

TO: Senate Committee on Education
FROM: Gregg Colschen, Principal, The Woodlands High School
RE: Public School Accountability
DATE: March 27, 2008

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in today's hearing on Public School Accountability. We as educators are very proud of our profession and welcome being held accountable. The current accountability system and TAKS specifically have played important roles in guiding campus practices from several different perspectives.

The Accountability system has caused us to closely analyze our testing data. TAKS has caused us to truly embrace the ALL MEANS ALL philosophy when it comes to student success. We now look at all our demographic groups and develop strategies for their success. TAKS has caused us to integrate more special education students into the regular education curriculum. We have seen some wonderful effort and growth in our special needs students that were not evident prior to their inclusion. Many have been successful and there have also been some students who have not experienced the desired success. This inclusion has caused stress for the teachers, parents and students as they step outside of their comfort zones. Parents feel stress because they have been accustomed to seeing A's and B's in resource classes and are now seeing lower grades in the regular curriculum. Teachers feel additional stress as they work with more students with individual needs than ever before, and the students feel the pressure of doing homework and making progress that was previously not expected. Our district has invested a great deal of money in contracting with a company to analyze our student testing information so we at the campus level have projections on each student's chances of passing the next level of TAKS. At the campus level we then develop strategies for students and groups of students to insure their success. This process is very labor intensive, and on our campus, involves assigning a faculty or staff mentor to about 200 students. Mentoring involves periodic meetings with mentees to provide encourage and information about academic tutoring that will help them pass TAKS. This mentoring responsibility is in addition to the teacher's regular responsibilities.

TAKS has given us cause to annually evaluate the content of all core courses as well as vertically align our curriculum with our feeder schools. This has had both intentional positive effects and in some cases unintentional negative effects. Using the item analysis provided by TEA, TAKS has caused us to evaluate the curriculum in each TAKS related course and either strengthen the content if the area showed as a weakness, maintain if the area was a strength or eliminate content if it did not appear as a TAKS related topic. Some of the paring of curriculum was appropriate and in some cases, long overdue. However in some cases, teachers feel the emphasis on TAKS has forced the elimination of some important content. For instance, narrative writing is the preferred method for success on the writing portion of TAKS. The emphasis and need for repeated practice with our level English students has virtually eliminated the ability of our English teachers to instruct students in the analytical method of writing. Practice in the analytical style has proven very useful for our Advanced Placement students and would also be helpful with level students if time allowed. In Science, our Chemistry teachers have greatly reduced and, in some cases, eliminated the unit on Nuclear Chemistry due to time constraints caused by TAKS preparation. Because Biology is a 9th grade course at The Woodlands High School, a great deal of time is spent reviewing Biology information with all

sophomores and juniors prior to TAKS. To provide this review time, teachers are unable to go into depth on certain topics. In Math, teachers not only teach the content of their course, but are also responsible for continually reviewing all of the TAKS tested concepts from Algebra I, Geometry and Algebra II, again reducing the amount of instructional time available for the current course content.

Teachers are increasingly frustrated by the amount of time dedicated to teaching to the TAKS, rather than teaching the TEKS which should cover the objectives covered on TAKS. They feel that most of their autonomy and creativity once available to them in their classroom has been replaced by the emphasis on TAKS. While the push in our district is to differentiate instruction and provide learning opportunities for students that involve upper level thinking skills such as synthesis, analysis and evaluation, the TAKS test does not lend itself to that kind of instruction. All sections of TAKS except the English Language Arts at the high school level are multiple choice tests. To prepare our students to succeed on a TAKS style test, we require our teachers to format at least a portion of each test in TAKS style. To incorporate and test the entire curriculum, tests in all disciplines other than English have become increasingly multiple choice as opposed to essay and open ended response. Evaluating students on their ability to think critically is very difficult to do through multiple choice exams. Teachers feel what they are being forced to teach is not everything they want a child to know about their particular subject, but with the current TAKS format, they do not have the time to spend on anything not related to TAKS.

At The Woodlands High School, we are on an Accelerated Block Schedule. Students take four courses per semester and complete a one credit course in 18 weeks and have the opportunity to earn 8 credits per school year. We, as a school and our community, feel that the Accelerated Block is the best schedule for our students as we prepare them for college and life after high school. In our schedule, students do not have core academic subjects for the entire year. Students who completed their math requirement in the fall will not have a math class in the spring semester. Six years ago with the emphasis on TAKS and accountability, we felt compelled to develop a way to continue to provide instruction in subjects which students had already completed during the fall semester as a safeguard against potential TAKS failures. Once a week during the spring semester students return to their fall semester class for thirty minutes on a rotating basis. During this time, the teachers provide additional TAKS instruction to keep them current for the upcoming tests. They will see each one of their fall semester teachers four times prior to the April administration of TAKS. This has proven successful, but takes time away from the subjects students are studying in the spring semester.

The increased emphasis on testing has taken instructional time from teachers and students. Just this semester, we have given a TAKS field test to all sophomores and juniors in January, administered the ELA and Reading TAKS to all 9th, 10th and 11th grade students in March and April and will give an End of Course Field test in May to a select group of students in U.S. History and Chemistry. Just to accommodate TAKS and EOC testing, we will have to alter our normal schedule for eight days, taking instructional time out of each class period. In addition to those tests, all sophomores and juniors take the PSAT in October and we encourage all juniors and seniors to take both the ACT and SAT multiple times prior to graduation. Most of the content on these tests are built into the curriculum through the TEKS, but we do spend extra time preparing students for

these college entrance exams. With over 75% of our seniors going off to college each year, these tests are very important to our students and community. On top of all of the testing, we are also responsible to administer a physical fitness assessment for all students in our high school, conduct two bus evacuation drills per year with every student, and provide a dating violence program for all students. Each of these activities takes time and disrupts the regular activities of one or more school days each year. The main focus of every school should be to prepare our students for success beyond high school. We feel that the best way to do that is to provide quality class room instruction. When students are taken out of class too often, we compromise academic preparation.

We have been forced by the accountability system to develop special classes for students who have not been successful on one or more portions of TAKS. Juniors and seniors who have failed a portion are forced to take a course whose sole purpose is TAKS review. Many of these students are not college bound immediately after high school. Some would be well served in a career and technology course that would lead to a marketable skill in the work force. If they have failed a portion of TAKS, these elective courses are replaced with a TAKS review course.

The Woodlands High School has been directly impacted by the Accountability system for the past several years. Because we were not a four year campus from 1996 through 2005, we have been forced to use the district's Completion Rate when it became a component in the Accountability Rating. For the 2003-2004 school year, all of our TAKS scores were in the Exemplary category, but because we had to use the district's Completion Rate, our rating fell to Recognized. A similar scenario occurred this year. Our 2006-2007 TAKS scores for our regular education students would have placed us in the Recognized category, but using the district's completion rate and the scores of ten special education students taking the State Developed Alternative Assessment caused our rating to fall to acceptable. This has an impact on not only our students and teachers, but also on our community. Conroe ISD opened another high school in The Woodlands in August of 2005. At that time we reorganized The Woodlands High School into a four year campus. We have a separate 9th Grade Campus, but operate under one budget and master schedule so that eventually we will be able to control our own destiny and not have to rely on CISD's Completion Rate in our Accountability calculations. We still have two more Accountability cycles using the district's completion rate.

We are very encouraged that the State Legislature has chosen the End of Course Exam model following TAKS in the 2011-2012 school year. Assuming that we will be able to administer the exams at the end of the course each semester will allow us to eliminate the continual review function that the TAKS format has necessitated. We look forward to working closely with TEA to develop the system which will benefit both our students and teachers.