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THE FIX IS IN^{*} – The Houston Press

SHAILA DEWAN | FEBRUARY 25, 1999 | 4:00AM

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When the results of last spring's Texas Assessment of Academic Skills were reported, little Kashmere Gardens Elementary was the star of the show in the Houston Independent School District. The nearly all-black inner-city school had outdone itself since the previous year, when only 54 percent of the school's fourth-graders had passed the reading portion of the all-important TAAS, and even fewer, 37 percent, passed in math, a chillingly low figure for any HISD principal.

The school made a robust effort to make sure not one of its 588 children fell through the cracks, according to Principal Margaret Jefferson, who later told the Houston Chronicle that even the school's custodians, crossing guards and food service personnel tutored students who needed extra help. Colorful reminders blared from the school's billboards and posters: "Soar High on TAAS."

When the scores came back, the news was almost too good to be true: Every single eligible fourth grader passed both the reading and math portions of the test, boosting the school from a rating of "acceptable" to "recognized." District dignitaries swooped down from their perches high in the HISD bureaucracy to congratulate the school. Not a visitor left the campus without a full briefing on how well Kashmere had done. Even the K-Ram cheerleaders aeriaded themselves onto the bandwagon, yelling: "Kashmere Rams gonna bust that test! Swing it all around! Show who's the best!"

"Our success," Jefferson told the Chronicle, "was a deliberate plan."

Just how deliberate is cause for much speculation among Kashmere Gardens's past and current teachers, who asked not to be named for fear of retribution. Some of them suspect that school employees tampered with student answer forms to improve the school's scores, and statistical evidence lends support to what they say. Last year, one third-grade class at Kashmere had 15 times more erasures than the state average, and 100 percent of the answers were changed from wrong to right. Students who perform poorly in their classes and on other tests do mysteriously well on the TAAS. Yet despite the evidence, the question is daunting: Would a school really go so far as to outright cheat?

Although educators are not, on the whole, known to be a disreputable bunch, given the high stakes of the test it's a reasonable question. The party line about the pervasive emphasis on the TAAS is that it's "for the children," but there are other, more immediate reasons to make sure scores are high.

In the world of public education in Texas, no test -- not the SAT, not the final exam, not the weekly spelling quiz, not the entrance test for gifted and talented programs -- comes close to matching the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills in importance. The exit-level TAAS, given beginning in tenth grade, is the one test students must pass before graduating from high school.

Before high school, children take the test every year beginning in third grade, but those results are used to rate campuses and school districts, not students. Schools that consistently score low on the TAAS risk being taken over or even shut down by the state. In some districts, including HISD, principals whose schools don't do well enough can lose their jobs.

Performing well has its rewards. Teachers receive candy, flowers -- and pay bonuses. There are banquets and press conferences, banners and marching bands and, most important in terms of public perception, school ratings: "exemplary" or "recognized" for schools that show muscle, "acceptable" or "low-performing" for those that lag behind. Upper-level management shares in the bounty: HISD's Superintendent of Schools, Rod Paige, can receive a bonus of up to \$25,000 based solely on the district's TAAS scores.

The kids, on the other hand, have to be brainwashed into caring, since the test doesn't particularly affect them. To that end, schools use "TAAS It Up!" pep rallies and motivational slogans, Saturday tutorials and endless practice tests, test-taking strategy books such as *Breaking the Code* and bribes of AstroWorld tickets, parties and special clubs. Much of this institutional hysteria is not, one assumes, what lawmakers envisioned when they put the test in place, but it's legal and some of it might even work.

On the other hand, one might suppose that outright cheating would be difficult to do. What with the TAAS's status as the be all and end all of Texas public education, the state might be expected to put massive roadblocks in the way of any would-be tamperer. But in fact, there is nothing short of integrity to stop a school from artificially raising scores, and the list of required equipment is short: All you need is a No. 2 pencil with a good eraser.

According to Kashmere Gardens Principal Margaret Jefferson, the *Chronicle* reported, the school's motto is "Striving for Exemplary Success." But one former teacher has another version of the Kashmere credo: "Do what you have to do." Instead of crossing guards or cafeteria workers tutoring students (which several teachers say they've never seen), employees describe tests administered with window shades pulled and doors locked, teachers not permitted to give the test to their own classes and poor students earning mysteriously high scores. (Jefferson declined to be interviewed by the Press.)

Two teachers who have moved from Kashmere Gardens to other schools say they were shocked when their normally struggling students received high marks on the TAAS. One says she had an overflow class of particularly low-performing students one year, yet almost all of them received "academic recognition" when their scores came back, even one whom she had tried to get tested for learning disabilities. "When I saw the test scores, I said, 'There's no way those kids passed.' I mean, they couldn't read."

She remembers that a veteran Kashmere Gardens faculty member told her not to worry if her students didn't seem like they could pass the test. "Just help them," the older teacher advised.

The younger teacher, who says her colleague was "a pointer" who would tell children to go back and rework problems they had gotten wrong, replied, "I am not helping them.... That's a disservice to those children because they can't read now, they're not going to read next year, and everybody thinks they can read."

Artificially boosting scores may be one way to draw favorable attention to a school, but it does no justice to children like the one whom the teacher tried to have tested for learning disabilities. His mother, who asked that neither she nor her son be named, says he passed the TAAS every year. Now, she's noticed her son has serious difficulty reading, and she's tutoring him every night to prepare for this year's TAAS.

Records obtained by the Press show that one fourth-grader at Kashmere who received high marks on last year's TAAS -- a 92 out of 94 on reading and an 83 out of 93 on math -- scored well below grade level on the Stanford Achievement Test and, this year, was in danger of failing courses.

Parent volunteer Julia Keller, who until recently helped out in the school library every day, says even she's heard rumors of test-tampering. "I've heard a lot of teachers around that school myself, personally, say that that's what [the school] was doing on these TAAS tests. I just said it was a shame." Keller recently withdrew her twin fifth-graders, Derric and Erric, to transfer them to another school.

Although neither of the former Kashmere Gardens teachers who spoke to the Press observed anyone tampering with tests, both left the school because they were convinced foul play had occurred. "I'm as sure as I can be without seeing [the answer forms] erased and changed," says one. "The scores were a joke."

The procedure for administering the TAAS offers no shortage of opportunities for those who want to "help" students pass. The sealed test booklets and answer forms arrive at a school a day or two before the test is scheduled to be given. The designated campus TAAS coordinator, usually the school counselor, signs for the tests and stores them in a secure place. On each day of testing, the coordinator passes out answer forms and booklets to each teacher in the morning and picks them up at the end of the testing

period. The day after testing, the coordinator delivers the tests to HISD's testing center, and from there the tests are sent to Iowa City, Iowa, to be scored.

Overnight and after the test, the answer forms are in the control of the school administration. During those periods, the testing coordinator is permitted to darken light answers and erase stray marks on the answer forms to prevent the computer from misreading them.

The Kashmere teachers' suspicion of tampering is supported by statistical evidence in the form of a little-known and, until recently, little-used document called the erasure analysis. When tests are scored, the Texas Education Agency's testing contractor, National Computer Systems, scans each answer form for erasures and notes whether erased answers were changed from wrong to right, right to wrong or wrong to wrong. The resulting erasure analysis lists every classroom in the state whose kids had an especially high average numbers of erasures (the statewide average lies between zero and one erasure per child; the report lists classes with averages greater than three standard deviations from the mean).

A high number of erasures is not in itself evidence of cheating. The analysis tells you, for example, that in 1997 one of Scott Elementary's fifth-grade classes had a whopping eight erasures per child, and 96 percent of them went from wrong to right, but it doesn't tell you how or why. A class could have started at the wrong place on an answer form. Or one child who made a lot of mistakes could throw off the class average. Or an especially conscientious teacher could train her students to double-check their work. But mostly, those would be isolated incidents; a class showing up once on the erasure analysis is not cause for concern. What's interesting, however, is that some teachers show up year after year, and some entire schools show up much more frequently than others.

Over the past three years, 36 Kashmere Gardens classes appeared on the erasure analysis, more than any other HISD school, and 12 more than the school with the next-highest number of appearances, Key Middle School. With a 41-point improvement in math, only one other elementary school in the Northeast District, E.O. Smith, made gains that even came close to rivaling Kashmere Gardens's math scores. Most who improved did so by four to 12 percentage points. Despite its gains in reading and math, Kashmere's passing rate declined two percentage points on the writing test, which is more difficult to tamper with because it includes a written composition.

Furthermore, Kashmere's appearances on the erasure analysis correlate with the school's scores. In 1996, when the school was rated "exemplary," 16 classes show up on the erasure analysis. In 1997, when Kashmere Gardens librarian William Price says the school had been warned that the district would be closely monitoring its TAAS administration, there were five classes on the erasure analysis. The school's

rating dropped two notches, to "acceptable." In 1998, when scores skyrocketed to nearly 100 percent passing, so did the number of classes appearing on the erasure analysis -- to 15.

Even with that kind of evidence, pinning down perpetrators isn't easy, as former HISD TAAS coordinator Carl Shaw knows only too well. Shaw oversaw HISD's department of student assessment from 1981 to 1995, when he left for a job as head of research and evaluation at Fort Worth ISD. Early on, Shaw advocated the state's accountability system, and he has served on numerous state committees dealing with assessment and the TAAS. Now he works for himself as an independent, Austin-based consultant who's developed assessments used in alternative education programs.

While Shaw, a bluntly spoken man with a hint of country twang, supports the idea of testing Texas students, he's disappointed in both the way the TAAS is structured and the way it's administered. He became an independent consultant because he grew weary of what he calls the "conspiracy" of an educational establishment which, he says, would find any way possible to conceal the truth about student performance. Cheating, he stresses, was only one of those ways.

"There's so dang much cheating in Houston," Shaw says, but the district's attitude about punishing cheaters was, he adds, "blase."

"Unless the perpetrator broke down and confessed and offered to resign, nothing ever happened," Shaw says. "I can think of one case where it was so blatant that we got involved and got all the little kids interviewed, and by the time we got it to a hearing a year later all the kids had forgotten about it, every one of them. It was kind of strange."

Although he declined to name any specific schools, Shaw remembers another case where, he believes, a school got ahold of the TAAS writing topic early and used it to coach students before the test. "The principal lied and they got by with it. They made up all kinds of bull crap. When you see this stuff, and you see the product of kids' efforts over the years, you know when you're being lied to and when you're not."

It was thanks to Shaw that National Computer Systems began doing the erasure analysis back in 1993 or 1994. Shaw suspected an HISD school (not Kashmere Gardens) of tampering, so he worked with the contractors to devise a way to screen answer forms. Although the analysis appeared to confirm his suspicions, Shaw says, nothing happened to the school; even if tampering is detected, there's often no way to determine who did it. Furthermore, Shaw admits, cheating investigations are not a task anyone is eager to undertake if they don't have to. In the case of the tampering, he says, "The teachers didn't know this had occurred, and they were so darn proud of what happened ... the pride was there before we figured out

what was going on." In that case, Shaw says, the threat of investigation was enough: "As soon as the method [of tampering] got detected it kind of went away."

That might be the case again this year. When deputy superintendent of school administration Faye Bryant discovered the erasure analysis, she responded by notifying every campus TAAS coordinator of its existence. She warned in a memo that the district would more closely monitor schools "during and after" TAAS administrations. "With the growing accountability attached to TAAS scores, it is essential that you maintain the highest integrity during the test," Bryant wrote.

Bryant may not have been aware of the analysis before this year because the district doesn't put it to regular use. In fact, HISD hadn't even noticed a stark fact that begs for explanation: while many of Texas's 1,042 school districts never register excessive erasures, a full 31 percent of the classes that show up on the statewide erasure analysis for the past three years are from HISD, which has only 5 percent of the state's students. Furthermore, erasures become a problem when school ratings are involved: Over the past three years, 71 HISD eighth-grade classes have shown up on the reading, writing and math portions of the TAAS, while only 14 have shown up on the science and social studies portions, which are not included in accountability ratings.

Asked to explain the district's high occurrence of erasures, Chief of Staff for Instructional Services Susan Sclafani, the district's second-in-command, said, "We were only concerned about what was happening in our district, so I didn't even look at how the numbers compared."

The district also hadn't noticed that of the 29 schools with more than five classes showing up on the analysis in the past three years, 26 of them are in one of three sub-districts: the Northeast, headed before this year by Superintendent Charles Herbert; South Central, headed before this year by Superintendent Andre Hornsby; or South, headed by Larry Alexander. The numbers don't surprise American Federation of Teachers president Gayle Fallon. Those districts, she notes, have higher levels of poverty and more low-performing schools, schools that might have difficulty coping with cranked-up pressure to pass the TAAS. Beyond that, Fallon cites a fear-based management style. "Whenever we hear something negative," she says, "South and South Central show up." Fallon says the supers in those districts had an "autocratic, my-way-or-the-highway" leadership style. "Consequently," she says, "We found principals that were really afraid of their bosses."

District spokesman Terry Abbott says it's possible such statistical clustering is a "coincidence."

"HISD is 25 percent larger than the next largest school district in Texas," Abbott says. "Is it conceivable that we could make up 30 percent of the erasure report? Sure. That doesn't mean there's a problem

there....In order to determine if there's a problem there, we have to investigate. And that is what we're doing." Last July, the district undertook an investigation of eight schools -- Kashmere Gardens, Frost, Gregg, Hobby, Montgomery and Scott elementaries and Key and Cullen middle schools -- in a massive operation that some have taken to calling EraserGate.

An initial review of the erasure data, Abbott points out, "gives HISD reason to further investigate the scores from only 56 classes -- or less than one-half of one percent" of HISD's total. But according to district documents, the 56 classes aren't the only ones with problems, they're just the first group the district chose to examine.

EraserGate began after the 1998 TAAS, when HISD received "an anonymous tip that some teachers had improperly aided test takers," according to a July press release. Abbott says that tip prompted Paige's office to request the past five years of erasure data from the Texas Education Agency. After screening out the less egregious classes (such as those where less than 75 percent of the erasures went from wrong to right), the district identified 32 schools from 1998 alone that warranted a closer look, according to a draft memo by Manager of Student Assessment Sandra Kriendler, who declined to be interviewed by the Press.

Because reviewing individual answer forms and test documents would take so much time, Kriendler recommended that only the ten "most suspect" schools be investigated first (ultimately, time constraints reduced that to eight). From there, the district could decide "whether or not it wishes to invest more time and effort on the remaining schools." Kriendler's office has turned over the investigation of the first eight schools to the district's Professional Standards department, which is interviewing the TAAS coordinator and other employees at each school.

Teachers' union officials worry that the district will peg teachers for cheating, when -- they say -- principals are the ones with more incentive and opportunity to tamper with tests. When asked, Chief of Staff Sclafani insists the district is investigating "campuses," but HISD does appear predisposed to the idea that EraserGate will unearth only one type of guilty party. "If the investigators have reason to believe there was indeed wrongdoing," a district press release on the investigation says, "... the teachers will be banned from administering the test."

Lack of trust is one reason investigators may come up empty-handed when they try to interview employees. Because principals have been given so much power, Fallon says, employees -- particularly office aides who are likely to witness cheating but have less job protection than teachers -- are often afraid to speak up. "When it comes right down to it," says Jon Dansby, president of the Houston Educators Association, "Nobody's going to back them up."

Shaw agrees. "The fear factor in the district keeps people paralyzed," he says.

If you ask teacher Ada Johnson, a former counselor at Scott Elementary, she'll tell you she had a "wonderful relationship" with her boss, Principal Artice Hedgemon, until she tried to report cheating on the TAAS in 1996. In an administrative hearing, Johnson testified that she saw teachers pointing out answers and correcting children's work on the TAAS and informed the principal of the matter. When Johnson, who said she was so close to Hedgemon she served as the "unofficial" assistant principal, followed up on her allegations, Hedgemon became "very cold and very distant," Johnson testified. The next month, Hedgemon told Johnson that her counseling position was being cut.

Johnson, a district employee since 1970 whose job performance as a counselor had been evaluated at 4.3 to 4.66 on a 5-point scale, spent the next two years "awaiting assignment" in the lounge of the Northeast District office. During that period, the district filled 59 counselor positions.

Finally, Johnson, who taught English, a TAAS subject, when she was a classroom teacher, was assigned to teach high school social studies, a position where, she noted, "I would not be around the TAAS-taking procedure." The board of trustees, saying Johnson offered no hard evidence that she had attempted to report cheating on the TAAS test, denied her request to be assigned as a counselor, a more lucrative position than teacher. Deputy superintendent Bryant told the Press that "Ada Johnson has a long history of problems with the district" but refused to elaborate.

The district is now investigating Scott Elementary.

Ultimately, the district depends on those who witness impropriety to come forward; if HISD doesn't hear about cheating, it can't investigate it. But cases like Johnson's appear to support what many say about HISD: The district cultivates a hear-no-evil, see-no-evil culture, and there's no reward for those who want to call attention to wrongdoing. "The retaliation is not subtle," says union president Gayle Fallon. "It's blatant."

Yet just as cheating can be difficult to prove, so can retaliation. Often, as with Johnson's case, it's one person's word against another. The administrator is the one who's likely to be believed, Fallon says.

Fallon says her union once had a case where a principal directed teachers' aides to alter a test and, fearing the loss of their jobs, they complied. When they tried to come forward, Fallon asked the district to grant them immunity, and the district refused. Without protection, Fallon advised the aides not to report what they had seen. Houston Educators Association president Dansby says his union has been in similar situations. "If Governor Bush granted amnesty, his phone would be ringing off the hook," Dansby says.

Chief of Staff Sclafani contends it's difficult to protect someone who has participated in improper handling of the TAAS. "Somebody who comes to us in advance we certainly can protect," she says. "Somebody who participates in cheating, it's a little difficult to say that they shouldn't be held accountable. I think every teacher understands that the maintenance of their certification is dependent upon their ethical behavior, directive or no directive."

Nonetheless, Sclafani says, the district has tried to alleviate some of the fear of retaliation by implementing a whistle-blower policy and installing a hot line to take anonymous complaints. "We know that in some cases employees don't have full confidence in the process that will be used. And we want them to -- we want them to know that this district stands for what's right. And we need them to stand with us on what's right. And we've given them an anonymous way to bring the information forward so that we can deal with the action and make sure that nobody is working in an environment that is less than totally ethical and legal."

Still, the perception persists that the district does not welcome complaints. Fallon says she tells union members not to use the hot line because she doesn't trust the district to keep the information private. In a termination hearing that Sclafani presided over, M.C. Williams Principal Roy Morgan testified that his supervisor showed him a hot line complaint accusing Morgan of abusing students. The principal said the hot line transmittal noted when and from where the call was made, and from that he was able to deduce -- correctly -- who had made the call.

Abbott says hot line transmittals don't record where a call emanates from, adding that the principal was most likely confused about what he saw on the form.

Still, principals in HISD have a virtual fiefdom when it comes to who works for them. They can transfer, or even fire, employees, who then have to fight their way through the system. "[Employees have] all these procedures to turn things in," says Fallon. "Of course, their life is hell after they do it. Heads, they're screwed. Tails, they're screwed."

Sometimes allegations of cheating simply disappear between the district's layers of bureaucracy. Suzanne Ely, who taught at Cornelius Elementary in the South Central District in the 1996-97 school year, reportedly told the district of cheating. Ely, now a graduate student at Harvard Divinity School, confirmed that she made such allegations but declined to give details, adding that the district took no action. According to Abbott, the district has no record of any communication from Ely, and an open records request turned up no allegations concerning Cornelius Elementary.

One of the teachers who left Kashmere Gardens also reported cheating beginning in 1994 -- twice to Carl Shaw, whom the teacher says advised a transfer to a different school (Shaw says while he doesn't remember the exact incident, under certain circumstances, such as a teacher unwilling to make a signed allegation, he might have told a teacher to transfer), and once to an official in the Northeast District office. "The district knew about it," the teacher says.

Bryant insists the district vigilantly pursues any hint of suspicion. "Any time we give TAAS or any other test, if there are rumors, there are allegations, we must follow up and check everyone if it takes us a year or two," Bryant says. "It's our obligation, and that's what we sign our name to."

Last May, North District Superintendent Erasmo Teran received a letter alleging that TAAS booklets at one of his schools were tampered with. The letter was signed "Berry Elementary Staff." Subsequent signed letters from individual teachers complained that, among other things, Berry Principal Graciela Kavulla had announced that the school was "exemplary" shortly after the test was administered (but before it was scored), and that campus TAAS coordinator Patricia Morgan had been seen going through test booklets with a pencil in hand, an activity that's bound to look suspicious to those who don't know that coordinators can remove stray marks.

The investigation documents provide an inside view of how schools handle the TAAS, and of how HISD handles its investigations.

Last year, Berry's TAAS performance jumped from 57 percent of kids passing reading, writing and math to 94.5 percent passing, a leap Kavulla attributed to an aggressive plan she developed over the summer of 1997. In her interview with Mike Martin, who investigated the case, Kavulla said the school closely monitored each child's progress throughout the year. In a school as small as Berry, Kavulla succinctly pointed out, "Seven, ten kids can knock it out for you."

Kavulla's plan focused on using test-taking "strategies," such as underlining key words and drawing arrows when rounding numbers. Children who used the strategies successfully on practice tests were rewarded with, among other things, movies and popcorn. They were told if they used the strategies on the TAAS, they would get a trip to AstroWorld.

That wasn't all they got. One teacher interviewed by Martin, Kristy Mikus, said Kavulla gave teachers candy and instructed them to give it out during the TAAS test to kids who were using the strategies. If a child was not using the strategies, Mikus said, Kavulla told her to whisper "Use the strategies" to the child during the test. Mikus also said Kavulla encouraged her to send low-performing kids to the nurse if they weren't feeling well.

Such practices, however questionable, were minor points compared to the question of whether or not children's answers had been changed after the fact. As campus TAAS coordinator, Morgan was responsible for distributing and collecting the tests. She told investigators that several office aides and one teacher helped her erase stray marks from the answer forms and said she checked over every test booklet to make sure that kids were using the strategies. She and the other employees who "cleaned up" answer forms all denied changing any students' answers or seeing anyone changing answers. A review of the answer forms, according to Martin's report, uncovered no evidence that tests had been tampered with.

However, interview transcripts reveal a few troubling details that never made it into Martin's report. One was Mikus's description of rewarding kids with candy during the test. Another was that an office aide who inspected answer forms, Mirna Garcia, told Martin she was told to put aside those where students had left questions blank.

Even more startling, Morgan was permitted to keep the answer forms for three extra days. "I always turned them in late and there's never been a problem," Morgan told the investigator. "They've always said, 'Just get them there as soon as you can, as soon as you've finished what you have to do.' "

Her admission was not enough to alarm the district. When asked about it, Teran issued the ultimate see-no, hear-no response: "There is no information that the school regularly turned in the test late."

Still another odd finding raised no official eyebrows: Morgan made her own answer key for the test. "Ms. Morgan denied that she took the TAAS but acknowledged that she did write down several question numbers and corresponding answer letters on a yellow tablet," the report says. "Ms. Morgan also acknowledged that she did in fact use the yellow tablet to compare several students [sic] answers." As to why Morgan wanted to compare students' answers, no explanation is offered.

Still, the district had decided to investigate Kavulla, not Morgan, and Martin said he could not confirm charges that Kavulla violated testing regulations. As far as Morgan and her assistants' reviewing test forms to see how children performed and checking booklets to see if children used strategies, Martin wrote that "one can interpret" such activities as a violation of TAAS regulations, which state, "There must be no unauthorized viewing of the contents of test booklets and answer documents" and "No person may review student responses without specific permission."

The district insists the investigation uncovered no evidence of wrongdoing.

In still another case, HISD decided there was no problem without even investigating. In the spring of 1997, an anonymous call prompted Sandra Kriendler's office to review erasure data on Kashmere High School. Kriendler's office reported that there were "a significant number" of students who had more than

75 percent of their erasures going from wrong to right. Furthermore, the report noted, "Several test booklets were marked with the original answer choice, yet were not marked with the change in answer choice. Others showed the change, but whereas the original marking was in marker or pencil, the change was made in a different medium. This suggests that someone other than the student made the change."

Kriendler recommended that Professional Standards and Student Assessment interview staff and students, that students' test scores be compared with their previous attempts to pass the exit-level exam, and that the district "should give the TEA periodic updates on the progress of our investigation."

The district did none of those things. An open records request turned up nothing further about Kashmere High. Asked to explain, Abbott provided a somewhat squirmy account of events.

First, Abbott said the area superintendent for the Northeast District, who at that time was Charles Herbert, had his staff readminister the TAAS to the Kashmere students. "The state provided an alternate test," Abbott said. "The kids did better, many of them, than on the original test. Obviously, this was the best way to handle the situation. If there was some sort of impropriety with the original testing, certainly a new test would answer that question."

When TEA senior director of assessment Keith Cruse said he had no knowledge of alternate tests being issued, the Press questioned Abbott again. Abbott queried district personnel and relayed that the district had used a previously released TAAS (the state releases them after they're given) and scored the tests in-house. "Using a released test made sure that it wasn't the same test [the students took before]," Abbott said.

Generally speaking, this sort of retesting would put any doubts about test security to rest. But in order to get valid results the test must be readministered quickly -- within four weeks of the original test. "If you went six weeks or longer you would expect increased scores," Cruse says.

Pressed further, Abbott again queried, and again relayed that the tests had been readministered the following January, eight months later. By then the 1997 TAAS would have been released, so how did the district make sure the kids weren't taking the exact same test they took in the spring?

Well, now that you mention it, Abbott said, they didn't. "The test was the same test. Would the children have remembered the questions? No. If so, the math scores wouldn't have gone down slightly."

Press: Wait a minute, the math scores went down?

Abbott: "On math, 133 were tested the first time and 88.4 percent passed. On the retest, 105 were tested, but only 69 of the original kids who took the test. On the math retest, the passing rate was 56 percent."

Okay, bear with us for a minute while we review: Kriendler found troubling evidence of tampering on Kashmere's TAAS tests. Students -- a substantially different group of students -- took the same test again, eight months later, and the number who passed math dropped more than 30 percentage points. From this, the district concluded that there was no substance to the allegations that someone, or many someones, at Kashmere High cheated.

The Texas Education Agency has very little to say about the district's foot-dragging. In the opinion of those who work at TEA, HISD is problem-free and the TAAS is adequately secure. After all, as the agency's associate commissioner for curriculum, assessment and technology Ann Smisko is quick to point out, every educator who handles the test signs a security oath.

Signed oaths, much like group prayer or homeopathic medicines, might have some beneficial effect, but it's hard to argue that they function materially to prevent cheating. On the other hand, they're cheap. More concrete security measures such as outside proctors, tamper-proof baggies for answer forms, or extra seals on booklets cost too much, the agency claims. "Just simple things like that just increase the price tremendously," says Joe Lucio, head of the TEA's TAAS Security Task Force. "We're testing over two million kids per year, so that's a lot of money if you put something per student."

On the local level, too, resources are scarce, HISD has so little manpower to investigate cheating, the district won't even venture a guess as to when EraserGate will be completed. And although some Texas districts have implemented their own safeguards, such as picking up the test from schools every night, HISD has yet to follow their lead. "There is no test that can be secured," Fallon says, "if the administration doesn't want it to be."

Since the Texas Education Agency doesn't put resources into test security on the front end, one might assume they'd be extra vigilant on the back end. But while the agency has a special data unit that systematically scrutinizes "red-flag" statistics, such as absences or exemptions for children who are in special ed or have limited English skills, to see if they're higher than normal, no one at the agency systematically reviews the erasure analysis. In interviews conducted in December and January, four administrators -- Smisko, Lucio, director of assessment Keith Cruse and Kay Thomas, executive assistant to the associate commissioner for accountability Linda Mora -- told the Press that they do not use the analysis.

"There just haven't been so many [reports] that we have determined to be real cheating that we felt the need to make a change in the [testing] procedure," Smisko said.

On January 22, however, the agency issued letters to 11 school districts including the Houston-area HISD, Fort Bend and North Forest, asking them to investigate excessive erasures. "It's the first time we've sent out a letter like that," says TEA spokeswoman Debbie Ratcliffe. The letter, signed by Commissioner of Education Mike Moses, was drafted by Cruse, Mora and Smisko, Ratcliffe says.

The agency asked HISD to investigate 15 schools (including seven of the EraserGate eight) by April 1. Abbott points out that this is 5.2 percent of HISD's schools, while in the smaller districts, Fort Bend has been asked to investigate 15 percent of its schools and North Forest 20 percent.

That will be a tough deadline for HISD, which has yet to forward its investigation of Berry Elementary, dated November 2, to Lucio.

Lucio, who says he's never heard of Berry even though the investigation was reported by local media, is supposed to review all probes of TAAS-related improprieties within 30 days. After Lucio's review, the state can decide to punish educators even if school districts don't.

After the Berry investigation, HISD quietly got rid of Principal Kavulla (her contract was not renewed), a curious move considering the school was rated exemplary, and the allegations against Kavulla were supposedly "unfounded." Had the district -- which, Abbott says, is planning to submit the investigation report -- let the TEA review their findings, Kavulla might have faced further sanctions.

"It's always, 100 percent of the time, they protect the administrators," says union president Dansby. He adds that typically that protection extends to even those who are fired.

As for Kashmere High, Lucio says he has yet to receive a final report from the district. A year and a half has passed since the incident. "The last I heard from them, the investigation was still ongoing," Lucio says. Neither he nor his supervisor, Cruse, knew about the district's in-house readministration of the tests, or the precipitous drop in scores. "Normally, I should know about these things," Lucio says.

Yet Lucio is not losing any sleep over the matter. In fact, he affably offered excuses for HISD's tardiness, including the explanation that Kriendler has only had her job for "a couple of years."

"I'm pretty easygoing on this," Lucio says. "I'm not one of those people who goes around and actually uses strong-arm tactics."

The state's cavalier attitude stops just short of encouraging cheating. In fact, the way Shaw sees it, the Texas Education Agency has no more incentive than school districts to strong-arm cheaters. "There's certainly a suspicion in my mind that professionalism does not prevail in the state of Texas when it comes

to testing and...making sure that everything is proper," Shaw says. "The agency is a political entity. They depend on their survival from the legislature and they're not about to shake anybody up."

As proof that the TEA really is on top of things, Smisko points to a major case last year where high-level officials in Austin ISD improved the district's ratings by manipulating data with what the agency called "laser-like precision." The fact that they were detected, she says, shows the system is working.

But the agency didn't catch on to the statistical sleight-of-hand until Austin schools inadvertently tipped them off, by calling to find out why their ratings had not yet been changed.

Even then, nothing happened to Austin ISD. "There is no punishment for the district itself other than the high level of embarrassment this will cause them," TEA spokeswoman Ratcliffe admitted to the Austin-American Statesman. "There is no legal sanction for the district." The case has prompted a state legislative proposal to make TAAS data-tampering a felony, and last week the Travis County Attorney announced that a grand jury would review evidence of possible criminal activity on the part of the district.

Smisko says Commissioner Moses has "aggressively pursued" complaints of cheating on the TAAS, yet the agency has revoked only one certificate for TAAS-related offenses, back in 1993. Since then, it has reprimanded or suspended certificates on five occasions.

"The bottom line is, we think educators are moral and ethical," says Smisko. "We believe they're doing the right thing and they're setting a standard for kids, and they're not in general, en masse, cheating on this test."

That may be true, but the incentive to cheat is hard to ignore. For every educator who comes in contact with the TAAS, high scores equate to money. The district gives employees two kinds of incentive pay. One is based on a campus accountability rating (determined primarily by TAAS scores), and divided among all school employees (except the principal), based on salary range, which means two teachers at the same school receive about the same amount, regardless of their classes' relative performance. The average payment last year, according to district figures, was \$627.

Principals don't get incentive pay, but the majority in HISD earn \$7,500 extra a year in exchange for having "performance contracts" that allow them to be terminated if they don't do their job. Clearly, that job includes improving TAAS scores. "A teacher doesn't have, economically, that much to lose if they have a bad TAAS year," Fallon points out. "The principals can find themselves unemployed."

Furthermore, incentives can work to the detriment of inner-city schools by driving teachers out. "Teachers have a very easy way to improve their TAAS scores," Fallon says. "Change schools."

The money trail leads all the way to the top. Superintendent of Schools Rod Paige has a vested interest in seeing the district's TAAS scores rise, as the amount of his annual bonus -- up to 25 grand -- is based solely on how well the district performs on TAAS. Texas Association of School Boards spokesperson Barbara Williams calls such contract provisions "rare." For two of the past three years, Paige has received all \$25,000. In fact, Paige can get his bonus even if the district's TAAS scores go down, as long as the state's overall scores decline more.

Money aside, district and state both place a huge emphasis on the TAAS -- soaring scores are, after all, a great draw for businesses and good bragging rights for politicians. With Governor Bush's proposal to end social promotion by keeping children who don't pass the test from moving on to the next grade, a plan that gives children a genuine motive to perform well, the test's importance will only grow.

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Critics of Bush's proposal complain the TAAS is a simple yardstick that measures a complex system. As long as the TAAS is the only yardstick, schools will continue to find ways to circumnavigate it.

"[Cheating] is just one example of the systemic problem of trying to impact results beyond what the teaching of the children would reflect," says Shaw. Shaw points out that Texas' system is not unusual. In virtually every other state testing program, those who are measured and rewarded by the test are the same as those who administer it.

No matter how flawed the system, though, the public still perceives that high TAAS scores signify good schools. And for those who would rather send out the cheerleaders and marching bands than implement instructional methods that work for children, it's a simple matter to make sure a school has high marks to flaunt when the TAAS scores come back in the fall. "Those were the most sickening days, when we were talking about TAAS," remembers one teacher who left Kashmere Gardens after five years. "It would be like over and over; it would be shoved down your throat--'We're so wonderful! We're so great.' it was too obvious. When you're good, you're good, and you just let it lie."

Next week: Is the TAAS a wimp among tests?

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March 4-10, 1999 FREE

**Insider:
Has Robert Eckels
lost his mind?**

Volume 11, Number 9

**“THE WEATHER REPORTER
SAID THAT THE PROBABILITY OF RAIN IS
20%.**

**WHAT IS THE PROBABILITY
THAT IT WILL
NOT RAIN?”**

— TAAS HIGH SCHOOL EXIT EXAM



**THE TEXAS EDUCATION AGENCY
THINKS THIS IS HIGH SCHOOL MATH.
DO YOU? BY SHAILA DEWAN**



**Catch the spirit:
Ghost hunters hot on
the trail of ectoplasm
By Wendy Grossman**

**A tender film
tracks a
tough hero in
*My Name Is Joe***

**Nara
makes lunch
boxes for
grownups**

ADD
ING
IT
ALL
UP

WHAT DOES
IT
REALLY MEAN
TO PASS
THE
TAAS?

THE HOUSTON PRESS: Adding It All Up

SHAILA DEWAN | MARCH 4, 1999 | 4:00AM

Even with the generally buoyant, election-stoked mood about public education in Texas, you don't have to look far to find the bad news. No farther than the comfortable north Houston living room of Larry and Stephanie Johnson on a Wednesday night.

Ever since Stephanie's teenage son, Stecil, died in a car wreck in 1997, 30 or so of his friends have gathered each week to talk about their lives. Most sit in a big circle, casually flopping against one another. One young woman has brought along her daughter, a toddler who leans back on the couch and falls asleep. Crisp athletic gear and Afros rival preppy, tucked-in T-shirts and fades. The mood of the group has changed over time, lightening from the nihilistic adolescent depression after Stecil's death, when his friends were convinced they would share his fate.

The topic of the night is education. High school senior Stayve Thomas, an outgoing rapper who says he considers it his responsibility to make school "entertaining for [his] peers," has brought in a friend who dropped out with only four months to go. Stayve's goal is to enlist the members of STECIL (the name was converted into an acronym for "Strengthened Through Education -- Community Inspired Leaders") to help him convince Komesha Mitchell to go back to school. If she does, he says, he'll marry her.

Neither his promise nor the conversation appears to sway Komesha, who has enrolled in GED classes and says, "School just wasn't for me." For some of these mostly black teens, questions about high school come down mostly to this: Do they go, or do they drop out? Only 50 percent of African-Americans in the state who enter ninth grade get a diploma four years later, and that number hasn't changed as TAAS scores have, to use HISD's term, "soared."

The group talks about favorite teachers and not-so-favorites, such as the coach whose idea of a history class was showing films every day. One student, a football player headed for a scholarship at Michigan State, mentions almost off-handedly that he was permitted to cheat on tests because as an athlete he had "pull" with teachers and administrators. He expects college to be easy, he says, because if you're a football player "all you have to do is be in class."

Those who have already made it to college have a different story: Their first semester came as a shock. All of them felt ill prepared for upper-level work. Asked if they felt high school administrators cared for them, one says, "They care about us passing TAAS and getting out of there."

Another chimes in, "They care about us passing TAAS so they can look a little good."

Across the state, the headlines are so regular as to form a refrain: TAAS scores are up; TAAS scores are up; TAAS scores are up. The Texas Assessment of Academic Skills, which tests primarily reading, math and writing, is the way Texas measures its education system. It is given in grades three through eight and again in high school, comes in English and Spanish versions, and sometimes -- to the learning disabled -- is even administered orally. A school's passing rate on the TAAS is the primary way parents, districts and the state can tell how well the school is doing; it's the main factor in a school's rating of "exemplary," "recognized," "acceptable" or "low-performing." Since 1994, statewide passing rates have risen from 60 to 84 percent in math, 76 to 87 percent in reading and 79 to 87 percent in writing. The Houston Independent School District's scores have increased even more than the state's.

The state spends more than \$20 million a year to give the TAAS test, which is considered the linchpin of the state's accountability system. A growing number of states are struggling to implement good accountability systems, which have several components: clear curriculum standards; school report cards or ratings; sanctions for poor performance and assessment, a way to measure whether schools are meeting standards. Texas's accountability system is considered advanced compared to most states and rates well in independent reviews.

Yet not much scrutiny has been given to the assessment component, the TAAS. In fact, with all the hoopla over the passing rate, the test itself is almost overlooked -- not surprising considering that the passing rate is an easy-to-grasp number, while it is necessary to plow through countless studies, stats and technical data to get at the heart of the TAAS.

What does it mean to pass the TAAS? In practical terms, except for the fact that a student must pass it to get his high school diploma, nothing. It doesn't mean a student can get into college. It doesn't mean a student can do high school math. All it means, if outside assessments are to be believed, is that a student can pass a pretty easy test.

"Fred poured an eight-ounce glass of juice from a full quart pitcher. How many ounces of juice were left in the pitcher?"

This TAAS question requires only simple subtraction, but if a student doesn't know how many ounces are in a quart, he might be stymied. No problem. Just flip back a few pages and find a weights and measurements conversion chart to make things a little easier, although there are still a few extra calculations needed to get from ounces to quarts. But by what grade should a student know how to answer this question?

The state thinks students should master subtraction, with the help of a conversion chart, by the time they take the exit-level TAAS test, the one kids have to pass before they graduate from high school. This is the same test that asks students to estimate the length of a pencil: Is it 19 millimeters, 19 centimeters or 1.9 meters? It's the same test that Texas Education Agency Commissioner Mike Moses uses to refute charges that the TAAS test is too easy -- "Let's take the exit-level math test," Moses says. "I think you will be surprised."

The test walks students through more challenging questions, such as "Which ordered pair is the point of intersection of the lines $y = 2x + 1$ and $2y = x - 4$?" On an algebra test, a student might have to graph those equations. On the TAAS, the lines are already graphed. All the student has to do is look at the graph and count over two and down three, to where the lines intersect. Still, there are more difficult problems: One asks students to find the lateral surface area of a cylinder. Most people might find that one tough, but once again the problem isn't as daunting as it could be; the necessary formulas are in the front of the booklet.

If these questions don't seem like high school-level material, it's because they're not. Although TEA officials insist the exit-level math test queries students on "early high school" skills, according to their own specifications it tests only curriculum for the eighth grade.

By contrast, a 12-year-old in Japan has to answer questions like this: "Jenny wanted to purchase two dozen pencils and a pen. Those items cost \$8.45, and she did not have enough money. So she decided to purchase eight fewer pencils and paid \$6.05. How much was a pen?"

Concerned about studies showing that American students can't compete internationally, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) looked at five American eighth-grade math tests: three widely used commercial tests and two state tests, including the TAAS. According to a panel of teachers and education experts, the TAAS had the lowest expectations for students, with all but two questions rated "easy" on a scale of easy, medium and hard (the other two were "medium"). Though none of the other tests rated well, the TAAS is the only one of the five that is all multiple choice.

Another report, this one funded by the Texas Education Agency and written by Temple Independent School District Director of Math and Science Kathleen Coburn, notes that 71 percent of questions on the exit-level TAAS cover material from the fifth-, sixth- and seventh-grade levels. Coburn says a generation of downgraded expectations in math has created chronically underprepared teachers. "Now nobody even knows what mathematics are. They think it's just computation. ...It just shows we've got a huge conceptual problem. There's something rotten. Something's very wrong."

Even more damning for the TAAS, a recent, more thorough independent review found the reading portion of the test for fourth, eighth and tenth grades had gotten easier over time which, if true, would render the state's rising scores meaningless. Harvard researcher Sandra Stotsky noted that the total number of words, the length of the passages and the number of unusual words (words not found on a standard list of 3,000 common words) had declined dramatically since 1995. That year, the difficulty of the passages, Stotsky says, was evenly distributed above and below the fourth-grade level. In 1998, however, there were more passages below grade level than at grade level, and none above.

Over that period of time, the percentage of fourth-graders passing the test increased from 79 to 89.

A similar study poked holes in the math portion of the TAAS. Although the TEA says firmly that all TAAS questions are "on grade level," researchers Paul Clopton, Wayne Bishop and David Klein said questions on the high school TAAS ranged from third to seventh grade, with most falling at the sixth-grade level.

The researchers said while the math test stayed at the same level of difficulty from year to year, it "focused on raising achievement only to a minimal level," a level "not consistent with the high expectations for mathematics achievement that are being called for from one end of the country to another."

For a school to be rated "acceptable," only 45 percent of its students have to pass the TAAS, though that number increases by 5 percentage points each year.

"By [the TEA's] own standards," says George Scott, president of the watchdog group that commissioned the two studies, "thousands and thousands of kids don't measure up. This is a vicious cycle of distortion that makes people believe these 'acceptable,' these 'recognized,' these 'exemplary' tags really mean something."

Every government institution has a critic like George Scott. As president of the Tax Research Association, he's adversarial, he's impolitic, he splits hairs and tracks inconsistency with an eagle eye. He's fed up, persistent, and he demands data and explanations. The game Scott plays with the Texas Education Agency is like a game of schoolyard tetherball: They spin data one way; he spins it the other.

Defenders of the state's accountability system call Scott -- off the record -- an obsessed, publicity-hungry man whose idea of constructive criticism is to call a press conference and release his latest study. Scott, who resigned from the Commissioner's Accountability Advisory Group in a huff after the agency tried to block him from getting some data due to pending litigation, maintains that the public has the right to know exactly what the much-trumpeted gains in education really mean.

John Stevens, executive director of the Texas Business and Education Coalition, hotly defends the education agency from attackers like Scott. "The people doing this are not charlatans and manipulators. I know they are insulted by accusations that they are simply manipulating the system and these do not reflect real gains," Stevens says. "These are good and honorable professionals who are doing a good job for Texas. ...I think it's unfair for [Commissioner Mike Moses's] leadership and their work to be denigrated by people whom I believe have an ideological and political agenda to discredit public schools. It's not fair."

The state's defenders are quick to accuse critics of being anti-public-school, a blanket defense that rebuffs earnest critics and snipers alike. In the TEA world-view, it seems, critics are either 1) out to dismantle the free world, beginning with public education or 2) have no idea what they're talking about.

For his part, Scott angrily insists he's always been on the side of public education. In a 1996 letter to Moses, Scott warned of his fear that public education's greatest risk was being "cannibalized" by school vouchers. Scott's allies include pro-public-school, if critical, minority leaders such as Roy Malonson, chairman of the Acres Homes Chamber of Commerce. Scott has weighed in on virtually every school issue, from bonds to administrative spending to TAAS.

Scott's aggressive stance gets more media attention than it does results from the education establishment. Newspaper editorials laud Scott's efforts, while educators sniff at his "methodology."

For example, last school year the Houston Independent School District began administering the Stanford, a commercial standardized test, in an effort to complement the data provided by the TAAS. Scott and the Texas Research Association saw this as an opportunity to get an outside measure of how well the state accountability system was working. He looked to see if kids at schools rated "exemplary" had scored on or above grade level according to the Stanford. He found that 38 to 83 percent, depending on the grade, had not. Schools rated "recognized" or "acceptable" fared even worse.

It seems like a fairly simple comparison, but HISD spokesman Terry Abbott complained to the Houston Chronicle that Scott's report was "not fair," and the district asked a group of University of Houston sociologists to take Scott's TRA study apart. They released a report saying Scott had made "inappropriate methodological assumptions," but they skirted the issue of his actual findings.

The researchers looked at each student who took both tests and concluded that one test was a pretty good predictor of performance on the other, which would seem to actually lend support to Scott's comparison. But the researchers did not say how well kids passing the TAAS actually performed on the Stanford.

"They were just saying, 'Nasty George, he shouldn't be saying our schools aren't as good as our schools say they are,' " says independent testing contractor Carl Shaw, who has served as director of testing for the Houston and Fort Bend independent school districts and on numerous Texas Education Agency committees on assessment.

As for the TRA studies, the TEA released a written rejoinder so poorly argued it appears it willfully misunderstood the studies. The agency called researchers' statements that test questions are below grade level "inherently opinion," despite the fact that students' actual performance on the questions correlated perfectly with the study; in other words, more students correctly answered questions the researchers said were at the third-grade level than questions they said were at the sixth-grade level.

Calling the studies' authors "novices" in the testing field and arguing that "since none of these hired reviewers are from Texas, they cannot be familiar with the daily workings of the statewide assessment program," the unsigned TEA rejoinder accuses TRA's researchers of offering "inaccurate, unsubstantiated and controversial opinions regarding the quality of the TAAS."

But the authors' resumes don't bring the word "novice" to mind. Stotsky, who wrote the reading study, has helped develop the Massachusetts English language assessment, has evaluated education programs for NASA and has ranked state reading standards for the Fordham Foundation's national survey. As for the math study's authors, David Klein and Wayne Bishop are both math professors at California State University, and both have served on numerous California education committees. Paul Clopton, a biomedical research statistician, founded the math education advocacy group Mathematically Correct (of which Klein and Bishop are members) and serves on the panel that is developing California's statewide math test.

In an attempt to prove that the researchers have some menacing "agenda," the TEA quoted from the Mathematically Correct web site, saying the organization is "devoted to the concerns raised by parents and scientists about the invasion of our schools ... and the need to restore basic skills to math education."

The agency's implication is clear: Mathematically Correct is an anti-public-school organization concerned about government control of what children learn. Yet log on to the web site, and it's easy to see what the agency left out: The organization is mostly concerned about "the invasion of our schools by the New-New Math," referring to a trend toward what some consider to be the dumbing-down of math curricula.

As for the reading study, the education agency again quibbles over methodology. But it doesn't argue with Stotsky's assertions that the reading passages have gotten easier; instead, they say, the test's difficulty has stayed the same because the test questions have gotten harder.

Asked if she found any valid information in the two Tax Research Association studies, TEA's Associate Commissioner for Curriculum, Assessment and Technology Ann Smisko replied, "No, not really. The analysis is not as we would have analyzed the test."

The agency is not the only defender of the TAAS. Although educators initially fought against accountability, many have come on board rather than miss the train altogether. As the screws tighten-- this year, for example, the state will include special ed and Spanish TAAS scores in the accountability ratings -- educators don't want to see the TAAS toughen up, especially since they're still struggling to get kids to pass. "There is nothing wrong with that test," says Houston Federation of Teachers President Gayle Fallon. "It's a minimum-skills test."

Confronted by critiques of the TAAS, the Texas Education Agency reacts not by reexamining the test, but by circling the wagons. Smisko says she has not seen the American Federation of Teachers study of the TAAS math test. Told that it rated TAAS the easiest of five tests, she chuckles and says, "That's the opinion of a panel. We have teacher committees that look at every single item. ... We have more than 6,000 educators participating in the item development process."

The TAAS has been sold to the public as a criterion-referenced test, which means it tests an objective set of things which the Texas Board of Education has decided it wants kids to know. Kids don't get a percentile ranking telling them how well they did compared to everyone else who took the test, as they would on a national standardized test such as the Stanford, because that's not the point.

However, most people don't realize that the TAAS is not solely based on what kids ought to be able to do; it's calibrated to what they already can do. Each potential TAAS question is field-tested, and the ones that are too hard, too easy or biased (if a significant number more boys get it right than girls, for example) are thrown out. According to Temple ISD's Coburn, the actual test is constructed so that if the kids who answered the field questions were taking it, a certain percentage of them would pass: 75 percent on the reading test and 60 percent on the math test. Which is why a statewide overall passing rate of 72 percent should come as no surprise.

The practice of basing tests on how well students do is widely accepted by testing experts, and it makes a certain amount of sense, particularly if, as in Texas, the questions are based on the state standards to begin with. But the practice is not without its critics, who say it tethers student achievement to old levels. Matthew Gandal, director of standards and assessment at Achieve Inc., a Cambridge-based nonprofit organization that reviews state accountability systems, says that while states must avoid making tests so difficult that few can pass, "it does seem counterintuitive at a time when we're trying to raise our

standards higher than they've ever been before -- to a level that kids in other countries have reached -- to strip our tests of questions that kids can't answer correctly simply because kids can't answer them correctly."

Alicia Ruffin is a serious young black woman on the cusp of 20, though she still wears the sassy overalls of a schoolkid. Ruffin says she made A's and B's when she attended Klein Forest High and passed the TAAS test with ease.

But when she started at the University of Houston two semesters ago, everything got harder. Because she didn't do well enough on the Texas Academic Skills Program, the test students have to pass before entering a state college or university, Ruffin had to take a remedial math course. Her GPA dropped to a 2.6, she says.

"I was really shocked," says Ruffin. "I kind of felt like I wasn't college material. I didn't know if I was smart enough."

Ruffin's situation is a perfect example of the difference between what people think the TAAS indicates and what it actually says. Using one of his favorite theatrical expressions, Scott says, "You can pass the TAAS test and still need a Hubbell Telescope to even be able to see college."

Although a 70 -- out of 92 -- is a passing score, you have to score an 80 before the Texas Education Agency says you have even a 75 percent chance of passing the public university entrance exam. You have to score an 85 to be exempt from taking the entrance exam.

The fact that the passing bar is set so low does a particular disservice to minority students like Ruffin, because the focus is on how many pass, rather than how many score high. Part of the accountability system's job is to help close "the equity gap," the chronic disparity in scores between whites and the economically advantaged on the one hand, and everybody else on the other.

Blacks and Hispanics are gaining on whites, if you look at what percentage are passing. But if you look at what percentage of students are scoring above 85 on TAAS, according to charts Scott created using TEA data, gains for blacks and Hispanics haven't been as high. Forty-two percent of whites scored above 85 in 1998, while in contrast 20 percent of Hispanics and 15 percent of blacks reached that score. "Yes, more students are passing the TAAS test," Scott says. "But let's look at closure of the equity gap in a more meaningful way."

After the now-famous Edgewood case that forced the state to equalize funds to rich and poor districts, the Texas Legislature defined seven public education goals, one of which was that "the achievement gap

between educationally disadvantaged students and other populations will be closed." That was in 1984. By the time the state defined its educational goals for the new millennium, "Goals 2000," the standard had changed; now the equity gap would simply "decrease." This is one of those subtle details that Scott picks up on. It's evidence, he says, that the state is all but forsaking the bottom rung of students.

The Texas Education Agency proudly touts the narrowing of the equity gap, but has it looked at the disparities at the top achievement levels? Apparently officials there didn't see what Scott sees. "We've taken a look at those numbers," Smisko says. "I do not recall that there's a wider gap."

The TAAS's lack of rigor and the low number of students who make top marks have serious financial and personal ramifications down the line, particularly when students try to get advanced degrees. Stevens, executive director of the Texas Business and Education Coalition, says that while the TAAS paints a good portrait of elementary kids, it loses students by the time they get to high school, a problem that could be fixed by Moses's proposal to add tests in ninth and 11th grade.

Stevens points out that Texas's flagship universities such as the University of Texas at Austin and Texas A&M can't keep up with their cousins in other states when it comes to retaining students and granting diplomas. "[The graduation rate is] dramatically lower," Stevens says. "Now that's something that ought to concern us."

In the two-year budget cycle ending in 1999, the state's public colleges and universities spent \$172 million on remedial education for people who could not pass the entrance exam, says State Higher Education Coordinating Board spokesman Ray Grasshoff. That's up from \$38.6 million spent in the two-year budget cycle ending in 1989, a 445 percent increase. Remediation is far more expensive, and less effective, than early intervention, which is why Governor Bush's education plan emphasizes reading in the early grades. Of the class that entered Texas colleges in 1989, according to a study by conservative public policy analyst Jeff Judson, 53.6 percent required remediation and, of those, only 4.9 percent had received a degree after six years. Grasshoff says the number of students needing remedial help (some portion of which are returning adult students) has hovered at around 50 percent, noting that the number of hours of remediation the state provides is no longer increasing dramatically.

Judson also notes that the remediation problem is not unique to Texas; nationwide, 90 percent of students entering urban community colleges require remediation. This failure to prepare students for the wider world translates into figures such as this one cited by Judson: According to the National Center for Education Statistics, one in three San Antonians aren't literate enough to fill out a job application.

As TAAS scores rise, so does public opinion. Texas education, apparently, has climbed out of the dry hole it drilled itself into during the '80s. Commissioner Moses lauds teachers and students for pulling through the dark times. There's still a long way to go, of course, but the TEA takes pride in what it has wrought.

Yet since the beginning of the TAAS in the early '90s, educators have been looking for some indication -- other than the word of the Texas Education Agency -- that rising TAAS scores mean better-educated Texans. The proof is equivocal at best. On some national tests, Texas's scores have even gone down.

Pat Porter, the TEA's deputy director of assessment, says there are two independent validations of Texas's gains: the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, pronounced "nape"), a group of tests that track a statistical sampling of students in 48 participating states (in 1990 only 40 were participating); and the commercial norm-referenced tests that the state gives to a sample of students every few years.

Porter points with pride to a November 1998 report, in which the National Education Goals Panel examined Texas and North Carolina, the two states with the largest average gain on the NAEP reading and math tests between 1990 and 1996. The report applauds both states for their highly developed accountability systems, both of which, the report says, were the result of sustained involvement by the states' business communities.

Texas's minority students in particular made an impressive showing on the NAEP math tests: The state is No. 1 among states with similar demographics, including New York and California. And although Texas ranks 20th overall in eighth-grade math, its black and Hispanic students are sixth and ninth, respectively.

But what of subjects that the TAAS test doesn't cover? In science, which is only tested on the eighth-grade TAAS and is not included in state accountability ratings, the NAEP scores plummet; Texas ranks 28th of 30 and its Hispanic students 21st of the 24 states who gave a representative Hispanic sample, lending some credence to critics who say subjects tested by TAAS are emphasized to the exclusion of others.

NAEP reading and math figures lose some of their luster under close examination. First of all, the test sample is small, about 2,000 to 3,000 students per test. Second, national scores over time haven't improved all that much. Between 1992 and 1996, Texas fourth-graders jumped 11 points in math, on a 500-point scale. That's about the equivalent of two points on a 100-point scale. The gain bumped Texas from 19th to sixth in the country.

In fourth-grade reading, Texas's average score on the NAEP actually dropped one point, from 213 to 212 points out of 500, between 1992 and 1994, the only two years that test was given.

"You have to break it down," says the Texas Business and Education Coalition's Stevens, explaining that the largest gains on the NAEP can be seen by ethnic group. "The overall result is lower because Texas is getting much more diverse." In other words, since blacks and Hispanics score lower on average than whites and Asians, a growing population of blacks and Hispanics means a lower overall average, even if the scores for those particular ethnic groups go up. Stevens's contention carries in math, but not in reading: Black and Hispanic scores in reading went down between 1992 and 1994, a period which covers only the very beginning of the accountability system.

As for the commercial standardized test Texas gives, there's not much comparative data, since the Legislature has frequently changed its mind about which test should be given. For 1995 and 1996, the state sampled 12,500 students in each grade (three through eight and ten) and used the seventh edition of the Metropolitan Achievement Test (MAT7). In 2000, the state will give the MAT7 and will continue to do so every three years, unless the Legislature changes the law again.

In reading, Texas's average percentile ranking on the MAT7 lingers slightly below the national average, and between 1995 and 1996 most grades gained between one and two percentage points in reading.

In math, the news was not as good: Although scores hovered above the national average, most grades declined between one and four percentage points on the MAT7 percentile ranking, yet TAAS passing rates went up about five points.

So on the NAEP, math is up and reading is down. On the MAT7, reading is up and math is down. On the TAAS, both math and reading are up.

Is that proof that the TAAS is valid? The TEA's Pat Porter says the TAAS is more sensitive to instruction than norm-referenced tests and children are more highly motivated to perform well on it. Gains on the TAAS, she says, "are validated by our gains on the NAEP, and our students are at the national average on a norm-referenced test."

Shaw says the fact that the TAAS is calibrated to instruction makes it easier to beat. "Every time you give a test it loses part of its validity, because what you're trying to do is see what the curriculum is doing in this area without influence of the test. And everything a teacher learns about the test, they teach more directly to the content ... So we don't know from the TAAS itself how effective our curriculum is."

To Shaw, celebrating the state's gains on the TAAS is a way of sidestepping the point: "Why is anybody missing any of these questions?" Shaw asks. "We've gotten very little bang for our buck on TAAS improvement. We ought to be hanging our head in shame."

Non-TAAS indicators of educational health aren't so hot. While eighth-grade passing rates on TAAS went from 68 to 83 percent from 1996 to 1998, a gain of 15 points, the percentage of students passing the end-of-course algebra test (usually taken in eighth or ninth grade) increased only 11 points, to a still-dismal 39 percent passing, and that on a test that combines prealgebra with algebra.

And while the state says the dropout rate is 9.1 percent, the so-called "on-time graduation rate" tells a different story: About 60 percent of the number of students who enroll in ninth grade get diplomas four years later, and that number declined slightly from 1995 to 1997. For blacks and Hispanics, the dropout figures are worse: Less than half get diplomas after four years. Because so many students -- 21 percent -- disappear after ninth grade, they don't even take the exit-level TAAS.

The one organization dedicated to helping states evaluate their assessments hasn't attracted much attention from Texas. Achieve Inc., founded by state governors after the 1996 National Education Summit, was set up to provide comparability and continuity among states in the growing national trend toward high-stakes accountability systems and testing. The organization can conduct a "rigorous review" of any state's accountability system and helps states compare their tests to others nationally and internationally.

But Achieve's Director of Standards and Assessment Matthew Gandal says that, although there's "been some interest" from Texas, the state hasn't sent anyone to either of Achieve's annual meetings (out of 25 states invited, 21 are participating), nor has it asked for a one-on-one review.

"From our perspective, Texas is the model of the nation for standards and accountability," says Linda Edwards, a spokesperson for Governor Bush. "And Achieve is working to get other states to do what we've already been doing in Texas. So, in a sense, Texas is a model for the efforts of Achieve."

Yet Stevens says he hopes Texas will avail itself of Achieve's ability to do comparative analysis in the future, adding that it troubled him when Texas didn't look at what other states had done before coming up with its own curriculum standards (Texas standards rank third in the nation, according to the Fordham Foundation, and got a grade of "B").

Despite the agency's squeamish reaction to the American Federation of Teachers report, George Scott's studies and other outside reviews of the TAAS, Smisko says she'll take another look at Achieve.

"Obviously, with our state progressing so well in testing and kids' performance, we believe we need to move on ... We welcome an objective analysis," she says, putting an emphasis on "objective."

The TAAS, which was originally intended to measure student performance, became a tool for measuring the success of educators and schools when the Legislature passed the education reform bill in 1993. Like any government-mandated test, it has always been, as Governor Bush put it ever so mildly when he

recently announced changes to his TAAS-based plan to end social promotion, "controversial." The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People has called the test racially biased, and the Mexican-American Legal Defense Fund is suing the state for the same reason. Parents have complained that the test is inappropriate, immoral and undermines parental authority. In short, it's a miracle the test exists at all.

But since the oil crash of the late '80s, when it became painfully obvious that the state's economy would have to diversify to survive, companies that do business in Texas have taken a serious interest in the state's education system. Organizations such as the reform-minded Texas Business and Education Council, founded by large companies in 1989, and the Governor's Business Council, a group of 100 CEOs started by former governor Ann Richards, have been the major architects of the accountability system.

These groups have the leverage to change the system -- TBEC initiated Moses's proposal to add ninth- and 11th-grade tests, Stevens says -- and they're not satisfied with it yet.

In fact, the changes Stevens has on his agenda echo what George Scott has been saying for years. Some are already in motion: This year the test scores of special education students and those that take the TAAS in Spanish will be counted as part of the accountability system, which is supposed to end the dubious -- if legal -- practice some schools use of exempting large numbers of students by designating them special ed or not proficient in English. By the end of next year, the TAAS will be brought in line with Texas's new curriculum, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, which schools began using this year and which experts say is richer and more rigorous than Texas's previous standards. And Moses wants to include science and social studies on the new 11th-grade test.

Furthermore, Stevens says teachers and schools might be more careful about the test's validity -- in other words, less likely to cheat -- if they had scores back soon enough to use them diagnostically in their own classes instead of just as a way to determine school ratings.

"Essentially, this thing is working, in its broadest way," says Stevens, "and the flaws and the problems need to be kept in perspective. I guess that's the concern I have with some of the critics. Their sense of proportion is wrong."

Yet Stevens sounds for all the world like George Scott when he says he'd like to see the number of students that score 85 or higher on the TAAS made part of the accountability system, particularly for schools with exemplary ratings. "The highest accountability rating shouldn't just be based on how many kids perform above minimum requirements on the test," Stevens says. " 'Exemplary' ought to mean that."

Roy Malonson, an ally of Scott's, chairman of the Acres Homes Chamber of Commerce and publisher of African-American News & Issues, says planned improvements for the TAAS should have come much earlier. "They're ending a lot of things after our report," says Malonson. "We've been hammering them for ten years."

Malonson says the large-business interests that have been the architects of the accountability system have very different concerns from small-businessmen like him. Since those businesses can afford to train their employees, Malonson says, they don't care if the accountability system is a "dog-and-pony show" that attracts development but doesn't produce fundamentally better results (a particularly interesting criticism, since Scott's organization also is funded by major companies).

"I depend directly on public education," Malonson says. "I can get the cream of the crop that doesn't even know how to answer the door or answer the phone."

But Stevens says large businesses have just as much interest in seeing the system work, saying that the demands on today's workers require critical thinking skills. "We need educated workers, not just trained workers," he says.

Where Malonson and Scott see foot-dragging, Stevens and consultants such as Darvin Winick, who advises the Governor's Business Council, see strategic implementation.

Businesses realize, they say, that you can't change something as large and decentralized as public education all at once. Bringing the exit-level test in line with real-world expectations and ending exemptions are measures their organizations support, but all in due time. In the end, the issue is not so much how the system should change, but how fast it can.

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They point to the new curriculum as evidence that the system is progressing. But even as the accountability system improves, the TAAS might still be left behind in the dust. The new test, according to TEA's Director of Assessment Keith Cruse, won't be any harder than the old one, since the tests are calibrated for difficulty from year to year.

Experience has shown that teachers are more likely to teach what's on the test than what's on the curriculum; if the TAAS emphasizes one kind of problem-solving skill, so will teachers. Some schools reportedly abandon all subjects not covered by the TAAS, and new material is pushed aside in favor of one more round of pretest practice. Instead of learning algebra and geometry, high school students review eighth-grade math. Teachers go to special TAAS training sessions; administrators check practice tests,

buy test strategy books and spend their summers coming up with plan after plan designed specifically to raise scores. Bonuses and careers hang on the outcome of the TAAS -- not students' careers, but educators' careers.

And that, perhaps, is the shameful part: not so much that children can't pass the test (although that's distressing enough), but that so much effort, time, energy and money is poured into preparing for a test so easy that when a student does succeed on the TAAS, it means hardly anything at all.

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HOUSTON ISD: END OF COURSE TESTING FOR 2012-13 ACADEMIC YEAR

The State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness, or STAAR, is the latest state-sanctioned test given to Texas public school students. Passing standards are phased in at a higher level each year; this chart shows how many students would be passing now if future passing standards had already been imposed. — **GEORGE SCOTT**

Sort	Category	Subject Test	Number Tested	Ethnicity	Eventual Grade Level Passing Rate
1	DISTRICT	Algebra I	11,860	District	33%
1	DISTRICT	Algebra I	7,178	Hispanic	32%
1	DISTRICT	Algebra I	382	Asian	76%
1	DISTRICT	Algebra I	3,054	A/A	23%
1	DISTRICT	Algebra I	1,088	White	69%
2	DISTRICT	Geometry	9,061	District	35%
2	DISTRICT	Geometry	5,735	Hispanic	32%
2	DISTRICT	Geometry	397	Asian	87%
2	DISTRICT	Geometry	2,093	A/A	23%
2	DISTRICT	Geometry	730	White	69%
3	DISTRICT	Biology	12,522	District	40%
3	DISTRICT	Biology	7,609	Hispanic	35%
3	DISTRICT	Biology	428	Asian	85%
3	DISTRICT	Biology	3,180	A/A	32%
3	DISTRICT	Biology	1,158	White	71%
4	DISTRICT	Chemistry	9,238	District	7
4	DISTRICT	Chemistry	5,510	Hispanic	

HOUSTON ISD: END OF COURSE TESTING FOR 2012-13 ACADEMIC YEAR The State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness, or STAAR, is the latest state-sanctioned test given to Texas public school students. Passing standards are phased in at a higher level each year; this chart shows how many students would be passing now if future passing standards had already been imposed. — George Scott. [Click here to view larger version.](#)

Amid All the Good Things Going On in HISD, Why Is It So Many of Our Kids Still Can't Read?

MARGARET DOWNING | DECEMBER 11, 2013 | 4:00AM

One kid is a 17-year-old senior getting ready to go on to college who says he can't

read even though he's passed all his state tests. Now in his final year of high school, he's playing a gigantic game of catch-up because suddenly it has hit him that he may not be able to skate by in college.

"I ain't going to lie to you. I can't read at all," says Tony (not his real name). "I hate stories that's real long. I panic on long stories. I'm not going to lie. I never liked reading." To get through the book he had to read for English class, Tony read it aloud to his teacher, who coached him through it.

A female classmate of Tony's says she can't get through the stories she reads in school unless someone explains them to her. She's passed all her state tests, too. How? She says she uses classroom-taught "strategies" on her English reading test and that if she underlines and highlights enough and narrows down her options, she has a better chance of guessing right by playing the odds. She failed her math state test because of the word problems, so she employed her English strategies there on the retry attempt and passed.

"You could tell me to read a book all day; I could read a book all day; I probably don't get it. And five minutes later you tell me to write an essay and I'll be over there struggling to write an essay because I don't understand," she explains carefully.

Another senior who passed every state test handed to him says he doesn't fare as well on his benchmark assessments (practice tests given during the school year). "I never thought I had a reading problem," he says. "I thought I had comprehended it but then when I have the questions, I don't know; I think I'm going to get them right but then I get the results and I'm wrong."

These students are not the exception. They are the rule at many schools in HISD, and as such they appear to be breathtakingly unprepared for either college or the work force.

Their HISD principal (we agreed not to name anyone) says that 80 percent of ninth graders arrive at the high school unable to read on grade level. And yet these same kids passed their state of Texas tests in all the years preceding. Most of these teenagers, this principal says, arrive reading at the fourth- or fifth-grade level.

There were several common refrains from these high schoolers in a series of interviews with the *Houston Press*: *I can read but I don't know what the words mean. I can read but not if the story is long or boring. I forget what I read and the questions at the end don't make any sense to me. I wish we could learn one-on-one. I don't like to be embarrassed in class. I need someone to explain it to me along the way. I'd like to have a tutor.* A few said they hope to become engineers, figuring that wouldn't require much reading, just math. All said they intend to go to college.

Houston Independent School District is riding the glory train these days. In 2012, it lined up support for the largest bond issue in its history. Winner of the prestigious Broad Prize in 2013 for urban education for the second time in 11 years, it is frequently cited as a success story with a visionary superintendent – Dr. Terry Grier – who knows how to get things done. Its Apollo 20 program – which has cost at least \$56 million so far – was engineered to help students at the lowest-performing schools through intensified instruction. In the past few years, student scores were on the rise for the TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) test as it was being phased out to make way for the STAAR (State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness).

But for the past several years, former HISD superintendent Dr. Billy Reagan has done his own annual assessment of standardized tests in the district – which he sends to whoever is superintendent at the time – and according to his calculations, if you're a minority student in HISD – and most of them are – all these good times are passing you by.

An analysis of 2011-2013 results from the national Stanford Diagnostic Reading Test done by Reagan's consulting company, Unlimited Access Educational Systems Inc., shows HISD reading scores "have declined at most middle and elementary grades when compared to scores reported two years ago...Only 29.6 percent of middle school students and 29 percent of elementary students read at or above grade level." (HISD trustees voted in spring 2011 to stop administering the Stanford at the high-school level.)

Many of these kids don't understand the books they're handed – in fact, they don't even understand the written instructions they're supposed to follow, according to Reagan. "Students with scores below the 50th percentile are very likely struggling

to understand the instructional materials they are required to read. Students with scores below the 40th percentile can read almost none of the grade-level materials for their grade."

Reading scores are lowest at HISD campuses with predominantly African-American student bodies, the report says. These are defined as schools where at least 50 percent of the student population is black.

"The situation is most desperate in the middle schools," Reagan's report states. "In the past four years, there has been only one grade in one year that scored at grade level or above.

"Even worse is the ever increasing slide toward the bottom rung with 70 percent of the middle school grades scoring below the 40th percentile in 2013," Reagan writes.

Things are scarcely better at the predominantly Hispanic schools. "Of the 89 HISD elementary schools with Hispanic enrollments of 70 percent or more, 78.4 percent of the grades scored below the 50th percentile in 2013. An even greater proportion of middle school grades – 86 percent – scored below the 50th percentile," Reagan wrote.

Even Dr. Roland Fryer, the Harvard-professor architect behind the Apollo program, had to concede during an October visit to HISD that – unlike in math – Apollo's gains have been almost nonexistent in reading and that neither Fryer nor anyone else yet has the key to what works – a problem, he says, that exists across the country. At that same meeting, Grier stressed the importance of early childhood education and tutoring. He said the district was still struggling with developing a better method by which to teach teachers how to teach reading and with the difficulties of somehow fitting that into an already overfull school day.

Some people would like to sweep the 83-year-old Reagan's data aside, hinting that he just wants to sell his consulting company's reading program to the district or that he is just an old man who wishes he was still superintendent.

But a *Houston Press* check with other sources armed with both statistics and classroom reports verifies that the Stanford results match up with other nationally recognized standardized test results – while the Texas test results do not.

Case in point from a middle school teacher with more than 25 years' experience: "I had one student coming in from fifth grade. He passed the STAAR fifth-grade reading." She gave him the same fifth-grade test as a baseline to start the sixth-grade year. "He got four of 11 right.

"I would be ashamed to say if I was this child's teacher that this child passed the reading test last year. I know there's no way he passed," she says. "Now the pressure is on me. The data says he passed last year. They're just pushing them along."

The only resort most teachers have, she says, "is teach them for what's about to happen. Drill and practice. I hate to say the words, but 'teach the test.'"

Local education activist George Scott, known for several years now for his extensive, data-driven evaluations of local school districts, says his own research bears out Reagan's findings, in both PSAT comparisons and college completion rates – results that also belie the glowing ratings that parents might have come to believe their HISD schools deserve.

Scott maintains the state is delivering a big, comfortable lie to parents with its phased-in testing results, and it's one that's particularly egregious in that the state testing system was presented to the Texas Supreme Court and a federal court out of San Antonio in 1995 and 2000, respectively, as a constitutionally approved tactic to resolve the academic equity gap between white and minority students that was a legacy of segregated schools.

"You tell parents kids are reading at grade level when in fact you know they are not," Scott says. He points as proof to the Texas Education Agency's own report on STAAR test results. In spring 2013, 11,109 students in HISD took the STAAR third-grade reading test with a 74 percent overall passing rate.

But put in the real TEA-approved recommended passing standard that all students will eventually have to meet and only 37 percent of those kids would have passed. Enforce the state's own "real" passing standard and the percentage of white students passing third-grade reading drops from 92 percent to 70 percent, Hispanics from 75 to 34 percent and blacks from 66 to 25 percent. The pattern

teachers. They'd call me out [to read in class], and I couldn't read what was on the page. The words was getting little and big and getting bigger." He says he got some help from the charter school teachers, but there were other students they were helping as well and they couldn't see him as much as he wanted. Some teachers, he says, just give up on kids too quick.

Before and after graduation, he appealed to his family for help. His mother turned him down flat; a brother tried working with him and ended up telling him: "You ain't never going to be able to do this." A sister told him, "I can't believe they let you graduate," he says.

His fiancée was more proactive. She got online and found Literacy Advance, a nonprofit designed to help adult learners. They set him up first with a math tutor, but reading teachers were in short supply. Farrington actually found his own tutor, a retired teacher living in his neighborhood; he brought her to Literacy Advance, and she's now part of the program there.

As Literacy Advance Program Director Kathryn Bauchelle puts it, it is unusual that Farrington found his own tutor, but the fact that he was given a diploma in spite of insufficient reading and math skills – that's not rare at all; there are plenty of adults that has happened to, according to her. "There was something about the way they were taught that didn't work for them," Bauchelle says.

Farrington says learning to read better would really do a lot for him. "I don't feel as stuck as I used to. I've got nephews not being raised by their mom and dad. I want to teach them. I can read them Dr. Seuss."

Mostly, Farrington sees reading as a direct path to a better, less embarrassing life. If he applied for a job, he says, "I wouldn't have to get the application and go home and have my [fiancée] help me. I could fill it out there and give it right back to them."

Asked if he felt optimistic about his future, he asked what that word meant.

Confronted with the discrepancy between the Texas state test scores and the Stanford results, Debbie Ratcliffe, spokeswoman for the Texas Education Agency, said that the TEA doesn't look at Stanford scores. "No, we don't. That's a test only

Houston gives. I'm not sure any other Texas district gives that."

Asked then how the agency makes sure its tests are valid, Ratcliffe responded: "Tests are based on our state curriculum, which is put together with the assistance of a lot of teachers who teach that particular subject at that particular grade level, and then approved and revised by the State Board of Education, and then Texas educators help us create the state test.

"There are teams of educators who look at the state test questions and tell us this is appropriate to test at this grade; this question would be better in fifth grade. Once we field-test our test questions, Texas educators and psychometricians (test experts) look at them to see if the questions were valid; is there any bias, race, gender, ethnicity? Every test question goes through a lot of scrutiny."

Test questions are developed by teachers who are then given performance reviews (and, in HISD, bonuses) based in large part on whether their kids can pass those tests and improve on previous years' scores. Somehow, that seems a huge disincentive to making the state tests particularly rigorous.

Ratcliffe did confirm the point that George Scott makes in his analysis that HISD's state test numbers more closely match those of the other standardized tests if you plug in the actual recommended passing rates.

"We are phasing in the passing standards on the STAAR. You are probably looking at the passing rates under our initial standards. If we had fully implemented the passing standards in one year, the failure rates, unfortunately, would have been higher," she said.

And how many parents are going to know that?

According to the veteran teacher, not many. "A lot of these parents are oblivious. All they know is their child passed, and they're happy; they don't care. They're not working with them enough at home to know this can't be right."

She says she and her peers are placed in an impossible position. "We're not able to meet them where they are and bring them up. They're so concerned about this progress and this data. What about the big picture? If they pass the test and they

can't remember what they just wrote down, what good is it doing?"

The teacher says the students being done the greatest disservice are those who expect to join the working world right out of high school. "We owe them even more so they will be gainfully employed. How are you going to do that if you can't even read? Even the math test is reading now."

In October the *Press* sent Grier a list of questions about Reagan's Stanford assessments, asking among other things for the superintendent's take on the comparison between Stanford and state test results, how HISD students were being taught reading and how students are able to understand instructions from a computer program any better if some of them can't read their textbooks.

At a school board meeting, Grier assured us that he'd have answers, but after repeated requests to the HISD public relations office for just that, we were instead provided a copy of a letter Grier had sent to school board members in August – but no direct answers to any of our questions.

In his letter, Grier adopted a no-excuses stance and outlined a prescription for change including such things as tutoring, longer school days, a special reading program at five elementaries and a daily structured reading schedule for the lowest-performing elementaries. He addressed the Advanced Placement curriculum in high school, but nowhere did he comment on the difference between the state test results and any national tests.

George Scott, who in previous lives was a newspaper editor and publisher in Fort Bend County, president of the Tax Research Association and a senior researcher with the Harris County Appraisal District before becoming an independent consultant specializing in education and property tax issues, painstakingly put together a chart from the 2012 PSAT reading and math results in HISD.

Multiplying the results by a factor of 10 to approximate SAT scores, Scott determined that 69.2 percent of HISD students scored below a 900 (out of a possible 1600) on the combined math and reading scores, 47.4 percent below an 800 and 24.1 percent below a 700. There is no pass/fail on the PSAT or SAT, but most Texas state colleges and universities want to see at least a 500 on each part for admission. It should be noted that HISD is one of the few school districts to

repeats among sixth-grade HISD students in reading. Overall, the passing rate drops from 64 percent to 34 percent, with white students dropping from 88 to 71 percent, Asian-Americans from 76 to 67 percent, Hispanic from 60 to 28 percent and blacks from 62 to 28 percent. Or an equity gap of 43 percentage points.

At the high school level in HISD, the overall passage rate for English I Reading was announced at 59 percent. Reset to the grade-level standard and that's 38 percent. For whites it's a drop of 86 to 72 percent, Hispanics 56 to 33 percent and blacks 54 to 32 percent.

As Scott told one group of public-school parents:

"If you are depending upon the state of Texas to tell you what your children do and do not know relative to genuine grade-level skills, you have misplaced your trust."

When Kevin Farrington first met his future fiancée, she didn't know what to make of him. They lived near each other, and she'd see him dressed up each day and figured him for a college student on his way to class. But then she saw that he was hanging with his friends all the time, and she didn't think that was such a great idea.

"Don't you have a future?" she asked him early on.

"Not at this moment," he says he responded.

Now 21, Farrington graduated from high school at 18, and to do that, of course, he'd had to pass all his end-of-course tests, which he says he did. Only trouble is, he couldn't read or do math well enough to hold down a job.

He had transferred from Willowridge High (too large, too difficult to focus, he says) to the Brazos School for Inquiry and Creativity – Southwest, a state-approved charter school, where, he says, the principal liked him. "I never got in trouble. She always told me, 'If you always try your best, I'll pass you.' I got along well with others."

Reading and math had always been difficult for him. "I was so frustrated with teachers. They'd call me out [to read in class] and I couldn't read what was on the

offer free PSAT and SAT testing to all students and to schedule the tests at the students' home campuses. As a result, they have a wider range of students taking the test than in most districts.

At ten of the district's schools, 90 percent or more of the students scored a 900 or below: Energy STEM, Sam Houston Math and Science, Jones, Kashmere, Lee, Scarborough, Sterling, Westbury, Worthing and Yates. Seven others were barely above the 90 percent mark: Austin, Furr, International School at Sharpstown, Madison, Milby, Sharpstown and Wheatley.

"I am not going to say someone who scores below a 900 is a failure and won't be able to handle college," Scott says. But odds are, he says, that such a student will have a much tougher time.

Legendary Furr High School Principal Dr. Bertie Simmons has figured out one way to get her kids to read. She put up crime-scene tape and mounted a collection of forbidden banned books. Nothing could have made them more appealing.

The idea came from last summer's idiocy in Arizona when certain books about Hispanics were banned. (Arizona lifted the ban on some Hispanic studies books this past October.) Some of the Furr High School kids were in New Mexico after winning an environmental justice award when the news broke about the books. The kids from Texas were outraged and brought their anger back with them, and Simmons saw this as an opportunity.

She put together a project to not only highlight these books, which included *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, but to pull in other books, such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee and *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote, that had also been banned in the past. Students were ushered into the school library, where a flashing strobe light and sirens were used to reinforce the *verboten* feeling. Simmons backed all this up with frequent loudspeaker offers of rewards for whoever could text her first about why a particular book had been banned.

Teacher Pat Duffy remembers having to tell students – "male students!" – to put their books down and get into her grad lab class. "One of my students was so

engaged he read one book three times."

Duffy has been among teachers trying to explore new ideas about reading, attending a recent seminar by Larry Bell, a motivational speaker out of Atlanta. Bell urges teachers to bring movement and music to the words minority students are trying to read, as a natural part of their culture to which they can respond.

"When students see those [words] on state assessments which seem to drive our nation now, when they see those words they freeze up," Duffy says. "You're asking me in a language I totally do not understand. It's not because I do not want to understand it. I haven't been equipped to understand," she says.

Both Duffy and the Literacy Advance execs agree that one of the key traits for success that most poor readers lack is confidence. According to Bauchelle, many adult students come to her agency saying that no one had ever encouraged them to read before.

As for what special magic Literacy Advance provides to help its students, Bauchelle says it isn't a certain program. "The single biggest factor for us in our adult program is one-on-one." Students can learn at their own pace without pressure or distractions. How this translates to a public-school education or any other school setting is a huge stumbling block, of course. Tutors are expensive.

"Adults, if they come through our door, they come because they want to," Literacy Advance Executive Director Melanie Fisk says. "In almost all cases it's because they want a better job, they want opportunities for themselves, their family." She said that even if they've got a high school diploma, if they've been told they must take remedial classes at college, they recognize they need to fill in the gaps.

"One of our students, he dropped out, he left, and he realized at 19, 'Oops, that's not going to work.' So he went back just enough to get the diploma and graduated. He didn't really learn much; they just kind of pushed him through," Fisk says. "He has the diploma and wants something different."

Questions have been raised about the Texas state tests since their inception (field testing started in 1989 on the TAAS, or Texas Assessment of Academic Skills test,

which became operational in the early '90s). Generally those questions involve the rigor of the test itself or accusations of cheating (HISD is investigating two schools right now). All the state tests are criterion tests, designed to represent what a student should know at a particular grade in school. In theory, an entire class could score 100 percent.

National tests that Reagan and Scott use for their comparisons are "normed," graded on a curve in relation to how other students around the country have done on tests. "But when Texas sets a lower passing grade on its criterion tests, in effect what they're doing is creating a phony curve pushing vast numbers of kids upwards," Scott says.

In 1999, for instance, the National Academy of Sciences held a forum on testing at which Anne Smisko, then a TEA associate who went on to oversee the creation of the TAKS, was questioned about how Texas came up with its test questions for the TAAS. As Smisko described it, the State Board of Education set the passing rates after being presented with information on how students had done on a benchmark test.

Following this meeting, Stephen Klein, a senior researcher with the Rand Corporation, said that when his group tested minority students in Texas and elsewhere in the country, the Texas students' scores were lower than their TAAS scores. He called the TAAS scores "suspect" and said they did not prove that Texas had closed its academic equity gap. He also questioned how students who had shown considerable improvement on the TAAS test could take another test covering much of the same ground two weeks later and score so much lower. "It's exactly the same kids, one for one. How could they suddenly do so poorly?"

"When independent review has been done, the state's accountability test has not held up," Scott says. "The PSAT is yet another example of a credible academic instrument not controlled by the state of Texas that presents a dramatically different conclusion compared to the state's accountability tests."

"It was only after they went to TAKS that [TAAS] suddenly was not a grade-level test. Clearly TAKS was harder than TAAS; it would have been impossible for it not to be. The only time they acknowledge the test is not good, they are justifying the new test," says Scott.

Using the latest statistics from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, Scott computed that of the 23,313 students who graduated from HISD high schools in 2002-2004 and were given six years to earn college degrees, only 564, or, 2.4 percent, earned associate degrees, while 3,164, or 13.6 percent, earned bachelor's degrees in Texas.

So either a whole bunch of kids got their degrees in another state or country, or there's a significant problem.

"Look at where kids go to college, look at the dropout rates in college; what explains the dropouts and poor performance in college better?" Scott asks rhetorically. "High scores, high passing rates on the state's accountability test or scores on a PSAT test? What is a more reasonable explanation for this reality: We have significant percentages who don't go to college, we have significant percentages of kids who go to a community college and don't matriculate to a four-year college, and we have significant percentages of kids who go to a four-year college and don't finish."

In a summary of his recently released Kinder Report, Dr. Stephen Klineberg of Rice University wrote, "Texas students score lower than the U.S. average in most subjects. In comparisons with the other 49 states in 2011, Texas 8th graders who took the NAEP [National Assessment of Educational Progress] ranked 37th in reading, 34th in writing and 10th in math.

"In 2009, only 58 percent of all high school graduates in Harris County went on to any further education; 11 percent of those who enrolled in a Texas two-year college actually graduated with any kind of certificate after four years."

And citing a U.S. Census Bureau survey, Klineberg wrote: "Texas ranks at the very bottom of the 50 states in the percentage of residents over the age of 25 with a high school diploma (80.6 percent).

"Only 59 percent of black children and 62 percent of the Hispanic children who were high school freshmen in HISD schools during the year 2004-5 actually graduated with a high school diploma four years later," Klineberg's report stated.

Reagan notes in his report, "The proportion of Hispanic students has increased by about one percentage point each year in the last five years. In 2013, 61.8 percent of HISD students were Hispanic. If the current trend continues, more than three-fourths of the HISD population will be Hispanic by 2020 and 90 percent of them will be reading below grade level."

There is no way to talk about the reading problem without bringing in the effects of being lower middle class or poor. This past October, the story of the Stanford University professor's follow-up study that verified an earlier study showing the enormous language proficiency gap between toddlers from more affluent homes and those living in poor conditions made headlines around the country.

Most of the high school students we met with for this story come from low-income backgrounds and rarely have books at home. There were a few bright spots: students with parents who read magazines, a couple of students who said they go to the library near their homes.

Most of them have absolutely no use for fiction. "I like reading something that I think is going to help me with my future. I just don't like doing something that I think is going to be a waste," one said, adding that Shakespeare's works definitely fell into the latter category.

Another senior talked about getting by in school. "I don't read that good. There's some words I can't read or pronounce, but I can read somewhat good. The last two [state tests] I took, I passed them. I didn't get very, very high grades. I would just pass."

These students know they have a problem, but how to fix it eludes them as well as all the educational experts who've devoted their careers to studying learning. With all his experience – Billy Reagan was HISD superintendent for 12 years (1974 to 1986) and went on to work for the premier textbook publishing firm Harcourt Brace Jovanovich before eventually opening his own education consulting company in 2002 – even he says he doesn't have a complete remedy.

"My greatest mistake, my greatest sin, was in creating middle schools," Reagan says today. "Because we cut off after the fifth-grade level, we quit formalized reading. Kids need reading teachers up to the seventh and eighth grades. We need to be

changing back as quick as we can to K-8."

The former superintendent stands by the conclusions he's drawn from the Stanford results. "The Stanford is the most valid and consistent set of data that there is along with the PSAT in terms of actually where students are," he says. "I think it certainly dramatically points out the incredible crisis that we're faced with in particular in reading with our students, with little or no closing of the gap in most - circumstances."

There is no one indicator to label a student college-ready or not. There's not even consensus on what it means to be college-ready, but most people tend to think it includes the ability to successfully negotiate a freshman college year without remedial courses. SAT and ACT scores have long been used to determine this, and in recent years there's been more emphasis on a student's GPA (though this has to be looked at in the context of what the high school's curriculum is) as well as performance on Advanced Placement tests and in International Baccalaureate courses.

As for work readiness, Rice's Stephen Klineberg points out that "good blue-collar jobs have all but disappeared" and gone are the days a high school grad can "go to work in the oil fields or on a manufacturing assembly line and expect to be able to earn a middle-class wage."

Scott says that all students, not just minority kids, have not received the educations they should have because of the false impression created by phased-in state passing scores.

"If 66 percent of the kids or 80 percent of the kids are reading at grade level according to the state of Texas, then I am organizing my delivery of instruction in a dramatically different way than at 37 percent districtwide. I get to pretend the problem is not as severe," Scott says.

"I can tell the parents of at-risk minority blacks that 66 percent of your kids are reading at grade level when we know that on a true standard, only 25 percent are. I don't have to solve that problem because I'm not even acknowledging that the problem exists," he adds.

"Billy Reagan makes this point, and it's a brilliant point. The point that Billy has made is that the accountability tests have masked the scope of the real problem. The state is under a constitutional burden to close that equity gap. It either does what is necessary to close that academic equity gap or it creates an elaborate hoax to pretend that it has closed that academic equity gap," Scott says.

"We have spent billions of dollars cumulatively on an elaborate hoax to pretend that we told the Supreme Court of Texas the truth in 1995, that we told the federal district court out of San Antonio in 2000 the truth, and we keep doubling down on the lies," Scott says.

What would happen if it were announced in a press release that only 38 percent of all ninth graders in HISD were able to read on their actual grade level: 72 percent of the whites, 67 percent of the Asians, 33 percent of the Hispanics and 32 percent of the African-Americans?

Or that with only three years to go before these kids go out into the work force or to college, only 25 percent of all HISD ninth graders were passing English I Writing; 54 percent of the whites, 63 percent of the Asians, 20 percent of the Hispanics and 20 percent of the African-Americans?

What would you have?

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HOUSTON ISD: END OF COURSE TESTING FOR 2012-13 ACADEMIC YEAR

The State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness, or STAAR, is the latest state-sanctioned test given to Texas public school students. Passing standards are phased in at a higher level each year; this chart shows how many students would be passing now if future passing standards had already been imposed. — GEORGE SCOTT

Sort	Category	Subject Test	Number Tested	Ethnicity	Eventual Grade Level Passing Rate	PASS	Fail	ADV As % Of Pass	AVG Scale Score
1	DISTRICT	Algebra I	11,860	District	33%	75%	25%	15%	3839
1	DISTRICT	Algebra I	7,178	Hispanic	32%	75%	25%	13%	3811
1	DISTRICT	Algebra I	382	Asian	76%	95%	5%	59%	4518
1	DISTRICT	Algebra I	3,054	Af.A	23%	68%	32%	7%	3705
1	DISTRICT	Algebra I	1,088	White	59%	89%	11%	35%	4150
2	DISTRICT	Geometry	9,081	District	35%	82%	18%	15%	3907
2	DISTRICT	Geometry	5,735	Hispanic	32%	81%	19%	10%	3841
2	DISTRICT	Geometry	397	Asian	87%	97%	3%	71%	4758
2	DISTRICT	Geometry	2,093	Af.A	23%	76%	24%	7%	3757
2	DISTRICT	Geometry	730	White	69%	94%	6%	47%	4352
3	DISTRICT	Biology	12,522	District	40%	82%	18%	11%	3922
3	DISTRICT	Biology	7,609	Hispanic	35%	81%	19%	7%	3860
3	DISTRICT	Biology	428	Asian	85%	95%	5%	59%	4659
3	DISTRICT	Biology	3,160	Af.A	32%	80%	20%	6%	3824
3	DISTRICT	Biology	1,156	White	71%	94%	6%	35%	4312
4	DISTRICT	Chemistry	9,236	District	36%	78%	24%	10%	3871
4	DISTRICT	Chemistry	5,510	Hispanic	31%	74%	26%	5%	3794
4	DISTRICT	Chemistry	400	Asian	83%	96%	4%	56%	4677
4	DISTRICT	Chemistry	2,312	Af.A	29%	71%	29%	5%	3770
4	DISTRICT	Chemistry	881	White	65%	91%	9%	28%	4232
5	DISTRICT	English I Read	13,023	District	38%	59%	41%	9%	1928
5	DISTRICT	English I Read	7,998	Hispanic	33%	58%	44%	5%	1895
5	DISTRICT	English I Read	482	Asian	67%	76%	24%	36%	2177
5	DISTRICT	English I Read	3,224	Af.A	32%	54%	46%	5%	1888
5	DISTRICT	English I Read	1,160	White	72%	86%	14%	27%	2151
6	DISTRICT	English II Read	10,485	District	55%	71%	29%	17%	2044
6	DISTRICT	English II Read	6,315	Hispanic	51%	68%	32%	12%	1998
6	DISTRICT	English II Read	455	Asian	80%	85%	15%	53%	2350
6	DISTRICT	English II Read	2,574	Af.A	51%	68%	32%	11%	1994
6	DISTRICT	English II Read	998	White	82%	90%	10%	46%	2304
7	DISTRICT	World Geography	12,402	District	32%	71%	29%	11%	3791
7	DISTRICT	World Geography	7,490	Hispanic	28%	70%	30%	7%	3743
7	DISTRICT	World Geography	431	Asian	77%	91%	9%	51%	4383
7	DISTRICT	World Geography	3,211	Af.A	21%	62%	38%	5%	3658
7	DISTRICT	World Geography	1,104	White	71%	93%	7%	39%	4249
8	DISTRICT	W. History	9,984	District	28%	62%	38%	7%	3717
8	DISTRICT	W. History	6,004	Hispanic	22%	58%	42%	4%	3637
8	DISTRICT	W. History	406	Asian	74%	92%	8%	38%	4402
8	DISTRICT	W. History	2,488	Af.A	20%	57%	43%	3%	3597
8	DISTRICT	W. History	951	White	63%	87%	13%	26%	4208
9	DISTRICT	English I Writing	13,408	District	25%	42%	58%	2%	1825
9	DISTRICT	English I Writing	8,290	Hispanic	20%	38%	62%	1%	1792
9	DISTRICT	English I Writing	481	Asian	63%	72%	28%	17%	2096
9	DISTRICT	English I Writing	3,295	Af.A	20%	38%	62%	1%	1794
9	DISTRICT	English I Writing	1,177	White	54%	72%	28%	6%	2023
8	DISTRICT	English II Writing	10,523	District	24%	45%	55%	2%	1855
8	DISTRICT	English II Writing	6,339	Hispanic	19%	41%	59%	1%	1827
8	DISTRICT	English II Writing	458	Asian	64%	76%	24%	16%	2075
8	DISTRICT	English II Writing	2,582	Af.A	17%	36%	64%	1%	1811
8	DISTRICT	English II Writing	1,002	White	56%	76%	24%	8%	2035

Higher Education Outcomes Showing 6-Year College Graduation Rates

Cumulative Cohorts of High School Graduates From 2002-2004 Earning College Degrees By 2008, 2009, & 2010

Houston ISD High School Campus	HS Grads	Earned Cert.	Earned Assoc.	Earned Bac.	% Earning Bac.	% Earning Assoc.	% Earning Cert.
ACCELERATED LEARNING AND TRANSITIO Total	358	1	7	1	0.3%	2.0%	0.3%
AUSTIN H S Total	895	21	22	43	4.8%	2.5%	2.3%
BARBARA JORDAN H S Total	678	10	20	70	10.3%	2.9%	1.5%
BELLAIRE H S Total	2,117	24	38	738	34.9%	1.8%	1.1%
COMMUNITY EDUCATION PARTNERS SW Total	37	-	-	1	2.7%	0.0%	0.0%
CONTEMPORARY LRN CTR H S Total	467	4	9	6	1.3%	1.9%	0.9%
DAVIS H S Total	923	14	12	49	5.3%	1.3%	1.5%
DEBAKEY H S FOR HEALTH PROF Total	418	2	7	178	42.6%	1.7%	0.5%
FURR H S Total	567	19	22	37	6.5%	3.9%	3.4%
JONES H S Total	553	3	7	31	5.6%	1.3%	0.5%
KASHMERE H S Total	392	5	9	30	7.7%	2.3%	1.3%
KAY ON-GOING ED CTR HIGH SCHOOL Total	58	-	-	1	1.7%	0.0%	0.0%
LAMAR H S Total	2,030	17	43	488	24.0%	2.1%	0.8%
LAW ENFCMT-CRIM JUST H S Total	464	6	36	126	27.2%	7.8%	1.3%
LEE H S Total	888	8	10	42	4.7%	1.1%	0.9%
MADISON H S Total	1,141	16	20	103	9.0%	1.8%	1.4%
MIDDLE COLLEGE FOR TECH CAREERS Total	115	3	3	24	20.9%	2.6%	2.6%
MILBY H S Total	1,248	24	67	118	9.5%	5.4%	1.9%
PERFOR & VIS ARTS H S Total	445	2	6	115	25.8%	1.3%	0.4%
REAGAN H S Total	872	9	25	60	6.9%	2.9%	1.0%
SAM HOUSTON H S Total	1,314	15	42	51	3.9%	3.2%	1.1%
SCARBOROUGH H S Total	491	14	17	53	10.8%	3.5%	2.9%
SHARPSTOWN H S Total	841	11	24	76	9.0%	2.9%	1.3%
STERLING H S Total	609	10	22	27	4.4%	3.6%	1.6%
WALTRIP H S Total	935	12	23	121	12.9%	2.5%	1.3%
WASHINGTON B T H S Total	672	5	9	108	16.1%	1.3%	0.7%
WESTBURY H S Total	807	14	21	96	11.9%	2.6%	1.7%
WESTSIDE H S Total	1,180	8	24	262	22.2%	2.0%	0.7%
WHEATLEY H S Total	305	6	5	6	2.0%	1.6%	2.0%
WORTHING H S Total	765	6	7	61	8.0%	0.9%	0.8%
YATES H S Total	728	9	7	42	5.8%	1.0%	1.2%
DISTRICT TOTAL OF SCHOOLS REPORTED	23,313	298	564	3,164	13.6%	2.4%	1.3%