

Laura Yeager
Comments before Senate Education Committee
October 30, 2012

Thank you Senator Shapiro, Senator Patrick, and Committee Members,

My name is Laura Yeager and I'm a parent of a 10th, an 8th, and a 5th grader. I am a TAMSA member and an advocate for all students in Texas public schools. I trust that you want to make our schools the best in the country and the world. Yet, I have seen firsthand that the overreliance on standardized testing, and the increasingly high stakes associated with the STAAR EOC's, is doing quite the opposite.

My three kids are as different as they can be. My oldest is an aspiring writer at a fine arts high school. His favorite class was "Film as Literature" that he took in middle school. My next son loves math, sports, and learning Chinese. His favorite class was "energy and technology careers" where they built a car for speed using math and physics. My daughter is artistic, and loves science and writing. Her favorite time of year is when Science Fair rolls around. As different as my kids are, they all agree that the testing (and test prep) that consume their time at school, is making school dull, limiting what makes the curriculum challenging and interesting, and turning them off to learning. If my kids think this, imagine kids that are struggling to stay in school or to learn English, or who have disabilities that make school even harder.

The STAAR EOC system that requires 15 standardized tests for graduation and counts as 15% of student grades has struggling students labeled as failures from the get-go. Data from the first round of EOC's, shows that these students are already behind. Now they are in remediation to catch up on last years' tests, while also prepping for this year's tests. As a result, they are losing the interactive, hands-on classes (like my kids' favorite classes) that make kids want to go to school. Ironically, these skills and classes are vital to preparing our kids for society: thinking critically, creatively, working in a team, seeing how learning relates to life. The dropout rate threatens to skyrocket as these kids give up.

If our aim is to improve education and encourage all students to keep learning during and past high school, then our tests need to be diagnostic. Kids aren't learning from their mistakes on these tests. The tests are being used as weapons against them, not as tools to help them.

I support accountability and expect the state, districts and schools to be held accountable to taxpayers and parents and ensure that our kids are being given a great education. I don't think it is the kids who should be accountable to the state---as the current structure dictates.

I also support testing, and expect rigor from our schools. However, wielding a bigger stick with which to hit the kids harder is not the way to improve education.

Please use assessment to diagnose where there are strengths and weaknesses and then allocate our limited resources accordingly. We are spending so much on measurement, that there is little left for actual improvement.

To that end, I urge you to:

1. Reduce the number of tests for graduation.
2. Eliminate the 15% from grades
3. Consider using nationally normed tests as one of multiple measures in a portfolio approach to assessment.
4. Allow more flexibility in kids' schedules. Not everyone wants to or needs to take physics, and by forcing kids out of the system, you are losing people who all have something to offer our society.

I know that counting things makes everything seem clean and tidy. But people are human- they are not widgets. If you want a state of dropouts and test-taking widgets, stay the course. If you want a creative, productive, and innovative society and a strong economy, please take a second look and fix this broken system.

Thank you.