Who's really failing — students or STAAR?

http://texasschoolalliance.org/

OVERVIEW

Feb. 25, 2019: Last week, Texas Monthly published an article, Are Texas Kids Failing? Or Are the Tests Rigged? that sheds light on what many reading and literacy experts believe is the misalignment between the reading TEKS and reading STAAR tests. ***Texas is testing students with reading passages that are one to three grade levels higher than the on-grade level text specified by the TEKS, to the detriment of students and their schools****. There is also evidence that the readability levels of STAAR reading passages are not grade level appropriate and need to be corrected so that educators and families have clear, transparent information about how well their students are reading. This is not about doing away with standardized tests. This is not about lowering standards. This is about aligning our state's standardized reading passages with our state's curriculum standards.*

THE BASICS

What is the STAAR test?

- Beginning in 2012, the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) test was designed to tell us how well our students understand grade-appropriate knowledge and how well they can demonstrate grade level skills.
- The Reading (literacy) STAAR test is given in early May to every Texas student in grades 3 through 8 and students enrolled in an English I and English II course.
- The STAAR test drives the state's A-F Accountability System and is a requirement for high school graduation.

Who does this impact?

Here are a few examples of the impact of the STAAR Reading misalignment:

- **Students** - students are being mislabeled on STAAR as "approaches grade level" when in fact they are reading "on grade level". This leads to costly and unnecessary remediation and interventions.
- **Teachers** - teachers have been perplexed and frustrated for the last seven years because their local assessments have been telling them that their students are reading "on grade level" while the STAAR scores label them as *not* reading "on grade level."
- **Parents** - when parents are told by TEA that their child is not reading on grade level, they seek costly tutoring, remediation, resources, summer school, etc.
- **Schools/districts** - use of funding for unnecessary state mandated remediation, tutoring, materials, and inaccurate state accountability labels (A-F).
- **Local Communities** - local Chambers of Commerce, economic development corporations, realtors' associations, home/property values, public perception, local funding for unnecessary remediation and test preparation.
- **State Policy** - any statewide policy based upon student performance data derived from the STAAR test.

KEY FACTS

1. **STAAR misalignment negatively impacts Texas students and schools.** Many of the students that are incorrectly identified as not reading on or above grade level are placed in unnecessary and costly interventions as well as suffer the loss of other educational opportunities. Parents are being told by the state to select books for their children based on one standard, but students and schools are tested at another standard. Schools are being assigned inaccurate accountability ratings and subjected to unnecessary state interventions, or in some cases, closure. Parents and schools are devoting significant resources attempting to correct problems that appear not to actually exist.

2. **All research-based information indicates the STAAR reading test is flawed.** Two independent research studies, one from the Texas A&M University- Commerce[1] and the other from the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor[2], used multiple readability formulas, including Lexile measures, to conclude that STAAR reading passages were written one to three grade levels higher than the student's enrolled grade level. One of the most commonly used and accurate readability formulas is called the Lexile Framework. The Lexile Framework includes a Lexile® measure and the Lexile® scale. A Lexile measure represents both the complexity of a text, such as a book or article, and an individual's reading ability. All 50 states use Lexile scores to measure the reading difficulty of books, newspapers, magazines, and other materials. The goal of including Lexile measures on a student's STAAR Report Card is to find materials that are "not too easy, not too hard, but just right," and increase the likelihood that students will comprehend what they are reading.

3. **The STAAR reading test is not indicative of grade-level skills.** Thousands of Texas students who demonstrated they have met the grade level curriculum standards (called the TEKS) were labeled as reading "below grade level" on STAAR. Two large urban districts found that out of 11,000 third-grade students, 22% or 2,500 students were mislabeled as "approaches" when their Lexile score showed they were reading on grade level or were mislabeled as "meets" when their Lexile score showed they had mastered grade level reading.

4. **STAAR reading results have shown little improvement since 2012.** This is inconsistent with all previous tests in Texas over the past 30 years. Why is STAAR so different from every other test Texas has ever implemented? Have our students suddenly declined in ability? Have our teachers suddenly lost their skills, commitment and passion? Of course not! The problem is in both the design of STAAR and the setting of performance labels.

5. **This is NOT about lowering standards for students or schools.** What this **IS** about is aligning what is tested on STAAR with the grade level TEKS that teachers are required to teach and students are expected to learn. The STAAR should not be designed to hold Texas 3rd grade students accountable for reading at the 5th or 6th grade level and then hold the school accountable if the 3rd grader does not read at that level. As previously mentioned, this misalignment has led to many unintended consequences for students, families and schools.

COMPARING NAEP and STAAR

Student performance on NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) does not correlate to student performance on STAAR (State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness). The tests serve different purposes, the tests are administered to different groups of students, and the results can be reported in different ways.

NAEP serves a different role than STAAR. STAAR measures student performance on Texas' curriculum standards (known as TEKS). Curriculum standards are what policymakers and citizens consider important for students to

know and be able to do. STAAR allows comparison of results over time within the state and gives individual student scores to allow parents to track their child's progress. NAEP is not aligned to the TEKS (or any state's content standards for that matter). The same NAEP assessment is administered in every state, and that allows comparisons of results from one state with another, or with results nationwide.

NAEP tests are given to randomly selected students within randomly selected schools in grades 4 and 8. The 2017 4th grade NAEP Reading test was administered to a representative sample of 7,100 students in 340 Texas schools. Within a school, not all of the students take the NAEP test, and student responses are combined with those from other participating students to produce the state's results. In contrast, the 2017 4th grade STAAR Reading test was administered to more than 400,000 students enrolled in Texas public schools because STAAR tests every student, every year, in every school in grades 3-8.

NAEP results can be reported in different ways – absolute rankings or adjusted for demographics.
At face value, Texas' 2017 NAEP scores are near the bottom in reading achievement, and roughly average in math compared with the other 49 states and the District of Columbia. Relative to the rest of the country, Texas' average test scores rank 46th in fourth-grade reading; 42nd in eighth-grade reading; 19th in fourth-grade math; and 25th in eighth-grade math.

Those results, however, do not account for students' backgrounds and their statistical likelihood for performing well on the test. In fact, an apples-to-apples analysis that factors in student demographics by the Urban Institute, a Washington, D.C. think tank, shows that Texas students perform very well in math and above-average in reading when accounting for the state's student demographics. The institute's results were much more favorable to Texas: 14th in fourth-grade reading; 20th in eighth-grade reading; second in fourth-grade math; and fifth in eighth-grade math.

"It's a much more apples-to-apples comparison, and Texas is sort of the poster child for this kind of adjustment," said Matthew Chingos, director of the Urban Institute's Education Policy Program. "Texas, on average, does pretty well with students compared to other states across the country." Source: *'Report Card' rankings get sunnier outlook,* Houston Chronicle, April 2018.

We believe strongly that Texas must invest and support literacy education, intervention and remediation for all grade levels, especially 3rd and 4th grade. However, currently, students, teachers, parents and schools are caught in the middle of a misaligned system.

CALL TO ACTION

Next Steps for Educators, Parents, Legislators and Public School Supporters

- Request the truth about STAAR reading passages for all grades.
- Request House and Senate hearings and change statute if necessary.
- Request TEA and the state assessment contractor include readability studies when creating the state assessments for 2019 and beyond to ensure alignment between the written, taught, and tested state curriculum.

Resources:

[1] **STAAR Reading Passages: The Readability is Too High.** Szabo and Sinclair, January 2012

[2] **Text Complexity: A Study of STAAR Readability**. Pilgrim and Lopez, October 2016