7.3** (2006) -- **7.4** (2007)

Composite score (essay and MC) – National (all students) – 497 (2006) -- 494 (2007)

Composite score (essay and MC) – Texas (all students) -- 487 (2006) -- 482 (2007)

To view information about how the SAT Reasoning/Writing Test is scored, please go to:

<http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/sat/scores/understanding.html>

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE

I have made it a practice never to criticize something unless I can offer suggestions for improvement. Accordingly, these are my recommendations:

Recommendation #1: The scoring and passing policies on the ELA TAKS need to be completely psychometrically defensible so that the passing standard is the same for a student regardless of test administration. The "2 Rule" must be discarded since it is based on unequated essay scores and, therefore, results in a different passing standard each time the essay is changed.

Recommendation #2: Since 2006 the SAT Reasoning Test has contained two parts in the Writing section. One subsection contains 49 multiple-choice grammar and usage questions (70 % of the Writing score). The second subsection contains the essay (30 % of the Writing score). Students are to write a persuasive essay in which they "support their point of view with reasoning and examples from reading, studies, experience, or observations." The essay must "follow the conventions of standard written English."

The ACT College Entrance Exam contains 40 multiple-choice grammar and usage questions. The ACT Writing Test requires examinees to write a persuasive composition based on two different perspectives on an issue. The examinees are to support one of the perspectives or to develop a response based on their own perspective. The students are to explain their view in a clear and logical way, discussing the issue through refutation and counterargument.

If the SAT and ACT objectively test grammar and usage, then our ELA TAKS tests need to emphasize those same skills. If the SAT and ACT require persuasive and expository writing, then our ELA TAKS tests need to contain the same type of writing skills. "The test drives the curriculum."

Recommendation #3: The ELA TAKS writing section should have two parts. The objectively scored grammar and usage part should count 70 % of the total Writing score, and the persuasive and expository essay part should count 30 % of the total Writing score.

Recommendation #4: To avoid a conflict of interest, the Technical Advisory Committee members should not be paid by Pearson nor by the TEA Student Assessment Division. A separate source of funding needs to be devised.

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