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# Texas Considers Backtracking on Testing

By **MOTOKO RICH**

AUSTIN, Tex. — In this state that spawned test-based accountability in public schools and spearheaded one of the nation’s toughest high school curriculums, lawmakers are now considering a reversal that would cut back both graduation requirements and standardized testing.

The actions in Texas are being closely watched across the country as many states move to raise curriculum standards to meet the increasing demands of employers while grappling with critics who say testing has spun out of control.

The Texas House of Representatives overwhelmingly passed a bill this month that would reduce the number of exams students must pass to earn a high school diploma to 5, from 15. Legislators also proposed a change that would reduce the required years of math and science to three, from four. The State Senate is expected to take up a similar bill as early as this week.

The proposed changes have opened up a debate in the state and beyond. Proponents say teachers will be able to be more creative in the classroom while students will have more flexibility to pursue vocational or technically oriented courses of study.

But critics warn that the changes could result in the tracking of children from poor and minority families into classes that are less likely to prepare them for four-year colleges, and, ultimately, higher-paying careers.

“What we all know is when you leave it up to kids and schools, the poor kids and kids of color will be disproportionately not in the curriculum that could make the most difference for them,” said Kati Haycock, president of the [Education Trust](#), a nonprofit group that advocates for racial minorities and low-income children.

Texas is currently an outlier in both the number of exit exams it requires students to pass and the number of courses its default high school curriculum prescribes.

Legislators raised the number of high school exit exams to 15 from 4 in 2007, and passed a law to automatically enroll all high school students in a curriculum that includes three years of English, science, social studies and math, including an advanced algebra course. Students may enroll in a less rigorous course of study with the permission of their parents.



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Texas now requires more than double the number of end-of-course exams used in any of the eight states that currently mandate that students pass such exams, according to the [Education Commission of the States](#). And only two other states and the District of Columbia set similar graduation requirements, according to Achieve, a nonprofit organization that works to upgrade graduation criteria.

Here in Texas, the backlash has been fiercest among parents and educators who believe testing has become excessive, particularly after a period when the state cut its budget for education.

On a recent afternoon, Joanne Salazar pulled out a copy of a testing calendar for the school in Austin where her daughter is a sophomore. “Of the last 12 weeks of school, 9 are impacted by testing,” Ms. Salazar said. “It has really started to control the schedule.”

Test critics also argue that standardized tests stifle experimentation in the classroom. “It turns our schools into these cookie-cutter manufacturing plants,” said Dineen Majcher, president of [Texans Advocating for Meaningful Student Assessment](#), a grass-roots group.

Some educators say the tests do not account for students who learn at different paces. “We expect every student to perform at certain levels with the same amount of time,” said H.D. Chambers, superintendent of the Alief Independent School District west of Houston. “That’s fundamentally flawed.”

But at a time when about half of the students who enroll in community colleges in Texas require remedial math classes, Michael L. Williams, the state’s commissioner of education, called the proposed changes “an unfortunate retreat.”

“What gets tested gets taught,” Mr. Williams said. “What we treasure, we measure.”

Champions of more stringent graduation requirements say they also help push students — particularly those who do not come from families in which college attendance is assumed — to achieve at levels they might not have considered on their own.

Since the tougher recommended curriculum was signed into law, the proportion of Texas high school graduates [taking at least one Advanced Placement exam](#) who were from low income backgrounds rose to 45.3 percent in 2012, from 30.5 percent in 2007.

But some argue that the current recommended curriculum could drive more students to drop out if they struggle with advanced courses. (The graduation rate in Texas actually rose from 63 percent in 2007 to 72 percent in 2011, the most recent year for which state education agency data is available.)

Defenders of the current curriculum come from “the elitist in our society who devalue blue-collar work and believe every student must get a four-year college degree,” said Daniel Patrick, a Republican senator from Houston who has sponsored Senate versions of the education bill.

Representative Jimmie Don Aycock, the Republican from Killeen who sponsored the House bill (which passed 147 to 2), said the revised curriculum would give students more options, including community colleges or technical schools. “I don’t want them to have to choose up or choose down,” Mr. Aycock said, “but choose what’s right for them.”

Some business leaders say that without advanced requirements, students will not be prepared for the kinds of jobs employers need to fill. “The jobs of today require higher level skills,” said Bill Hammond, president of the Texas Business Association.

Josh Havens, a spokesman for Gov. Rick Perry, said the governor favored a curriculum that required four years of math and science and “does not support efforts that lessen the accountability and academic rigor that prepares our students for career and college.”

Senator Leticia R. Van de Putte, a Democrat from San Antonio, said she was proposing an amendment that would require four years of math and science, although allow students to substitute more applied courses for advanced algebra or subjects like physics. “This allows for relevance and flexibility while maintaining high rigor,” she said.

But some principals and guidance counselors, along with [civil rights groups](#) like the [League of United Latin American Citizens](#), fear that low-income and minority students could slip through the cracks.

“It puts more of the onus on the school to make sure that kids are taking the most rigorous courses possible,” said Daniel Girard, principal of Akins High School in Austin. With large class sizes and shrinking budgets for guidance counseling, he said, “some adults may not push kids on the potential that is there when it’s not required by the state as a graduation plan.”

One morning last week, several high school seniors, all from low-income families, gathered in the Akins guidance office beneath dozens of college pennants hanging from the ceiling.

Nathaniel Buescher, 18, is considering offers from Columbia, Harvard, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Princeton, Stanford, the University of Texas and Yale. His mother immigrated to the United States from Mexico without a high school diploma, and his father never attended college. But his elder sister and brother both advised him to “take the hardest classes that are available.”

Proponents of the changes in the default curriculum say students can continue to select the

most advanced classes. But those who want to take math or writing classes geared toward technical careers will be able to do so.

“There is a fundamental policy disagreement between those that think kids can’t make choices and will take the easy way out,” said Hector L. Rivero, president of the Texas Chemical Council and a member of Jobs for Texas, a coalition of employers and industry trade groups, “and those of us who believe that kids can make the right choices given the right support and direction.”

Even some students say, though, that standards help guide their choices.

“If they are allowed the option to not take a harder math class, of course they’re not going to do that,” said Anthony Tomkins, 18, a senior at Akins who plans to attend Texas A&M. “So forcing it upon us in the long run is actually a good thing.”