

A BRIEF HISTORY OF TESTING POLICIES IN THE STATE OF TEXAS

*Keith L. Cruse*  
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In the middle and late 1960's, the Texas Governor appointed a "blue ribbon" committee to study public education in the state and to develop policy statements which would provide a basis for improving the state system of public education. One aspect of the Texas Educational Development Study conducted by the Governor's Committee on Public School Education in Texas (1967) was a statewide assessment using the American College Testing (ACT) Program.

While Texas was reviewing the state system of public education, the Federal Government was in the midst of educational reform which was expressed in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. This national legislation provided the impetus for states to install educational planning units in their state departments of education. Thus, the Texas Education Agency created the "Office of Planning" which included the "Division of Assessment and Evaluation. "

One predictable outcome of the interaction of the state and national educational efforts was that the new planning unit would conduct a study based on the Governor's Committee's previous work. In May of 1972, the Texas Education Agency released a report on the 1971 Texas Achievement Appraisal Study. The "Preface" of that report summarizes the beginning status of a developing state testing policy:

The Texas Achievement Appraisal Study was conducted as a part of the continuing effort of the Texas Education Agency to assess the educational needs of Texas pupils. Although patterned after the 1967 study of the Governor's Committee on Public School Education, this activity was the first of its kind to be accomplished by the State agency. Based on a replication study of 69,000 Texas high school seniors, the report describes demographic information and test scores on the American College Test. The report was designed to assist educational leaders in improving the quality of Texas elementary and secondary public schools.

Immediately after reporting the ACT results, the state department of education began working cooperatively with a commercial testing company to explore potential benefits of standardized criterion referenced tests for use in large scale assessments. Primary motivation of the managers of the Texas Education Agency and the test company was to find an economical method of obtaining student performance data which was more useful for improving the quality of education. The traditional norm referenced tests in use were helpful in evaluating how well a student, or a group of students, was compared to one another and the nation, but seemed to lack the precision necessary to evaluate the achievement of specific learner objectives of priority concern to teachers, administrators, and policymakers and thereby define the needed improvements in educational programs.

In 1973 and 1974, the state department conducted statewide assessments in reading and mathematics using criterion referenced tests. *Multiple outcomes were achieved:*

1. Statewide student performance data were available on specific learner objectives which were judged important by Texas educators.
2. Information was obtained on the usefulness of criterion referenced tests.
3. Discrepancies in student achievement between various subpopulations were quantified in specific learning areas.
4. **Educators in Texas began to communicate about how (and where) specific learner objectives were taught, at both the local and state levels.**

*The remaining years in the 1970's offered more opportunities for the Texas Education Agency to explore assessment strategies for a state testing policy. In 1975, the Agency conducted a statewide assessment of the status of career education. This study was largely a result of the combination of national concerns in career education and the state level interests in the area of testing. The unique features of this program provide some insights on the emerging state policies on testing:*

1. A funding plan was designed by *Texas* Education Agency managers which used both state and federal resources.
2. A commercial contractor developed unique tests to measure career education outcomes (objectives) which were developed for Texas students through an extensive "grass roots" program conducted across *the* state.
3. *The work of selecting learner outcomes and building criterion referenced tests was accomplished cooperatively by the state department of education, selected regional education service centers, several urban school districts, and a paid contractor.*
4. *The primary objectives sought through these assessment activities related to diagnosing student learning deficiencies, identifying educational program weaknesses, and evaluating statewide student performance. A sampling approach* was used which provided no district or campus information.

*As a result of the first decade of student testing activities (initiated and conducted by the Texas Education Agency) and an increasing awareness on the part of the state legislature that there was little empirical evidence of the effectiveness of public*

education in Texas, the legislature appropriated \$3,000,000 to the state department for the development of a better management information base. Some of the funds were used to plan and develop a computerized database for education. The remaining resources were used to conduct statewide student performance assessments.

In 1978 and 1979, the Texas Education Agency requested that school districts cooperate in seven separate statewide student testing programs. Participation was consistently close to 100 percent in the Texas Assessment Project. Custom built criterion referenced tests were administered in mathematics and reading. Released test items from the National Assessment of Educational Program program were used to develop tests in writing, economics education, and citizenship. Commercial norm referenced tests in reading and mathematics were also administered. By 1979, the Texas Education Agency had a separate division with full-time responsibility for providing student performance data. More information on student achievement was available to educators and the public than ever before in the history of public education in Texas.

As one reviews the history of student testing in Texas, the benefits of an early start and a wide variety of assessment experiences become evident. Throughout all the previous assessment activities, the state department was making comprehensive reports to all school districts, the press, the public, and the state legislature. In 1979, an informed Texas legislature passed a law to establish the first state mandated testing program. Although no specific “line item” in the budget provided funding for the program, the State Board of Education and the managers of the department developed a funding plan. The law was implemented in a manner to comply with the full intent of the legislature. Criterion referenced tests in the basic skills of mathematics, reading, and writing were administered to all students in grades 3, 5, and 9. Students in grades 10, 11, and 12 who did not master the tests were offered the opportunity to retake the tests each time they were administered.

*From 1980 to 1985, the state mandated testing program, the Texas Assessment of Basic Skills (TABS), used criterion referenced tests to provide information on student achievement.* The TABS program offered the first opportunity for students across the state to take the same test. Individual students, parents, and teachers received mastery information of each basic skill (8 to 12 per test). The program avoided classroom summaries but provided data on campuses and districts which, by law, were made public. Comparisons between districts were made. Attention of the public was focused on student learning to an unprecedented degree. The results were dramatic. Local school officials identified successful instructional strategies and employed them in such a manner that they increased student achievement statewide. Not only did overall student performance increase, but the differences in student performance between minority and majority subpopulations decreased. During the six year period, the state legislature amended the law to make it mandatory for students in grades 10, 11, and 12 to retake the tests if they had not demonstrated mastery in grade 9. In 1980, only 70 per cent of the grade 9 students mastered the mathematics test, while in 1985 the mathematics tests was mastered by 84 per cent of grade 9 students. Mastery on the reading test improved from 70 to 78 per cent over the same time period.

The TABS program did not begin without the usual resistance to change associated with such large scale educational efforts. Some teacher groups resisted the idea of a “state program” meeting the needs of different types of students. Supporters of the program responded by pointing out that these were “basic” skills, necessary for all students in the opinion of **a cross section** of Texas educators. Some school administrators resisted the idea of comparing schools because of diverse student populations in terms of ethnic composition, family wealth, and limited English proficiency. The reporting strategies used for TABS always included demographic information as a part of reporting student performance. Standard reports for each school district included three separate aggregations: (1) all students, (2) limited English proficient students, and (3) non-limited

English proficient students. Minority organizations monitored the program carefully. Every effort was made to ensure that the TABS tests were free from bias, and the results of those efforts were made public. As the results of minority groups improving at a faster rate than majority students became apparent, little opposition was left.

If the TABS program is to be judged successful, why was it so widely accepted? There is no simple answer, but it is important to understand that the entire program was tied to state compensatory efforts. State compensatory funds were given to school districts on the basis of eligibility for free or reduced priced lunches, but the law required those districts to use the funds to develop and implement appropriate remedial programs for students who did not master the basic skills measured by the TABS program. Thus, the testing program was put in the perspective of a “needs assessment” strategy for state compensatory efforts. *The supporters of the program were those educators and public policy makers who wanted documentation of educational needs and empirical evidence of educational improvement if it occurred. At the end of the program, there **was** no organized group which offered public opposition to the program.* The true evaluation of the program should probably be based on what happened to it.

In 1984, the Texas Legislature, in special session, passed one of the most comprehensive educational reform laws in the history of public education. House Bill 72 changed the construction of the State Board of Education, altered the way that education was financed, required students to make 70 to pass a course, implemented a “no pass, no play” rule in Texas schools, required teachers to pass competency tests, and revised the TABS program. *The TABS language was moved from the compensatory education section of the Texas Education Code to a separate section of its own. The law changed the student assessment program from the “largest” to twice that size. The new program, the Texas Educational Assessment of Minimum Skills (TEAMS) tests every student in grades 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, and 11, approximately 1.6 million students annually.*

If there is a central theme to this history of testing policies, it is the concept of a “policy evolution.” In fact, a proper title would be the “The Evolution of Student Testing Policies in Texas.” Obviously, the complexity of any government/society function such as that *of* a state educational system for public education makes it impossible to identify simple cause-effect relationships. However, several factors should be listed for their contribution to the present testing policy in Texas:

1. A national “report card” for education repeatedly ranks Texas low.
2. *The current Texas Governor* based much of his campaign on improved quality *of* education in the state.
3. A “blue ribbon” committee appointed by the Governor recommended sweeping reforms for the state system of public education.
4. *The* chairman of the Governor’s Committee was a very influential citizen who was committed to higher standards for education in Texas.
5. State policy makers had over a decade of experience to inform their state *policy* decisions in the area of student testing.

*In October of 1985, the first TEAMS tests were administered to over 191,000 high school juniors. A review of the new state testing program reveals some significant changes from the TABS program:*

1. *The State Board of Education is required to set passing standards for the total test at all grades.*

2. High school students must pass an Exit Level test (first administered in grade 11) in order to receive a high school diploma. The opportunity for retesting is provided for students failing the test.
3. Students are now tested at each odd numbered grade — 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, and 11.
4. The Texas Education Agency is directed to provide national comparative data on the TEAMS tests in order to monitor the state's rank in the nation.
5. Texas school districts must provide remedial instruction to those students not passing the TEAMS tests.

The Chairman of the State Board of Education and the Texas Commissioner of Education have both repeatedly made public statements to the fact that the TEAMS program will be the primary basis for evaluating the education reforms called for in House Bill 72. A public policy has evolved, in the light of a concern for Texas to compete successfully in the world market place, which indicates a desire to provide adequate resources for a quality system of public education along with an accountability component which includes a state testing program to monitor the progress of educational reform in Texas.