



Representative Dan Huberty



STATE CAPITOL

Capitol Extension E2.712
P.O. Box 2910
Austin, TX 78768

PHONE

512.463.0520

DISTRICT

4501 Magnolia Cove
Suite 201
Kingwood, TX 77345

PHONE

281.360.9410

FAX

512.463.1606

E-MAIL

District127.Huberty@house.state.tx.us

Staff Contact Information:

CASEY CHRISTMAN

Chief of Staff

Casey.Christman@house.state.tx.us

BEN MELSON

Legislative Director

Ben.Melson@house.state.tx.us

MOLLY SPRATT

Administrative Assistant

Molly.Spratt@house.state.tx.us

BRYAN SHEA

District Intern

Bryan.Shea@house.state.tx.us

Public Education Committee Hearing 3-26-14

The Texas House Public Education Committee met last Wednesday, March 26, for the first time this year. The hearing was the first of what is expected to be many more committee hearings in the coming months to consider the interim charges that were passed down by the Speaker of the House. During the hearing, the committee considered the first interim charge, HB 5 implementation, and the fifth interim charge, student assessment.

My fellow committee members and I had the privilege of hearing several hours of testimony from state experts on the new HB 5 law and what it will look like as the implementation process continues. Starting this fall, students will have several new options for which path they'd like to take to earn a high school diploma. Flexibility in graduation plans was one of the cornerstones of the new education reform package.

However, there were several points of contention throughout the hearing concerning whether or not the new curriculum and graduation requirements are too complicated for parents and students to understand. In addition to this, questions about over-testing and Algebra II as a requirement for graduation were major points of continuing concern for many who testified at the hearing. In order to address these concerns, the SBOE is now in the process of implementing a new rule that limits the number of high school standardized tests from fifteen to five while getting rid of the Algebra II mandate for most students.

What remains to be seen is exactly how the curriculum will look once it is fully in place. Chairman Jimmie Don Aycock stated, "Any tweaks to the law won't be discussed until later this year. Until then, the focus remains on implementation." Overall, this committee hearing was a great way to kick off interim hearings. Many members of the public were also there to share their concerns with the committee. As the committee continues to move forward, my fellow members and I will continue to listen to those concerns. There are many more important decisions to be made leading up to the 84th legislative session. The second committee hearing will take place in Austin next month.

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Fifth Circuit Rules for State, Finds HB 2 Constitutional

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit today issued a unanimous decision upholding House Bill 2. The decision rejecting the plaintiffs' constitutional challenge to HB 2 was written by Judge Edith Jones and joined by Judge Jennifer Elrod and Judge Catharina Haynes.

Gov. Rick Perry today released the following statement regarding the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals decision to uphold a law protecting life and women's health passed by the Texas Legislature in 2013: "The people of Texas have spoken through their elected leaders and in support of protecting the culture of life in our state. Today's court decision is good news for Texas women and the unborn, and we will continue to fight for the protection of life and women's health in Texas."

Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott issued the following statement: "This unanimous decision is a vindication of the careful deliberation by the Texas Legislature to craft a law to protect the health and safety of Texas women."

Texas Armed Services Scholarship Program Nominations Being Accepted

Nominations for the Texas Armed Services Scholarship Program (TASSP) for the next academic year (fall 2014/spring 2015) will open on April 15, 2014. Appointments must be made by the legislator or legislator's designee through an online process approved by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board at <https://www1.theccb.state.tx.us/apps/tassp/>.

IRS Free File Before April 15th

Every taxpayer with a 2013 Adjusted Gross Income of \$58,000 or less may visit www.irs.gov/freefile to prepare, complete and e-file their federal tax returns at no cost. Free File is made possible through a partnership between the IRS and the [Free File Alliance](#), a coalition of industry-leading tax software companies. Since its inception in 2003, the program has offered 70 percent of taxpayers free access to leading commercial tax preparation software from Free File Alliance member companies. Free File has already saved taxpayers an estimated \$1.2 billion in filing costs.

IRS Free File is available at www.irs.gov/freefile, which provides a list of Free File Alliance member companies and their free tax software offerings. Users may either choose the company that fits their needs or utilize the "Help me Find Free File Software" tool. After selecting a company, users will be transferred to the company's website to prepare, complete and electronically file their federal income tax returns. The service is also available in Spanish. Free File also offers basic federal e-filing services with no income limitations. This basic e-filing service, called Free File Fillable Forms, allows taxpayers who are familiar with tax law and need no preparation assistance to complete and file their federal income tax electronically. It is also available at www.irs.gov/freefile.

Free File Alliance member companies have continually worked with the IRS to strengthen the Free File program, and taxpayers have consistently reported that it is user-friendly and efficient. Responding to a 2009 IRS survey, 96 percent of users said they found Free File easy to use, while 98 percent said they would recommend the program to others.

About the Free File Alliance

The Free File Alliance, a coalition of 14 industry-leading tax software companies, has partnered with the IRS since 2003 to help low and middle-income Americans prepare, complete and e-file their federal tax returns online. The Free File Alliance is committed to giving 70 percent of Americans free access to the industry's top online tax preparation software. About 40 million returns have been filed through Free File since its inception. For more information, visit www.freefilealliance.org.

Commissioner Williams Authorizes Calculator Apps for 8th grade STAAR Mathematics in 2014-2015

Commissioner of Education Michael Williams has advised superintendents he will allow districts to satisfy a requirement to use graphing calculators for the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) grade 8 mathematics assessment with either a traditional handheld graphing calculator or a graphing calculator application available on an electronic tablet. The Commissioner's decision marks the first time an electronic calculator application has been authorized for use by students in a Texas state assessment.

Use of calculator apps on electronic tablets will be allowed on a pilot basis for the 2014-2015 administration of the 8th grade mathematics assessment only. For the pilot year, the Texas Education Agency will still prohibit the use of smart phones. "After extensive feedback from superintendents across our state coupled with conversations with agency staff, I am allowing a broader array of technology to meet the 8th grade calculator requirement," said Commissioner Williams. "While I recognize this revised policy will not address all concerns and may still require some districts to purchase additional technology, I am hopeful this policy will enable us to provide some flexibility."

Commissioner Williams originally wrote to Texas superintendents in February regarding the required use of graphing calculators for the STAAR grade 8 mathematics assessment. Beginning in the 2014-2015 school year, districts must ensure that each student has a graphing calculator to use when taking the STAAR grade 8 mathematics assessment. Calculators are now necessary for grade 8 mathematics because the State Board of Education significantly increased the algebra content in the grade 8 TEKS requiring the use of graphing calculators – not only in classroom instruction, but also on the state assessment.

In his letter to superintendents, the Commissioner continued to express concerns about ensuring test security and preventing cheating. For districts that choose to use technology other than a handheld graphing calculator, there will likely be additional test monitoring and security measures put in place to ensure that the integrity of the test is not compromised. "Depending on the success of this pilot, especially as it relates to test security and any confirmed testing irregularities, I will make decisions about either continuing and possibly expanding the use of additional technologies or prohibiting their use moving forward," said Commissioner Williams in his letter. "The future viability of technology like this during state assessments will largely depend on the success, vigilance, and integrity within your districts."

Districts choosing to meet the calculator requirement for the grade 8 mathematics test using technology (other than a handheld graphing calculator) should note that all other major standardized tests – including the PSAT, SAT, ACT, Advanced Placement (AP) exams and Texas Success Initiative (TSI) Assessment – do not permit the use of calculator applications on tablets, smart phones, or other electronic devices. As a result, Commissioner Williams advised districts that they may want to keep in mind the policies their students will need to follow for these tests when deciding which technology to use for classroom instruction.

Some school districts may elect to have students use a graphing calculator application on a tablet or other mobile device during routine classroom instruction and homework, with an actual graphing calculator available for use during the assessment. In these instances, the calculator application should have the same functionality as the calculator to be used on the state assessment to ensure that students are familiar with the calculator. However, students are not required to use the exact same tool during routine class work or homework and the state assessment. To view the Commissioner's letter sent to school districts and charters, visit http://www.tea.state.tx.us/taa_letters.aspx.

Upcoming Events

Friday, April 4th

12 PM - Crosby/Huffman Chamber of Commerce "Tees & Tails" Golf Tournament

Red Wolf Run Golf Club - http://crosbyhuffmancc.org/wordpress/?page_id=2090

12 PM - Lake Houston Sports & Recreation Foundation Golf Tournament

Tour 18 - <http://www.lakehoustonsports.com/#!/golf-tournament-4-4-2014/c1n5c>

6:30 PM - Humble ISD Education Foundation Gala

Humble Civic Center - <http://www.humbleisdoundation.org/news-events/events/gala/>

U.S. Department of Education Denies Texas' Double-testing Waiver Request

The U.S. Department of Education has advised the Texas Education Agency that the state's waiver request to address the issue of multiple assessments for students taking Algebra I at the middle school level will not be granted.

In spite of this federal decision, Commissioner of Education Michael Williams is discouraging local school districts and charters from double-testing middle school students taking Algebra I. However, the Commissioner noted the decision about whether to administer multiple assessments is ultimately a local one. Eighth grade mathematics testing in Texas is scheduled to begin on April 1.

"The waiver request was submitted because I do not believe that double testing middle school students is instructionally appropriate nor a valid evaluation of mathematics for Texas middle schools and high schools," said Commissioner Williams. "Given state and federal testing requirements, federal denial of our amendment request, and the Texas Legislature's decision to reduce end-of-course testing to one high school mathematics assessment, I am eliminating any perceived incentives a district might have had for double testing students for accountability purposes."

The Commissioner has formally notified all Texas school districts and charters that for 2014 and 2015 state and federal accountability, if a student takes the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR®) Algebra I end-of-course assessment and a STAAR mathematics grade level assessment, only the results of the Algebra I assessment will be included in the accountability calculations for the campus and the district where the student tested. Although taken while in middle school, the Algebra I EOC would count toward a student's high school graduation requirements under House Bill 5.

Commissioner Williams acknowledged his primary concern remains that some school districts may make poor instructional decisions regarding accelerated students. For example, to avoid the dilemma of having these students' scores attributed to a middle school campus (instead of the high school campus), some districts might reconsider offering Algebra I at the middle school level.

"Such a move would seriously disadvantage students who move quickly through the mathematics curriculum in grades K-8 and would benefit from taking advanced coursework in middle school," said Commissioner Williams. "Should a Texas district or charter elect to make such a move, this stalls students' academic progress and provides them with one less opportunity to take an advanced mathematics course or another relevant upper-division course in high school."

Given his concern, Commissioner Williams said the Texas Education Agency will be analyzing course completion data submitted by school districts to ensure that enrollment in Algebra I by middle school students does not precipitously decline beginning with the 2014-2015 school year. Based on this annual analysis, some school districts may be contacted to explain reductions in Algebra I enrollments by middle school students.

Current federal accountability requirements call for students to have a mathematics score every year in grades 3–8, as well as a mathematics score in high school. The federal government requires states that offer only one mathematics assessment at the high school level (which can also be taken by middle school students) to ensure there is a separate mathematics result that can be attributed to a high school.

Late last year, Commissioner Williams advised the U.S. Department of Education that Texas would be seeking to amend its conditional waiver of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) provisions. In its communications with the agency, U.S. Department of Education officials informed the Texas Education Agency that similar waiver requests from other states have not been approved.
