



Texas' journey from TABS to TAKS

With stops at TEAMS and TAAS along the way

BY ROSS SHERMAN, ED.D., AND TIMOTHY B. JONES, ED.D.

In the era of No Child Left Behind, you cannot pick up an educational journal without seeing an article that either supports or decries the merits of standards-based education. A common topic of discussion among our graduate students seeking administrative positions is the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) and its impact on Texas education.

We chuckle when we hear someone call standards-based education a “new phenomenon”; it has been a part of life in Texas for 25 years. Join us as we relive a quarter-century of standards-based education. Beware: This is not a journey for the faint of heart!

The state's initial charge

Our story begins in 1978 when the 66th Legislature passed Senate Bill (SB) 350 and charged the State Board of Education (SBOE) with the following responsibilities: periodic review of the state's educational needs; adoption or promotion of plans for meeting those needs; and evaluation of the educational programs' achievement.

The Legislature further stipulated that beginning with the 1979-80 school year and each year thereafter, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) would adopt and administer criterion-referenced assessment instruments that would measure minimum basic

skills competencies in reading, writing and mathematics. TEA's first effort was the Texas Assessment of Basic Skills (TABS), which was designed to provide principals and teachers with information they could use to raise student achievement.

One of us recalls telling a fifth-grade class: “Today we are going to stop what we normally do to take the TABS test, and we will get back to our regular studies tomorrow.” Testing results revealed that nearly all students were passing TABS with minimal difficulty. Perhaps their success can be attributed to the quality of instruction provided, but, more likely, it came about because

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TABS tested students on material they had learned two grade levels earlier.

The first statewide curriculum

The educational buzzword of the early 1980s was “back-to-basics.” Educators and policy-makers focused on students’ knowledge of basic reading and mathematics skills. “All students can learn” became the education battle cry, and TEA responded during the 1985-86 school year by changing its state assessment to the Texas Educational Assessment of Minimum Skills (TEAMS).

The objectives and skills measured by TEAMS differed from those evaluated by TABS. The TEAMS objectives were designed to be congruent with the Essential Elements of the curriculum as identified in the SBOE Rules for Curriculum. The Essential Elements, which were part

of the landmark education reforms in House Bill 72, constituted the first statewide curriculum.

For the first time, students from the Valley to the Panhandle were learning the same curriculum and taking the same test to measure their mastery of the curriculum’s objectives. During this time, some of us acquired appreciation for the adage, “What gets tested gets

taught!” The high school graduates of 1987 had the honor (or the dubious distinction) of being the first class required to pass an exit-level exam in order to receive high school diplomas.

Refining the system

In the late 1980s, the education community realized that implementation of TEAMS had unintentionally resulted

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Testing jargon

- **A criterion-referenced test** measures a student’s mastery of instructional objectives or the curriculum. It does not compare one student with another, nor does it serve to rank students.
- **A norm-referenced test** compares a student’s performance with that of his classmates or that of a larger group of students. It does not measure student mastery of curriculum objectives.

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in a “dumbing down” of the curriculum. The emphasis placed on mastering the minimum skills tested by TEAMS ran counter to the test’s original purpose—measurement of a student’s grasp of the Essential Elements. Therefore, in October 1990, TEA introduced the next chapter in Texas standards-based education: the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). TAAS more comprehensively assessed the instructional targets delineated in the statewide curriculum and focused on higher-order thinking and problem-solving ability. In addition to the criterion-referenced testing program, the state implemented end-of-course exams for Algebra I, Biology I, English II and United States History.

Once again, Texas teachers rose to the occasion, and students across the state began to demonstrate their mastery of the test’s objectives. Student TAAS performance continued to improve throughout the 1990s.

Aligning TEKS and TAKS

Beginning with the 1998-99 school year, the state put in place its first major curriculum revision in 14 years with the introduction of the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). The curriculum approach taken in the TEKS was different from that of the Essential Elements; while the Essential Elements described what teachers should teach, the TEKS outline what students should learn. The difference between the Essential

Elements and the TEKS can also be described in the terms of Bloom’s Taxonomy, a hierarchy used by educators to describe the complexity of instructional activities. While the Essential Elements were based on Bloom’s lowest levels, knowledge and comprehension, the TEKS are more complex, based primarily on the higher levels of application and analysis.

The new curriculum soon brought with it a new test. The latest version of criterion-referenced testing, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), was first officially administered during 2002-03. TAKS is designed to measure TEKS performance and is more rigorous and comprehensive than the former TAAS test.

For the first time, Texas is attempting to implement alignment between the curriculum and the assessment model. In essence, what the state has approved as the official curriculum (TEKS) is being taught in classrooms throughout the state. It is then being tested by the state’s assessment system (TAKS). In theory, this alignment should result in students learning the TEKS.

Whether you refer to it as criterion-referenced testing, standards-based education or “high stakes” accountability testing, Texas has been doing it in some form for 25 years. And, as the assessment system has evolved from a measurement of basic skills to minimum skills to academic skills, Texas teachers have responded to the challenge. New challenges are likely to keep appearing; one should not assume that this process is over, unless one is shortsighted ... or close to retirement! ☺



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