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Texas Redefines the Three 'Rs: The New Public School Curriculum

The State Board of Education (SBOE) recently adopted new course requirements for public schools amid significant disagreement among its members over the content of the curriculum. The three-year, \$9.2 million project was fueled by a 1995 legislative directive to rewrite the "Essential Elements" curriculum of the 1980s. The Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) takes effect with the 1998-1999 school year.

Controversy developed over the TEKS when a draft of the document was released for public comment in August 1996. Initial reactions to the TEKS by educators, public officials, the media, and the public were generally negative. Many complained that the length of the document — over 2,000 pages — made it an impractical tool for teachers. Others said that the TEKS lacked clear standards or testable objectives, failed to list specific literary works or historical events that are essential to a good education, and had been produced by academics removed from day-to-day classroom education.

Public outcry prompted the board to extend the time available for public comment on the TEKS and to direct its drafters to make significant changes to the curriculum. Numerous suggestions were received and many changes were made to clarify standards, include specific literary works or historical events, and shorten the document. The final version of the TEKS received praise from education scholars and national groups as well as the support of Gov. George W. Bush and other state leaders.

The SBOE adopted the TEKS by a 9-6 vote. Critics of the TEKS claimed it could be further improved with additional time for public comment; others supported an alternative proposal for the English/language arts curriculum drafted by a group of teachers. Some critics objected to the procedural tactics leading up to the board's vote: repeated motions to separate sections for individual votes were tabled by the same 9-6 margin and discussion was stifled, they said. After the TEKS was adopted, some board members pledged to seek an injunction preventing its implementation. While those members have not yet proceeded to seek an injunction, criticisms continue. This report reviews the controversies surrounding TEKS and examines how the new curriculum is likely to affect Texas public school teachers and students.

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Development of TEKS

In 1993, then-education commissioner Lionel "Skip" Meno began to form study groups to consider a massive overhaul of the curriculum for Texas public schools and the essential elements of that curriculum. Proponents of an all-encompassing change pointed to the dramatic transformations in the makeup of the state's workforce. The economic foundation of the state clearly was no longer grounded solely on farming, ranching, and oil and

gas production. The rapid rise of computer manufacturing, software development, and health care meant that students would need highly skilled technical training in order to compete in the increasingly high-tech job marketplace.

Proponents of revision also argued that the “essential elements” curriculum required a major overhaul in order to function as a better resource for teachers and to expand the ways in which teachers could explore new methods of teaching knowledge and skills. The essential elements curriculum was a prescriptive document that described what should be taught in each subject for each grade level, they said. Focusing on what must be learned rather than what must be taught would allow teachers to discover new avenues for preparing students for the fast-changing challenges of a high-tech world.

In 1995 the Legislature, through SB 1 by Ratliff, directed the SBOE to develop a revised curriculum of fundamental knowledge and skills. The SBOE defined 15 content areas to be included in the curriculum and formed writing teams for each area. Nearly 400 educators, parents, community members, and business representatives participated in creating the first draft of what came to be called the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, or TEKS (pronounced “teeks” by some, “tex” by others). Revisions to that draft took more than a year while the SBOE reviewed public comments and held hearings to receive input from citizens around the state.

The second draft of TEKS, released in August 1996, generated considerable controversy. Many observers said the 2,000-page document contained standards so vague as to be meaningless. Gov. Bush called the draft “mush.” Primary criticism was aimed at objectives couched in such terms as “understand,” “explore” or “recognize” rather than “use,” “analyze,” or “evaluate.” Critics said such objectives could not be tested. Absent were any clear-cut standards stipulating, for example, that students should learn the alphabet, be able to count from 1 to 100, read at least one work of Shakespeare, or know who George Washington or Stephen F. Austin were.

Critics also charged that the document repeated standards from one grade level to the next without any explanation of how the standards would be

raised. Some complained that the TEKS also seemed to favor teaching certain political-philosophical points of view. Statements exalting the benefits of multiculturalism, secularism, and community service abounded, they said. While most critics did not question the message these statements gave, they did object to their being taught in school rather than learned at home, where values traditionally have been inculcated.

Because of the length of the document, the SBOE extended the review period by several months and allowed additional opportunities for public comment. Some 29,000 responses were received during the two review periods, most in response to the second draft.

The final version of the TEKS, approved in July 1997, incorporated thousands of suggestions made by individuals and groups that added references to individual works, historical figures, and dates; changed many “soft” objectives to clear, testable standards; and increased distinctions between various grade levels. The English/language arts portion of the TEKS took some guidance from the Texas Alternative Document (TAD), which was developed by a group of teachers, some of whom participated in writing the original draft of the TEKS.

The final draft of TEKS was endorsed by many Texans who had opposed the earlier version, including Gov. Bush, the Texas Business and Education Coalition, and the American Federation of Teachers. Even some members of the SBOE who voted against the TEKS as a whole stated that the final version contained significant improvements and that they supported many individual sections.

Some members who voted against the adoption of the TEKS pledged to seek a legal injunction to prevent its implementation, alleging parliamentary errors during the board meeting at which the TEKS was adopted. These members said that the SBOE majority who supported TEKS adoption did not allow those in opposition to offer amendments or vote on individual sections separately at the July 11 board meeting. Those in favor of the TEKS said that there had been ample time to offer such amendments before the meeting date and that the proposals by the TEKS opponents were simply meant to delay adoption of the new curriculum.

Curriculum Standards Pre-TEKS: Identifying Essential Elements

The Texas Constitution requires the Legislature to support and maintain a system of efficient public schools. This mandate authorizes the Legislature to place into statute required courses and other directives regarding curriculum. But authority over curriculum also has been shared with others, principally the State Board of Education (SBOE). The SBOE has substantially influenced curriculum by designing student development goals, setting accreditation standards, and choosing acceptable textbooks.

As Texas has grown, so has the required curriculum but often with unclear intent and effect. Curriculum requirements have been added by the Legislature, the SBOE, the federal government, and local school districts. One legislative directive, for example, required that schools teach as part of the citizenship curriculum “intelligent patriotism,” kindness to animals, protection of birds and their nests and eggs, and dangers of crime and narcotics. SBOE requirements included “competence in judging the merits of comparative political systems and ideologies with emphasis on democratic institutions, the responsibilities and privileges of citizenship, and the comparative merits of candidates for political positions.” Local districts often required students to learn about local history, heroes and traditions. All of these elements were combined into lesson plans without any unifying structure.

In 1979, the Legislature approved HCR 90, requiring the SBOE to develop recommendations for improving and helping to standardize the Texas curriculum. The Statewide Curriculum Study Panel was formed to examine creating a unified curriculum. It recommended repealing all legislative mandates concerning the curriculum and developing a standard curriculum in 12 subject areas. The Legislature was to define the subject areas and allow the SBOE to establish which elements would be taught in each of

those areas for each grade level. In 1981, the Legislature enacted HB 246, stipulating a set number of required subject areas: English language arts, mathematics, science, Texas and U.S. history, social studies, economics, fine arts, health, physical education, vocational education, business education, and other languages to the extent possible.

The SBOE and Texas Education Agency (TEA) undertook a three-year project to develop a curriculum for the state and define the essential elements of the curriculum based on the mandates included in HB 246. These “essential elements,” as the curriculum came to be known, were put into place beginning in the 1984-1985 school year. Among the requirements of HB 246 was an ongoing revision process through which the SBOE and TEA have continued to expand and modify the elements.

The essential elements were based on a “blueprint” philosophy for developing a curriculum. They attempted to reduce to a simple document the essential points that must be passed on to students in each subject and at each grade level. The elements typically are couched in terms of “opportunities” that must be provided to every student. (See page 12.)

The essential elements did not require that a new curriculum be developed from the ground up; rather, teachers simply integrated the elements into the classroom by adjusting the current curriculum. The transition was not a dramatic change in the daily operation of the classroom. Because most schools already had defined curricula and experienced teachers who were accustomed to those curricula, the transition team recommended merely placing the essential elements “on top of” the daily curriculum and making adjustments where necessary. In most instances, teachers just needed to show how the lessons they were already teaching applied to and covered the elements.

Models for Public Education

The debate over the Texas curriculum is no mere difference of opinion over whether or not to emphasize phonics or teach alternative theories to evolution. According to some observers, the core argument is whether public schools and the students they serve benefit most from an “input-based” or “outcome-based” model of education. Should a curriculum more appropriately define what a student should learn or what a teacher should teach? In a perfect world, there would be no difference between those two approaches. However, in practice, they can create very different styles of education.

Input-based and outcome-based models of education differ in their point of emphasis within the school system. The traditional model of judging the quality of education has been based on inputs — such as dollars per pupil, student-teacher ratios, teacher salaries, and facilities per pupil — that are easily quantifiable and can easily be increased, assuming taxpayers are willing to shoulder the increased cost. The current school finance system in Texas is primarily input-based, grounded on the idea that the amount of money spent per pupil should be equalized, to the greatest extent possible. This scenario assumes that the amount of money put into a child’s education is directly related to the quality of

that child’s education. Critics of input-based systems, however, say that simply increasing such resources does not necessarily increase the quality of education and objective measurements should be used to direct the distribution of resources.

Outcome-based education defines educational success based on the end result of a well-educated student. Actual results normally are measured by testing or other objective means, which then indicate whether the program should receive additional funding or if changes should be made. Such testing also is often used to determine if a student may advance to the next grade level. Texas has adopted a certain degree of outcome-based education: the state uses the standardized Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) test as a measure for validating graduation eligibility, allowing student transfers, and rewarding schools. Critics of outcome-based education argue that the goal of a quality education is undefinable and varies from one child to another; the measurement tools now available cannot evaluate students based on their potential. Rather than receiving a well-rounded education, students are taught how to pass the tests, they say.

In the classroom, these two systems for educating children translate into very different models for curriculum.

Texas State Board of Education

The State Board of Education was created in 1866 to oversee the system of public schools in Texas. The original board was composed of the governor, the comptroller, and the superintendent of public instruction. The board was disbanded during the Reconstruction era; in 1876, a new SBOE was created that included the governor, comptroller and secretary of state. In 1928, voters approved a proposal changing the board’s composition to nine members appointed by the governor, subject to Senate confirmation. Members served staggered six-year terms.

Beginning in 1949, SBOE members were elected from congressional districts. Due to reapportionment, membership had increased from 21 to 27 by 1984. In that year, the Legislature, under HB 72, abolished the elected SBOE, replacing it with a 15-member board appointed by the governor to serve until January 1, 1989. HB 72 also created the 15 districts from which SBOE members are selected. In 1987, voters were asked in a statewide referendum whether to continue the appointed SBOE past 1989 or to stay with the original plan of returning to an elected SBOE. Voters supported the decision to return to an elected board by 52.4 percent of the vote. The current State Board of Education is composed of 15 members chosen from single-member districts throughout the state. SBOE members serve staggered four-year terms.

Input, or teacher-based, curriculum defines what the teacher should present to students in a given course. It uses material uniformly throughout the system and operates as a fixed resource rather than a process; the curriculum plan is stated in clear terms that essentially tell the teacher what to teach in the classroom. The idea behind such an approach is that students will learn the material when these specific resources are presented to them.

Supporters of teacher-based curricula argue that the simple documents this model generates can be used by both teachers and parents to understand what will be taught in the classroom. Such a curriculum is helpful for inexperienced teachers because it tells them what their lesson plans should cover and, in many cases, how that material should be presented. Teacher-based curricula also help to ensure that every student is given the same opportunity to receive a quality education; the essential knowledge and skills stated in the curriculum will be taught to every student regardless of the specific school attended or the teacher for the course, they say.

Critics of teacher-based curricula argue that such systems are too rigid and discourage new methods for teaching students from being implemented. For example, the essential elements curriculum requires reading teachers to use “word attack skills” to teach students to use phonics, acquire a basic vocabulary, and use context clues to read. The Texas Alternative Document for English/language arts (TAD), also a teacher-based curriculum, lists works students should read and specifies the phonic concepts students should learn as well as when they should learn them. However, such practices may not work for all students, and other methods could more quickly increase a student’s reading comprehension. Critics claim that under a rigid, teacher-based curriculum, teachers have to circumvent the curriculum in order to use new methods.

One variation on the input-based model of education, sometimes called the “nostalgist” approach by its critics, calls for restructuring education as it was more than 30 years ago. Proponents say the use of standard, time-tested curricula that taught students the fundamentals of reading, writing and math could improve today’s educational system, which suffers from too many “soft” elements. Diversions from traditional education undermine teaching of the basics and lead to academically weak students, they say. Opponents

of this view, however, argue that the inputs a child receives must change with the evolving needs of society. They argue that today’s student should be taught to use computers at a very early age and should also be given information on intangibles — such as safety and friendship — that previously may have been communicated at home.

Outcome, or student-based, curriculum concentrates on establishing the end result of what a student should have learned in a particular class or during a certain year of schooling. Rather than defining what should be taught, outcome-based curricula state the end result; the process is left to the teacher and student.

Supporters of a student-based curriculum contend that teachers and students will find the best way to achieve the goals of each course by concentrating on those goals rather than on specific teaching instructions. If teachers are allowed to use any reasonable means necessary to teach the agreed objectives, all students will still receive the same education no matter what school they attend, despite differences in methods. Additionally, because it dispenses with certain state mandates, a student-based curriculum increases local control. Local schools can determine which texts would be the best to use in particular classes and develop innovative programs for use in the district, supporters say.

Critics argue that the lack of clear standards and specific information prevents student-based curricula from being useful educational tools. If certain necessary elements of a course are left unstated, many students and teachers will have to depend on other sources of information, such as textbooks, to shape lesson plans. Inexperienced teachers who lack good direction from colleagues could fail to teach some essential elements of a course simply because they were unaware such elements should be taught. They also claim such a curriculum makes it difficult for parents to know whether their children are progressing in their classes. Because the method of teaching could differ from class to class, student-based curricula only states the end results. If, at the end of the course, the student has failed to meet such goals, it is often too late for the parent to attempt to help the child, they say.

One variety of outcome-based education — the so-called “transformational” approach — focuses more

TEKS Curriculum Elements

Basic Curriculum

English Language Arts and Reading
 Mathematics
 Science
 Social Studies

Enrichment Curriculum

Health Education
 Physical Education
 Economics with Emphasis on the Free Enterprise System and Its Benefits
 Spanish Language Arts and English as a Second Language
 Languages Other Than English
 Fine Arts
 Agricultural Science and Technology Education
 Business Education
 Marketing Education
 Health Science Technology Education
 Home Economics Education
 Technology Education/Industrial Technology Education
 Trade and Industrial Education
 Technology Applications
 Career Orientation

The full text of the TEKS is available on the TEA website: www.tea.state.tx.us/teks/.

on the social and emotional development of a child than on the academic development. This approach has been attempted in early versions of many curriculum revision projects throughout the country, including Pennsylvania, where the draft curriculum set certain goals and then defined measures of success for those goals. For “self worth,” the goal read “all students understand and appreciate their worth as unique and capable individuals and exhibit self-esteem [and] act through a desire to succeed rather than a fear of failure while recognizing that failure is part of everyone’s experiences.” In “arts and humanities,” the specified goal was for “all students [to] advocate the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage and traditions, including works of art, presentations and performances in the local and global community as a function of good citizenship.”

Critics say that while such standards may be worthwhile goals, they are hard to quantify, much less measure, in any standardized way. They also can show a bias toward a particular culture or set of values that everyone in the community may not share.

These problems were among the criticisms levied by Texas opponents of the second draft of the TEKS.

The version of the TEKS adopted by the SBOE combines elements of many different education approaches. For example, the first grade English/language arts TEKS (see page 13) includes:

- input-based concepts, e.g., participation “in rhymes, songs, conversation and discussions”;
- transformational outcome-based concepts, e.g., listening and speaking “to gain knowledge of his/her own culture, the culture of others, and the common elements of culture”;
- traditional elements, e.g., the order of the alphabet and recognizing capital and lowercase letters; and
- outcome-based concepts, e.g., setting expectations for students without stating the methods to be used to meet those expectations.

Practical effects of a new curriculum

Most observers agree that changing the curriculum standards from the essential elements to the TEKS will not radically change the Texas school system for better or worse. They say the transition to the TEKS is not likely to be a jarring change for most students and teachers, but rather a gradual shift in how various courses are taught, since the stated goals of the TEKS are to allow teachers to use new methods of teaching.

Much like the implementation of the essential elements in 1984, the transition to the TEKS will not necessarily be one that dramatically affects all students on a day-to-day basis. Most teachers and schools constantly update their lesson plans and local curricula each year to incorporate new facts, new textbooks, or new teaching methods. The incorporation of the TEKS will likely be no more difficult than modifying a lesson plan to conform to a new textbook, its supporters say. Additionally, the TEA plans to significantly increase professional development programs to help teachers prepare for the TEKS implementation. Regional education service centers will be responsible for helping teachers develop lesson plans and answering questions regarding new requirements.

Some critics have claimed that the sheer length of the TEKS, coupled with the controversy surrounding its adoption, could make its implementation difficult. They say teachers, especially those without much experience, may have difficulty trying to interpret the numerous requirements of the TEKS and develop lesson plans from that document. Without strong guidance from education leaders on how the TEKS should be implemented into the everyday lesson plans at each school, the initial change to the TEKS curriculum may result in widespread confusion. Other critics warn that the opposition to the second draft of the TEKS may have prejudiced a number of teachers against the new curriculum, regardless of changes made to the final version.

Those who support the TEKS view it as an opportunity to expand both what is taught in the classroom and the ways in which this information is taught. However, even some supporters say it is unlikely that graduation rates or test scores will dramatically improve solely because of the TEKS. Critics argue that the TEKS will provide an eventual dumbing-down of

the whole education system and lead to the teaching of untestable, “touchy-feely” lessons. However, these same critics concede that no degradation is likely to occur in the first years of TEKS implementation precisely because many teachers who taught under the current system will continue to use their methods of teaching students. The implementation of the TEKS may have a greater impact on schools in other ways.

Teacher education. The State Board of Educator Certification recently proposed requirements that all teachers be certified in the subjects that they teach, unless an emergency situation necessitates temporary certification. Under the proposal, subject level certification would be based on the TEKS elements of the subject, because those elements are what teachers should be able to teach. In this system, future teachers could be taught a variety of teaching methods and strategies because the TEKS only sets the goals in each subject. The educator certification program would also likely follow the outcome-based model of the TEKS in setting goals, such as demonstrated competence, rather than listing required courses for each subject certification. However, some question the wisdom of radically departing from the traditional teacher education model in favor of a system that has not yet been fully implemented, much less proven to be beneficial for students.

Graduation requirements. The TEKS could lead to additional changes to measures recently taken in Texas to increase graduation requirements for high school students. Under the new rules, freshmen beginning high school in the 1997-1998 school year must complete 22 credit hours, up from 21. The requirements include one additional credit of technology applications, such as computer science. The seven elective credits previously allowed have been reduced to five and one-half credits; students must now take one-half credit of speech and one additional credit of science or social studies class. The new graduation requirements were implemented to meet the needs of a workplace where technology and public speaking are becoming more commonplace. The TEKS further expands both the basic and enrichment curricula. It is possible that once the TEKS has been fully implemented, some may call for increasing the graduation requirements to 23 or 24 hours to ensure that every student has the opportunity to complete as many courses as possible considered “essential” to function in today’s workplace.

Reading initiatives. Gov. Bush has advocated increasing reading instruction early in school so that by the third grade all students can read at their grade level. The TEKS stresses reading skills in all grades of the English/language arts curriculum and also includes reading as part of many other subject curricula, such as social studies and science. Unproven is the theory that simply including more requirements and objectives in a reading curriculum will improve individual reading. However, the importance given to reading throughout the curriculum tends to bolster the perception of reading as one of the skills most essential to student success.

Textbook changes. In 1995, the 74th Legislature enacted SB 1 by Ratliff, which curtailed the authority the SBOE previously had in selecting textbooks for use in public schools. Now the SBOE cannot refuse a book if it meets set physical specifications, is free of factual errors, and contains material covering each element of the essential knowledge and skills of the subject and grade level. Some critics of the curriculum development process asserted that drafting a new curriculum could be a secondary way for the SBOE to retain its control over textbooks. Because the board could no longer refuse to recommend a book based on its content, the board could draft the curriculum standards in such a way as to influence content, critics claimed. For example, before SB 1, the board could reject a history book due to its perspective on one particular subject or point of view. Because the board no longer has such authority, critics argued, it could use the TEKS to make content requirements specific enough to ensure books adopted did not over or underemphasize particular viewpoints.

The SBOE is currently examining ways of streamlining the textbook adoption process so that students have access to the newest books as quickly as possible. Currently, most books are as much as three years old when they are incorporated into the classroom. Those books are also expected to have a shelf-life of six to 12 years; for example, history textbooks replaced in 1997 concluded with Ronald Reagan as president. With the TEKS, new texts can be developed even before the SBOE issues a request for texts, cutting down production time once a new book is approved. This is possible because the TEKS curriculum sets student objectives in each class and leaves the actual instruction up to the teacher, and to some degree, the textbook. Books currently in produc-

tion can accommodate the TEKS broader guidelines rather than being developed to precisely fit a strict curriculum.

Textbook content changes in Texas have implications for the rest of the nation. Because of its size and the specificity of its requests, Texas is one of the largest single purchasers of textbooks in the country. Publishers often sell the books created specifically for the Texas market in other states or individual districts as well.

Standardized testing. Texas currently uses the TAAS test to judge student performance in academics, including math and reading and writing language arts. The test is given to students in fourth, eighth, and tenth grades. In order to graduate, students must pass all parts of the tenth grade exam.

TAAS scores are a large factor in determining the performance rating of a school. Schools are categorized as low performing, acceptable, recognized, or exemplary based on such factors as the percentage of students passing the TAAS. These ratings are significant; under HB 318 by Cuellar, enacted in 1997, students from any school rated as low performing in any of the previous three years may transfer to another school. A proposal this year by Education Commissioner Mike Moses also would have linked TAAS test scores to teacher performance appraisals. That proposal drew criticism from teachers around the state and was not implemented.

The TAAS test has been based on the essential elements curriculum currently used in public schools, so the TEKS is likely to generate calls for a new version of the TAAS. However, the problems currently associated with the TAAS test could make any major revision of that test difficult. Even if the test is revised and its content improved, the varied purposes for which it is now used are likely to continue to draw criticism.

In a recent survey of teachers by the Texas Association of Professional Educators, 71 percent agreed with the statement that the "TAAS has not been a positive thing for public schools." According to the teachers surveyed, TAAS has become a driving force for rather than a measuring stick of the curriculum. The test is not measuring the progress of students, they say, but rather how well faculty are teaching students to pass the test. Theoretically, students who

are well grounded in the measured skills can easily pass the test; however, the pressure to achieve a high passing rate means schools cannot take the chance that their students have not mastered the general skills, critics of the TAAS say.

Others have objected to the TAAS based on its content, contending that the test is biased against minority students. After a two-year study, the U.S. Department of Education in July 1997 determined that the TAAS is not biased against ethnic or minority students. However, if the test were significantly changed and minority test scores remained at low levels, another costly investigation could be necessary to study the potential for bias in the newer exam.

A second criticism of the TAAS content is that it fails to test in a broad area of subjects. The TAAS does include sections on science and social studies, but the scores on these sections are not considered when determining a school's overall test scores. If a new test is to be based on a curriculum that covers 15 subject areas, some say, more than just math and language arts should determine a student's score.

While criticized widely, the TAAS has also drawn praise from the Rand Corporation, a national research institute, which found the combination of assessment and accountability systems in Texas to be one of the best in the nation. It also found that the connection between assessment and accountability has been able to significantly motivate those schools rated as low-performing to make improvements.

TEKS and education controversies

Sex education. Sex education is an inherently controversial subject in public schools. Texas requirements for sex education stipulate not only what to teach and when but also which aspects to emphasize. SB 1, enacted in 1995, requires that any course materials and instruction on human sexuality, sexually transmitted diseases, or AIDS education present abstinence from sexual activity as the preferred behavioral choice in sexual activity involving unmarried persons of school age. Such education must also devote more attention to abstinence than to any other

NATIONAL TESTING?

President Clinton has proposed instituting national testing to gauge reading skills of fourth graders and math skills of eighth graders. Participation by any state or school district would be voluntary. The proposal carries a price tag of about \$107 million: nearly \$27 million to develop the test and another \$80 million to administer it nationwide. After the first year, participating states and local districts would have to pay the costs of administering the test, at a cost of \$10 to \$12 per student.

Supporters of the proposal claim it would be the best way to judge state and regional variations in education and could be used as a basis for comparing American students to those of other countries. Detailed test scores would help teachers and principals strengthen instructional plans by pinpointing areas where students are having the greatest difficulties. The test could also be used to judge the benefits or weaknesses of new programs or systemwide changes, such as implementation of a new curriculum, they say.

Critics argue that the intrusion of the federal government in this area could usurp the authority of states to manage education independently. If the national test included questions on certain areas, states would be required to teach those areas or risk looking bad in standings. Others fear that the test could stigmatize minority children, who may be less likely to attend high performing schools and whose scores on standardized tests tend to be lower.

sexual behavior. The TEKS follows the legislative mandate in the health education curriculum:

6th grade Health Education:

- (4) Health information. The student comprehends ways of researching, accessing, and analyzing health information. The student is expected to:
- (D) explain the relationship between tobacco, alcohol, drugs, and other substances and the role these items play in unsafe situations such as drinking and driving and Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)/Sexually Transmitted Disease (STD) transmission. . .
- (I) explain the consequences of sexual activity and the benefits of abstinence.

7th grade Health Education:

- (5) Health behaviors. The student engages in behaviors that reduce health risks throughout the life span. The student is expected to:
- (E) analyze the importance of abstinence from sexual activity as the preferred choice of behavior in relationship to all sexual activity for unmarried persons of school age;
- (F) discuss abstinence from sexual activity as the only method that is 100% effective in preventing pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and the sexual transmission of HIV or acquired immune deficiency syndrome, and the emotional trauma associated with adolescent sexual activity.

9th grade Health Education:

- (7) Health behaviors. The student analyzes the relationship between unsafe behaviors and personal health and develops strategies to promote resiliency throughout the life span. The student is expected to:
- (B) explain the relationship between alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs and other substances used by adolescents and the role these substances play in unsafe situations such as Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)/Sexually Transmitted Disease (STD), unplanned pregnancies, and motor vehicle accidents.

Evolutionary theory. While generally accepted by the scientific community as the best explanation for the variety of species on the Earth, the theory of evolution and natural selection remains controversial because of its religious implications. The TEKS

approach is to examine all theories, including the bases and implications of evolutionary theory:

9th grade Biology:

- (3) Scientific processes. The student uses critical thinking and scientific problem solving to make informed decisions. The student is expected to:
- (A) analyze, review, and critique scientific explanations, including hypotheses and theories, as to their strengths and weaknesses using scientific evidence and information; . . .
- (7) Science concepts. The student knows the theory of biological evolution. The student is expected to:
- (A) identify evidence of change in species using fossils, DNA sequences, anatomical similarities, physiological similarities, and embryology; and
- (B) illustrate the results of natural selection in speciation, diversity, phylogeny, adaptation, behavior, and extinction.

Multi-culturalism. In the current age of diversity and exposure to varied world cultures, controversy has developed over how social sciences should be taught in public schools. Proponents of multi-culturalism say children must be taught to appreciate the variety of people in the world and value cultural and ethnic differences. They argue that students also should be taught history from a variety of perspectives on an event.

Critics argue that multi-culturalism is a “politically correct” concept that is meant to denigrate the accomplishments of the majority, primarily white men, in history. They point out that multi-culturalism has transformed the image of Christopher Columbus from the traditional view of a brave explorer to that of a murderous pirate who abused the indigenous peoples in the New World. Many objectives specified in the social studies curriculum of the TEKS, critics say, emphasize multi-culturalism to the detriment of historical significance, inappropriately elevating obscure female and minority figures.

2nd grade Social Studies:

- (4) History. The student understands how historical figures and ordinary people helped to shape our community, state, and nation. The student is expected to:
- (A) identify contributions of historical figures

such as Henrietta King and Thurgood Marshall who have influenced the community, state, and nation;

(B) identify historic figures such as Amelia Earhart and Robert Fulton who have exhibited a love of individualism and inventiveness.

3rd grade Social Studies:

(12) Culture. The student understands ethnic and/or cultural celebrations of the United States and other nations. The student is expected to:

(A) explain the significance of selected ethnic and/or cultural celebrations in Texas, the United States, and other nations such as St. Patrick's Day, Cinco de Mayo, and Kwanzaa; and

(B) compare ethnic and/or cultural celebrations in Texas, the United States, and other nations.

7th grade Texas History:

(2) Selections may include a biography of Barbara Jordan or Lorenzo de Zavala and William B. Travis' letter *To the People of Texas and All Americans in the World*.

8th grade American History:

(24) Culture. The student understands the relationships between and among people from various groups, including racial, ethnic, and religious groups, during the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. The student is expected to:

(A) identify selected racial, ethnic, and religious groups that settled in the United States and their reasons for immigration . . .

(D) analyze the contributions of people of various racial, ethnic, and religious groups to our national identity; and

(E) identify the political, social, and economic contributions of women to American society.

Phonics. The phonetical system of teaching reading and writing by breaking words down to their component sounds has been both lauded and criticized. Supporters claim phonics is an essential part of learning how to read and write. It can also help students to learn these skills at a faster pace, they say. Critics argue that an overemphasis on phonics without instruction in spelling, vocabulary and writing can lead to poor communication skills. The slogan of a popular phonics program is parodied as: "Hookd on foniks wurkt fur me!"

In contrast to phonics, the "whole language" method for teaching reading encourages students to read and write as much as possible, learning reading from contextual clues and writing to the best extent possible without worrying about correct grammar or spelling under the theory that the natural predisposition toward learning language will allow students to develop greater language skills.

Advocates of phonics claim that the whole language system has failed to help a large number of students who require drill work in the basics of phonics in order to read and write. They say that students who learned under a whole language system would also have learned just as well under a phonics system but that those who need the structure of phonics have been overlooked in whole language classrooms.

The TEKS, according to most observers, balances out phonics with other skills in a way that allows students the benefits of phonics but helps to avoid some of the problems that may occur if phonics are either overemphasized or underemphasized. In the first grade reading curriculum (see page 13), phonics is used to develop letter/sound relationships. The first grade writing curriculum also stresses the importance of spelling and using spelling rules such as "silent e's" or double consonants:

1st grade Language Arts:

(20) Writing/spelling. The student spells proficiently. The student is expected to:

(A) write with more proficient spelling of regularly spelled patterns such as consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) (hop), consonant-vowel-consonant-silent e (CVCe) (hope), and one-syllable words with blends (drop);

(B) write with more proficient spelling of inflectional endings such as plurals and verb tenses;

(C) spell single syllable words that have r-controlled vowels such as in *burn* or *star*; that have the final consonants *f*, *l*, and *s* such as in *miss* or *doll*; and that have *ck* as the final consonants such as in *buck*;

(D) use resources to find correct spellings, synonyms, and replacement words; and

(E) use conventional spelling of familiar words in final drafts.

Old Curriculum v. New:

First Grade

Essential Elements (adopted 1984)

[Introductory material deleted.]

“(3) Reading.

(A) Using word attack skills to decode written language. The student shall be provided opportunities to:

- (i) use basic phonics: initial, medial, and final consonants, long and short vowels;
- (ii) use simple structural analysis: compound words, inflectional endings;
- (iii) acquire a basic sight vocabulary; and
- (iv) use context clues.

(B) Developing vocabulary to understand written material. The student shall be provided opportunities to:

- (i) relate experiences with appropriate vocabulary in complete sentences;
- (ii) understand the meaning of words in context;
- (iii) acquire reading vocabulary relating to concepts being learned; and
- (iv) alphabetize according to initial letter.

(C) Using comprehension skills to gain meaning from whatever is read. The student shall be provided opportunities to:

- (i) identify an explicitly stated main idea;
- (ii) recall facts and details;
- (iii) arrange events in sequential order;
- (iv) distinguish between fantasy and fact;
- (v) summarize a selection;
- (vi) identify the cause of a given event; and
- (vii) predict probable future outcomes.

(D) Applying reading skills to a variety of practical situations. The student shall be provided opportunities to:

- (i) follow written directions;
- (ii) use phrases in oral reading; and
- (iii) use basic parts of a book: table of contents, title page.

(E) Developing literary appreciation skills to provide personal enjoyment. The student shall be provided opportunities to:

- (i) appreciate repetition, rhyme, rhythm, and alliteration;
 - (ii) respond to various forms of literature;
 - (iii) become acquainted with a variety of selections, characters, and themes of our literary heritage;
 - (iv) select books for individual needs and interests;
 - (v) follow story line involving several characters;
 - (vi) describe the time and setting of a story; and
 - (vii) understand the feelings and emotions of characters. “
-

Essential Elements and TEKS

Reading Curricula

Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (adopted 1997)

[Introductory material deleted.]

“(5) Reading/print awareness. The student demonstrates knowledge of concepts of print. The student is expected to:

- (A) recognize that print represents spoken language and conveys meaning such as his/her own name and signs such as *Exit* and *Danger*;
- (B) know that print moves left-to-right across the page and top-to-bottom;
- (C) understand that written words are separated by spaces;
- (D) know the difference between individual letters and printed words;
- (E) know the order of the alphabet;
- (F) know the difference between capital and lowercase letters;
- (G) recognize how readers use capitalization and punctuation to comprehend;
- (H) understand that spoken words are represented in written language by specific sequences of letters;
- (I) recognize that different parts of a book such as cover, title page, and table of contents offer information;
- (J) recognize that there are correct spellings for words; and
- (K) recognize the distinguishing features of a paragraph.

(6) Reading/phonological awareness. The student orally demonstrates phonological awareness (an understanding that spoken language is composed of sequences of sounds). The student is expected to:

- (A) demonstrate the concept of word by dividing spoken sentences into individual words;
- (B) identify, segment, and combine syllables within spoken words such as by clapping syllables and moving manipulatives to represent syllables in words;
- (C) produce rhyming words and distinguish rhyming words from non-rhyming words;
- (D) identify and isolate the initial and final sound of a spoken word;
- (E) blend sounds to make spoken words, including three and four phoneme words, through ways such as moving manipulatives to blend phonemes in a spoken word; and
- (F) segment one-syllable spoken words into individual phonemes, including three and four phoneme words, clearly producing beginning, medial, and final sounds.

(7) Reading/letter-sound relationships. The student uses letter-sound knowledge to decode written language. The student is expected to:

- (A) name and identify each letter of the alphabet;
- (B) understand that written words are composed of letters that represent sounds;
- (C) learn and apply letter-sound correspondences of a set of consonants and vowels to begin to read;
- (D) learn and apply the most common letter-sound correspondences, including the sounds represented by single letters (consonants and vowels); consonant blends such as *bl*, *st*, *tr*; consonant digraphs such as *th*, *sh*, *ck*; and vowel digraphs and diphthongs such as *ea*, *ie*, *ee*;

- (E) blend initial letter-sounds with common vowel spelling patterns to read words;
- (F) decode by using all letter-sound correspondences within regularly spelled words; and
- (G) use letter-sound knowledge to read decodable texts (engaging and coherent texts in which most of the words are comprised of an accumulating sequence of letter-sound correspondences being taught).
- (8) Reading/word identification. The student uses a variety of word identification strategies. The student is expected to:
- (A) decode by using all letter-sound correspondences within a word;
- (B) use common spelling patterns to read words;
- (C) use structural cues to recognize words such as compounds, base words, and inflections such as *-s*, *-es*, *-ed*, and *-ing*;
- (D) identify multisyllabic words by using common syllable patterns;
- (E) recognize high frequency irregular words such as *said*, *was*, *where*, and *is*;
- (F) use knowledge of word order (syntax) and context to support word identification and confirm word meaning; and
- (G) read both regular and irregular words automatically such as through multiple opportunities to read and reread.
- (9) Reading/fluency. The student reads with fluency and understanding in texts at appropriate difficulty levels. The student is expected to:
- (A) read regularly in independent-level materials (texts in which no more than approximately 1 in 20 words is difficult for the reader);
- (B) read regularly in instructional-level materials that are challenging but manageable (texts in which no more than approximately 1 in 10 words is difficult for the reader; a “typical” first grader reads approximately 60 wpm);
- (C) read orally from familiar texts with fluency (accuracy, expression, appropriate phrasing, and attention to punctuation); and
- (D) self-select independent level reading such as by drawing on personal interest, by relying on knowledge of authors and different types of texts, and/or by estimating text difficulty.
- (10) Reading/variety of texts. The student reads widely for different purposes in varied sources. The student is expected to:
- (A) read fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, including classic and contemporary works, for pleasure and/or information; and
- (B) use graphs, charts, signs, captions, and other informational texts to acquire information.
- (11) Reading/vocabulary development. The student develops an extensive vocabulary. The student is expected to:
- (A) discuss meanings of words and develop vocabulary through meaningful/concrete experiences;
- (B) develop vocabulary by listening to and discussing both familiar and conceptually challenging selections read aloud; and
- (C) identify words that name persons, places, or things and words that name actions.
- (12) Reading/comprehension. The student uses a variety of strategies to comprehend selections read aloud and selections read independently. The student is expected to:
- (A) use prior knowledge to anticipate meaning and make sense of texts;
- (B) establish purposes for reading and listening such as to be informed, to follow directions, and to be entertained;
- (C) retell or act out the order of important events in stories;

- (D) monitor his/her own comprehension and act purposefully when comprehension breaks down using strategies such as rereading, searching for clues, and asking for help;
- (E) draw and discuss visual images based on text descriptions;
- (F) make and explain inferences from texts such as determining important ideas and causes and effects, making predictions, and drawing conclusions; and
- (G) identify similarities and differences across texts such as in topics, characters, and problems.

(13) Reading/literary response. The student responds to various texts. The student is expected to:

- (A) listen to stories being read aloud;
- (B) participate actively (react, speculate, join in, read along) when predictable and patterned selections are read aloud;
- (C) respond through talk, movement, music, art, drama, and writing to a variety of stories and poems in ways that reflect understanding and interpretation;
- (D) connect ideas and themes across texts; and
- (E) describe how illustrations contribute to the text.

(14) Reading/text structures/literary concepts. The student recognizes characteristics of various types of texts. The student is expected to:

- (A) distinguish different forms of texts such as lists, newsletters, and signs and the functions they serve;
- (B) understand simple story structure;
- (C) distinguish fiction from nonfiction, including fact and fantasy;
- (D) recognize the distinguishing features of familiar genres, including stories, poems, and informational texts;
- (E) understand literary forms by recognizing and distinguishing among such types of text as stories, poems, and information books;
- (F) understand literary terms by distinguishing between the roles of the author and illustrator such as the author writes the story and the illustrator draws the pictures;
- (G) analyze characters, including their traits, feelings, relationships, and changes;
- (H) identify the importance of the setting to a story's meaning; and
- (I) recognize the story problem(s) or plot.

(15) Reading/inquiry/research. The student generates questions and conducts research about topics using information from a variety of sources, including selections read aloud. The student is expected to:

- (A) identify relevant questions for inquiry such as "What do pill bugs eat?";
- (B) use pictures, print, and people to gather information and answer questions;
- (C) draw conclusions from information gathered;
- (D) use alphabetical order to locate information;
- (E) recognize and use parts of a book to locate information, including table of contents, chapter titles, guide words, and indices; and
- (F) locate important areas of the library/media center.

(16) Reading/culture. The student reads or listens to increase knowledge of his/her own culture, the culture of others, and the common elements of cultures. The student is expected to:

- (A) connect his/her own experiences with the life experiences, languages, customs, and culture of others; and
- (B) compare experiences of characters across cultures."

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