
House Public Education Committee

Testimony on HB 4613



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Students with Emotional Disturbances and Behavior Disorders

Students with emotional disturbances and behavior disorders often struggle with the disruption of their routine caused by STAAR testing. Despite many of these students not having academic deficiencies, STAAR testing can cause severe emotional distress for the students disrupting their learning and instruction. One such student had an extreme level of anxiety about the STAAR and as a result lost control and became physically aggressive and violent during any activity or lesson associated with STAAR testing. On test day, the student threw his desk at his instructor and required a high level of support for the entire day. As a result, the testing was compromised and the student was unable to complete the test. Later in the day, the student finally agreed to complete the test, but purposely, randomly selected answers stating that he did not care about the test or his results. Although the student had the academic capability to complete the STAAR, the test compromised his emotional well-being and resulted in loss of control and physical and emotional outbursts. This meant that the STAAR test provided no information about the student's achievement or growth and instead merely served as a major stressor on the student, his parents, and his teacher.

This example is not an anomaly. Not all students react physically, but students have been so compromised by the stress associated with STAAR testing that they have lost control of their actions and attempted to engage in a variety of extreme behaviors such as, eating the test, urinating on the test, or ripping the test into pieces. The students' emotional or behavioral disorders simply prevent the students from managing the intense pressure associated with STAAR testing. As a result, teachers must spend test day coaching students to attempt the test or calming students in full-blown panic attacks. In the end, many students either never complete the test, or only complete the test by randomly answering questions instead of attempting to answer the questions correctly. The STAAR provides no meaningful data in such cases and only has the effect of disrupting instruction.

Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities

Some students also have severe cognitive disabilities such that the STAAR ALT measures skills beyond their developmental capability. For example, the target of instruction for some students is primarily sensory. Teachers focus on coaxing a change in vocalization in response to a person or object or on trying to get the student to hold their heads up. As a result, even the STAAR ALT test disrupts their highly-structured day focused on post-secondary skills. This disruption results in challenging behaviors such as students refusing to even attempt to select answers on the test without constant prompting from their teacher. A few students have become so agitated by the disruption caused by STAAR that they have attempted to engage in extreme behaviors similar to those described above.

The STAAR ALT requires a significant investment of time from the teacher preparing to administer the exam. The STAAR ALT must be individualized for each student which requires several hours or preparation per student for the teacher administering the test. This time comes from instruction each day, yet the test is often not developmentally appropriate for the severely cognitively disabled students. As a result, the student, if he or she manages to complete the exam, fails the test and parents are left feeling like their student is making no progress, when in reality, the student is learning life skills that will help them live their post-secondary lives.

Other Special Education Students

Many students who qualify for special education services benefit from the high expectations associated with regular assessment of academic achievement. Not all special education students encounter the same difficulties described above. These students should continue to be held to high standards and their academic achievement and progress should continue to be assessed. Failing to assess these students and hold them to high standards can lead to slower growth and lower levels of academic achievement.

Conclusion

Many students in Special Education have both the cognitive and behavioral ability to sit for and perform well on the STAAR. These students should continue to be held to high academic standards and their achievement and growth should continue to be assessed. However, some students with severe emotional disturbances and students with significant cognitive disabilities are unable to complete the STAAR or the STAAR ALT. As a result, these tests serve merely to create additional stresses on the students, parents, and teachers while providing no meaningful data about the students' progress in their education. Providing parents and ARD committees the option to exempt such students, on a case-

by-case basis, using guidelines provided by TEA, from STAAR testing would help to relieve the undue pressure and stress the testing places on these students and their parents and teachers.