

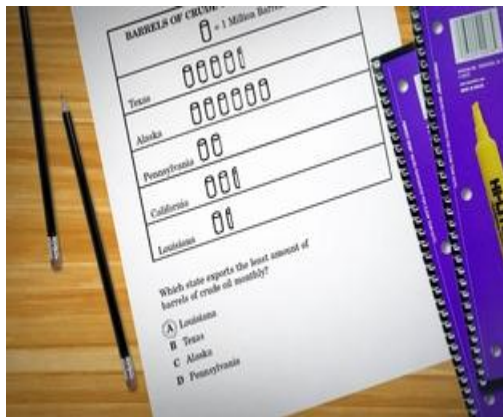
# THE TEXAS TRIBUNE

## House Bill on Student Testing Reopens a Familiar Debate

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When Rep. [Rob Eissler](#), R-The Woodlands, brought [House Bill 500](#) to the Texas House floor on April 6, he emphasized what it did not do.

It did not, he said, lower testing standards. Nor did it delay the planned 2011-12 rollout of the state's more rigorous STAAR exams.

Eissler was setting out to correct what he called the “misrepresentations” and “false claims” surrounding the bill, which, despite its overwhelming support in the House — more than two-thirds of his colleagues signed on to it, and only five voted against it — has generated vocal opposition from some within education circles who view it as a dramatic retreat from hard-won reforms.

The bill also reveals a divergence between the Legislature's two public education chiefs — Eissler, who heads the House Public Education Committee, and his counterpart in the upper chamber, Sen. [Florence Shapiro](#), R-Plano — on how the state should hold students and educators accountable.

Shapiro staunchly supports moving forward with the testing standards in HB 3, the 2009 legislation that set up the transition to the new STAAR exams from the state's current TAKS subject area tests .

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“It's a shame that it's happened at the very same time that we are having problems with the budget,” Shapiro said, “but that doesn't change the idea that this is the direction we should be going.”

Worried about how operating with fewer teachers will affect classroom instruction and whether they will be able to afford updated textbooks, districts have pushed to delay the new exams.

HB 500 makes significant modifications to HB 3, with the goals of reducing costs and easing districts' concerns that the new testing regimen could lead to large numbers of students failing to graduate. Instead of the end-of-course STAAR exams counting 15 percent of a student's final grade, HB 500 permits school districts to set their own policies. It also would allow districts to suspend a new requirement that students receive a cumulative score on 12 exams in four subject areas to graduate; instead, students would have to pass a total of four exams, one in each subject.

Business groups — including the Texas Association of Business, the Texas Coalition for a Competitive Workforce and the Austin Chamber of Commerce — oppose the measure because they believe it represents a step back for student accountability.

Drew Scheberle, a senior vice president at the Austin Chamber, said HB 500 “represents the first time in 25 years that we would actually reduce the expectations for graduation.”

To some extent, the divide between Eissler and Shapiro is a rehashing of an old battle between the House and Senate on student testing.

“This is basically a fight we had two years ago in conference committee, when the Senate wanted the standards as they are on the books today, and the House wanted relaxed graduation standards,” said Andrew C. Erben, president of the Texas Institute for Education Reform, which opposes Eissler's bill.

The House more than the Senate has traditionally aligned with school districts on student accountability, Mr. Scheberle said. “The House has not always been the strongest on this issue,” he said. “It has usually been the Senate.”

Now, lawmakers in the House are looking for ways to soften the blow of their stark budget, which allocates about \$4 billion less to public education than the Senate. “The House is dealing in a very different arena than the Senate is dealing,” Shapiro said. “If I was in their shoes and didn't have money for textbooks, I didn't have any money to keep our teachers or to keep our schools whole, I would be looking for ways to lessen the pressure, too.”

Eissler told his colleagues that his bill represented the “middle ground” between those who want a delay of the STAAR tests and those who want to hold firm. On Friday, he acknowledged he had “some missionary work” to do in the Senate.

“It's not like there's a difference in philosophy,” he said. “It's a difference in application.

Florence Shapiro and I agree that we need to have rigor, relevance, and responsibility or strong accountability, but how that translates to day-to-day operation in the school district is what made H.B. 500.”

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