

Frisco Independent School District STAAR, End of Course Tests and Semester Exams: FAQs

This year, FISD is implementing some changes in grading periods and eliminating cumulative semester exams to maximize instructional time for our students. Our ultimate goal is for all of our students to master all learning objectives taught in the classroom. Research shows that instructional time with a quality teacher is the most predictive factor of increased student achievement. The changes that have been made are in effort to maximize learning time.

Assessments and tests are essential in providing students and parents with feedback, to document academic progress, and to inform instructional decisions for our teachers. Frisco ISD teachers and administrators have been engaged in researching and studying the role of assessment and testing with the learning process. Our study forced us to evaluate and compare how much we are assessing and testing students and how much we are actually teaching them in the classroom. A major factor in the increasing number of testing days in our secondary schools is due to the new (STAAR) assessment program. With the new assessment system in mind, changes must be made to preserve as much instructional time in the classroom as possible. Students can and do learn without tests; however, learning is inhibited when instructional time is sacrificed.

Below are some frequently asked questions (FAQs) that we wanted to share with our parents and community members. If you have any additional questions, please contact the principal of the school your student attends.

Q: What changes are being made in regards to semester exams with the high schools and the middle schools?

A: The cumulative semester exam process has been eliminated. Teachers can still administer unit exams that spiral content from throughout the semester. The secondary schools will remain on their normal schedules and not run lengthy reviews or “special” schedules to administer semester exams. Instructional time will be maximized! Teacher made exams are not going away, however, we will no longer shut down the instructional process for several days at the end of each semester to do it.

Q: Why are we making changes to the school calendar?

A: The decision was made to end the semester before the winter holidays to give a clean end to the first semester and a fresh start to the second semester upon return from the break. In recent years, we have completed the first semester after the holidays with a week of instruction and review and then shutting down instruction for a week to give a battery of semester exams. While the first semester is shorter in days, the number of true instructional days for secondary students is relatively balanced out due to the number of testing days in the spring as well as the multitude of activities that pull students from classes in the second semester. In a previous legislative session a new state law was created mandating the earliest school start date, requiring schools to start school two weeks later than in years past.

Q: How was this decision made and who was involved?

A: The semester exam process has been a topic of discussion between campus principals and central office staff for the past few years. The discussions expanded when the specifics of the new state assessment system were unveiled. An “End of Course Think Tank” made up of central office staff, campus staff, technical support staff and classroom teachers met several times in the fall of 2010 to research and discuss the implications of the new testing system. The particular conversation centered on the fundamental question of, “is the amount of instructional time lost to testing justified by the results and information gained from the testing?” A teacher subcommittee advised that instructional time was more sacred than more time for testing.

Q: Were there any other steps taken to return instructional time back to the classroom beyond restricting semester exams?

A: Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) has been piloted in FISD the past three years. Dr. Mike Waldrip, assistant superintendent for program evaluation and assessment conducted a great deal of statistical analysis on MAP. His team found that while MAP served some purpose in providing feedback about student learning, it was not enough to justify the time taken from the classroom to assess the students. Additionally, other measures that are already in place can provide the same information produced by MAP. This step will return several more days of instructional time back to the classrooms in those schools conducting the pilot.

Q: Will students be prepared for college if semester exams are eliminated?

A: Our students will prepare and go through multiple “high-stakes” assessments during their middle school and high school careers. Middle school students will all take the STAAR assessments in sixth, seventh and eighth grade, curriculum based assessments for math and science, an Algebra Readiness assessment, as well as teacher created assessments on a regular basis. Each high school student on the Recommended Graduation Plan or Distinguished Graduation Plan will go through multiple high stakes assessments and tests. The list includes, but is not limited to: twelve high stakes End Of Course Assessments, Advanced Placement (AP) Tests, Assessments in Dual Credit Courses with Collin County Community College, PSAT, SAT , ACT – not to mention highly rigorous curriculum based assessments and teacher made assessments during the year. Students go through more educational testing now than at any other time in the history of Texas education. There is no research that indicates semester exams will better prepare students for college than the regime of testing that they currently go through.

Q: Will there be the level of “rigor” in the classroom that our students need to help prepare them for post-secondary education if we do not have semester exams?

A: Absolutely! In fact, teachers should be able to create a more rigorous course of study due to increased instructional time with the students. David Conley says, “the single most important factor in determining college success is the academic challenge of the courses students take in high school.” Dr. Conley is a leading researcher on college readiness. According to Dr. Conley, the problems most students encounter at

the college level are because they did not complete a rigorous program of study in high school. The level of rigor that Dr. Conley is talking about cannot be achieved through more testing and assessments. The most important factors to establish a highly rigorous classroom for students is to have a high quality teacher providing highly engaging instruction and continuous constructive feedback as to the student's progress.

Q: How will STAAR/EOC compare to TAKS?

A: The test will be longer, more complex and will include a college-ready component; students will have to analyze and interpret more and more information at higher levels than ever before. They will have to pass 12 tests to receive a diploma, where before there have been four exit-level exams. See [website area](#) for more information.

Q:What resources contain more information on the research?

Conley, D. (2005) *College Knowledge: What It Really Takes for Students to Succeed and What We Can Do to Get Them Ready*

Guskey, T. (2009) *Practical Solutions for Serious Problems in Standards-Based Grading*

Marzano, R. (2006) *Classroom Assessment & Grading that Work*

Stiggins, R., Arter, J., Chappuis, S., Chappuis, J. (2009) *Assessment for Student Learning: Doing it Right-Using it Well*