



# THE PRINCIPAL'S PAD

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## What to Think of the TAKS Tests

Parents and people from other professions I meet often ask me what I think of the Texas TAKS tests. My feelings and thoughts about it are mixed. Remember that standardized tests similar to the TAKS arose from the public's outcry that education had few if any accountability measures. As educators and schools, our "product" is children, and measuring their growth is not as simple as measuring a business's success. You can learn more about the TAKS tests by exploring the Texas Education Agency's website: [www.tea.state.tx.us](http://www.tea.state.tx.us) I do believe that we need to be accountable for how and what our children are learning. And for the most part, I believe that you would want your children to be able to perform well on the TAKS tests administered at the different grade levels. I encourage you to go online and take one of the many released TAKS tests available. When you enter the TEA website, listed above, just click on released tests. I would recommend that you review the latest "released" tests, those dated in 2006.

**Do we teach to the test? Well . . .yes.** We teach the state-mandated curriculum, and that is what is measured on the tests. At Curriculum Night we gave you a condensed version of what your children are to learn in each grade level and major subject. **Do we "drill and kill" to make sure our children pass the test? Absolutely not.** We do have to prepare them for the format of the test and the length of the test. So, we give one TAKS simulation test in each subject and each grade level. This also provides us with data about what children know and what they still need to practice. That data is then used to guide us as we plan instruction that will help children learn.

**This week in third grade, I observed a forty-five minute reading lesson.** During this time, the children played two different games that helped them understand the difference between "fact and opinion". They were asked to defend their answers while playing the game. "What words in that sentence make you think it is an opinion?" What about that sentence makes you think it is a fact?" Not once during the lesson were the children completing a work sheet. They were fully engaged, having fun, and learning – all at the same time! Keep in mind that this was the week before the Reading TAKS in third grade. I think you would agree that determining the difference between a fact and an opinion is an extremely important skill for children to learn. As I was leaving the class, one student approached me with the plant flip-book the students were creating during science this same week. He was so proud of his work! Obviously, the students were also learning about science – not a tested area in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. ☺

**I wish that the tests were not so "high-staked".** I don't think that a child's promotion to the next grade level should be predicated on their performance on one test. But, keep in mind that the requirement to pass these standardized tests began because "social" promotion was a serious problem. The news was full of stories of students graduating from high school that could not read or write at appropriate levels. Students have three opportunities to pass those tests that are required for their promotion to the next grade. And if a child fails the first test, that student receives focused instruction in that area each day until the next administration.

**Do I think the TAKS tests have made us better educators? I do.** We work very hard to identify students early in their school career who are struggling with important academic content. Our teachers devise creative and intense intervention strategies to work with these children. Each lesson we teach is more focused on specific goals; we have learned to cut out "fluff". We have also learned how to engage students, make their learning relevant to their lives, and to help them be "thinkers". In addition, we continue to strive to find ways to deepen the curriculum and challenge those students who are meeting and exceeding grade level standards.

**Am I proud of Fisher's passing and commended scores? You bet!** Our students and teachers work very hard *at learning* to earn those scores. And I would not be telling the truth if I said that as a principal I don't want our school to be rated "Exemplary" by the state of Texas. BUT, our goal is that every child performs to his/her ability – we celebrate passing scores for some children and commended scores for others. That is a philosophy that we have about our students' performance each day in their academic work and in their character development as well. That doesn't change as they face a TAKS test. I would expect them to do their best in a tennis tournament, a piano recital, a football game, a chess match, etc. Learning to set goals and doing one's best is a part of life.

**Do I think there is a better way to measure student growth and hold school's accountable? Perhaps. But, Right now, we have to live with the TAKS test.** As teachers we continue to focus on the curriculum that needs to be taught and quality instruction. We always want to improve our skills. This year, during some of our Wednesday afternoon staff meetings, we completed a book study on The Differentiated Classroom by Carol Ann Tomlinson. We want to be the best educators we can be - TAKS or no TAKS. *Children and teachers will always be a little stressed about the tests.* This is normal. Don't we all get a little nervous about a big performance of any kind? Our children are prepared, and I am confident that they will do well on the TAKS tests. More importantly, I think they are receiving an excellent education at Fisher that will serve them well as they move through their academic careers.

Please don't ever hesitate to contact me with questions you might have about our school, the curriculum, etc. I enjoy visiting with parents about a wide range of topics related to our school!