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Reported STAAR Design Flaws in Reading Show Why High-stakes Punishments Should be Removed from the STAAR

IDRA Statement

March 4, 2019

When tests are tied to high-stakes consequences, they can deny capable, motivated students the opportunity to proceed to the next grade or graduate from high school. Such tests can negatively impact students' confidence, academic achievement and lifelong opportunities.

While there should certainly be measures of a student's knowledge of a subject, both to ensure learning and to judge when mastery has occurred, those measures should be based on a holistic view of the student's academic career, opportunities and efforts.

A recent Texas Monthly article, [Are Texas Kids Failing? Or Are the Tests Rigged?](#) revealed that the Texas Education Agency (TEA) may have ignored at least two academic studies that questioned the reliability of the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) reading tests. These studies, published in 2012 and 2016, evaluated real excerpts from the STAAR reading tests, using several independent, nationally-recognized readability tools to determine the difficulty of the passages.

TexasMonthly

Are Texas Kids Failing? Or Are the Tests Rigged?

Leading educators and testing experts have studied the exams and find that they are asking kids to understand passages aimed two or more years above their grade level.

BY **MIMI SWARTZ**
DATE FEB 20, 2019

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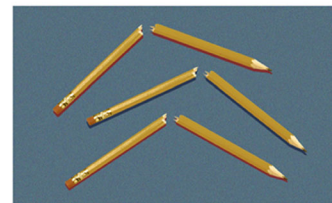


Illustration by Shaina Markland/Perisic Getty

The researchers found that, for the exact same passages, the reading levels identified by TEA did not match the reading levels determined by the readability tools. On average, Texas students were being tested on reading passages that were two grade levels higher than they should have been.

As a result, many students who, by a number of outside measures, were able to read on grade level were nevertheless assessed as "not proficient" in reading by the STAAR results. One former State Board of Education member interviewed by Texas Monthly **estimated that 1.25 million students had been "misidentified as reading below grade level."**

If the studies are accurate, the incorrect STAAR results were certainly devastating for students and their families who worked hard to pass the STAAR, not to mention to develop a love of reading.

The scores also were distressing for teachers who worked with students and knew that they were capable of academic excellence, despite what the STAAR results were telling them.

Current state policy is such that failing to pass the STAAR can result in required additional testing, grade retention and remedial measures for students, along with negative ratings for teachers, schools and districts.

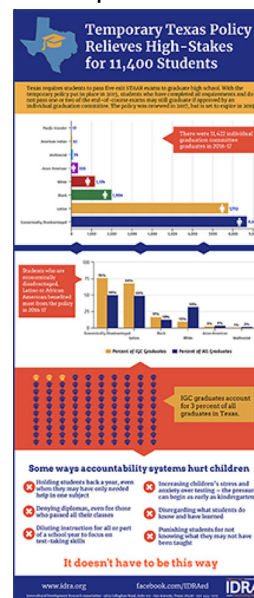
The wrong reaction to Texas Monthly article would be to end testing completely. Some form of testing is critical to measuring schools' performance, particularly among specific student populations. Much can be gleaned from accurate test results to inform school improvement.

For example, [IDRA recently conducted research on the reading test questions](#) that a high percentage of students miss across grade levels. We found that students in the five schools we studied were having difficulty with questions that require the skill of inferencing. There is a strong correlation between inferencing and comprehension. Following [IDRA-led training for teachers and school leadership](#), the schools improved literacy scores and helped close the achievement gap between English learner and non-EL students. They also moved out of the "needs improvement" rating and received awards for distinction.

In the current Texas legislative session, our policymakers have the opportunity to address the problems with high-stakes structure of the STAAR, including approaches like the use of individual graduation committees (IGCs). The IGC policy allows smart, hard-working high school students who do not pass one or two end-of-course exams to be able to graduate with their peers following a holistic evaluation of the students' coursework by a team of teachers, administrators, the student's parent(s) or guardians and, sometimes, the student.

IDRA studied the impact of the IGC policy. The results were published online today. According to the latest TEA data released for the 2016-17 school year, there were 14,735 students assigned an individual graduation committee. Of these, 77.5 percent (11,422) were recommended for graduation.

That's more than 11,000 students who would not have graduated, despite good attendance and classwork, solely due to a test score on the STAAR.



But, without legislative action, the policy that allows IGCs to function is set to expire in September.

Accountability systems can hold schools accountable to the local communities that they serve without using punitive and dysfunctional consequences for children.

Texas must move away from the current system of harmful testing with high-stakes penalties in which educators, students and families are pressured to rely on a single measure as the indicator of success. Rather, we must adopt a system of evaluating progress and proficiency through multiple measures over time while helping students to develop a deep and lasting love of learning.

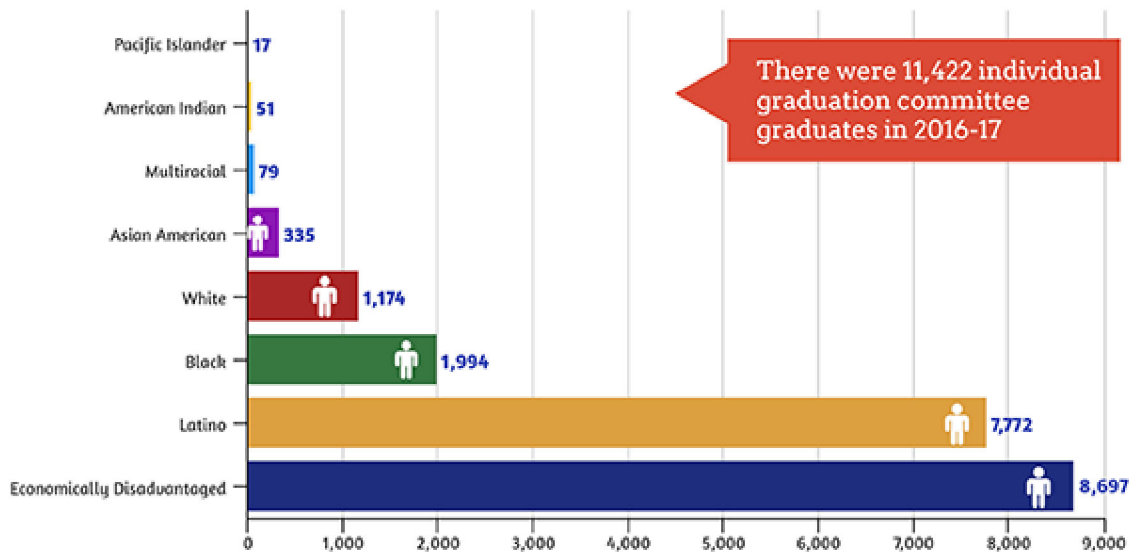
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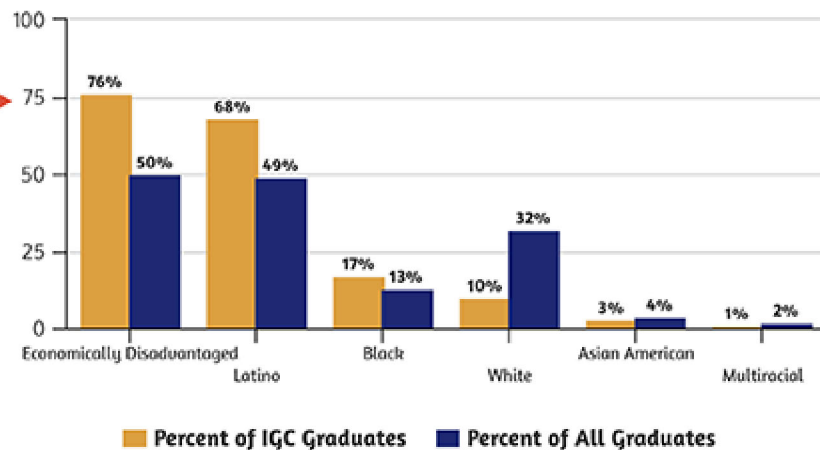


Temporary Texas Policy Relieves High-Stakes for 11,400 Students

Texas requires students to pass five exit STAAR exams to graduate high school. With the temporary policy put in place in 2015, students who have completed all requirements and do not pass one or two of the end-of-course exams may still graduate if approved by an individual graduation committee. The policy was renewed in 2017, but is set to expire in 2019.



Students who are economically disadvantaged, Latino or African American benefited most from the policy in 2016-17





IGC graduates account for 3 percent of all graduates in Texas.

Some ways accountability systems hurt children

- Holding students back a year, even when they may have only needed help in one subject
- Increasing children’s stress and anxiety over testing – the pressure can begin as early as kindergarten
- Denying diplomas, even for those who passed all their classes
- Disregarding what students do know and have learned
- Diluting instruction for all or part of a school year to focus on test-taking skills
- Punishing students for not knowing what they may not have been taught

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