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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to analyze the effect of including special education students in the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) accountability subset of students. In 1999, the accountability subset was expanded to include scores for all special education students not exempted and all bilingual/limited English proficient (LEP) students tested with the Spanish TAAS at grades 3 and 4. The study compared the accountability subsets of TAAS for 1999 and 2000 with the accountability subsets for the previous 3 years to determine changes in the percentages of students taking the TAAS, the percentage of students in the accountability subsets, and the percentage of special education students receiving exemptions from the TAAS. The data show that clear trends in the percentage of students taking the TAAS and the percentage in the accountability subset are present in the 5 years from 1996 to 2000. There were slight increases in the percentage of students tested in 1996-1998 and decreases in the percentage tested from 1998 to 1999 and 1999 to 2000. The decrease in percentage of students tested in 1999 coincided with the inclusion of special education students in the TAAS accountability subset. This would seem to indicate that a larger percentage of students were being exempted from the test in 1999 and 2000. The inclusion of special education students should have caused an increase of 10 to 12% in the accountability subset in 1999, but the increase was 2 to 3% less than projected. This pattern was consistent for all ethnic and gender groups. From 1999 to 2000, the accountability subset remained constant, except for Hispanic students. The percentage of Hispanic students increased by 2.4%, primarily because of a decrease in the percent of LEP exemptions and the inclusion of Spanish TAAS results for grades 5 and 6 in the accountability subset. Black and Hispanic students were more likely to be placed in special education and were more likely to receive exemptions from the TAAS, and males were twice as likely as females to be classified as special education. The Texas Education Agency had predicted that 1999 TAAS passing rates would drop by about 5% because of the inclusion of special education students, but the predicted drop did not materialize. The paper suggests that the percentage of identified special education students dropped because school districts could no longer use the special education status as a way of exempting TAAS scores from the calculations for school ranking. At the same time, more exemptions were granted for special education students, an occurrence that would minimize the impact of including them in the accountability subset. (SLD)

HIGH STAKES TESTING AND SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS: A FIVE-YEAR TREND ANALYSIS

ED 454 247

The State of Texas encompasses 1,042 school districts with a total enrollment of 3,991,783 students. The ethnic makeup is 39.6% Hispanic, 14.4% African-American, 43.1% white, and 2.9% other. 12.1% of the students are classified as special education and 12.1% are limited English proficient (LEP).

School districts in Texas have been required to administer the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) test on an annual basis since 1990-91. The TAAS consists of criterion referenced tests in reading, math, and writing. In 1994-95 the tests were revised and additional grades added to the testing schedule. In its present form, the TAAS is administered to all eligible public school students in grades three through eight and grade ten.

The TAAS tests are an integral component of the Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) which is an integrated accountability system required by the State of Texas. This accountability system is used by the Texas Education Agency to evaluate and report the performance of public school districts and individual campuses. Campuses and districts are rated as Exemplary, Recognized, Acceptable, or Low Performing on the basis of TAAS scores and other selected criteria.

When calculating the campus and district ratings the Texas Education Agency excludes the TAAS scores for certain categories of students. Prior to 1999, these included:

- Students who were not enrolled in the district on the snapshot date (the last Friday in October)
- Special Education students
- Bilingual/ESL students exempted by the LPAC committee

The subset of TAAS scores, which remain after scores for these student groups are deleted, is called the accountability subset and is used in the calculation of campus and district ratings. In 1999 the accountability subset was expanded by including the TAAS scores for all special education students not exempted by their ARD committee and all bilingual/LEP students tested with the Spanish TAAS at grades 3 and 4. (1998-99 Accountability Manual)

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The Texas Education Agency projected that expanding the accountability subset would result in a significant decrease in the percent of students passing TAAS. The percent of students passing the reading subtest was projected to drop from 87% in 1998 to 83.3% in 1999. Similarly, the percent projected to pass the math subtest would decrease from 84.2% to 80.4% and the percent projected to pass the writing subtest would decrease from 87.4% to 84.2%. (1998 and 1999 AEIS, Performance Reports, Section I, p.4).

A comparison of actual 1999 passing rates with 1999 projected passing rates revealed that the percent of students passing the reading, math, and writing subtests was higher than projected (Table 1). In fact, the 1999 passing rate was higher than the 1998 passing rate in math and writing. This trend continued in 2000 when passing rates for reading and math increased from 1999 and writing remained constant (2000 AEIS, Section 1).

TABLE 1

PROJECTED AND ACTUAL PERCENT OF STUDENTS PASSING TAAS AEIS ACCOUNTABILITY SUBSETS--1998 AND 1999 STATEWIDE RESULTS							
Subject	Dates	Total Passing	African-Am	Hispanic	White	Native-Am	Asian
Reading							
	1998 Actual	87.0	78.2	79.5	94.2	88.7	93.0
	1999 Project	83.3	74.8	74.8	91.3	84.7	92.2
	1999 Actual	86.5	78.2	79.5	93.7	87.3	93.6
	2000 Actual	87.4	80.8	80.7	94.3	90.3	93.6
Math							
	1998 Actual	84.2	70.5	77.7	91.9	85.7	94.3
	1999 Project	80.4	67.0	73.3	88.6	81.2	93.4
	1999 Actual	85.7	72.8	80.7	92.5	85.4	95.4
	2000 Actual	87.4	77.0	82.9	93.6	88.0	95.7
Writing							
	1998 Actual	87.4	80.4	80.9	93.4	87.2	92.4
	1999 Project	84.2	77.0	77.4	90.1	82.6	91.7
	1999 Actual	88.2	81.9	83.1	93.1	88.3	92.7
	2000 Actual	88.2	82.4	82.3	94.0	89.8	92.7

The Problem

The TEA requires that all students in grades 3 through 8 and grade 10 take the TAAS test unless they are exempt by a legally recognized committee. Special education students must take the TAAS unless they are exempt from testing by their ARD committee.

Prior to 1999 TEA provided separate TAAS reports for non-special education students and for special education students who were not exempt from the TAAS. The TAAS scores for special education students were not used in the accountability subset for the AEIS accountability system. In 1999 the TEA expanded the accountability subset by including special education students' scores. Since special education students have historically had lower passing rates than non-special education students, TEA projected that the passing rate for the accountability subset would drop by approximately 5% in reading, math, and writing. The passing rate, contrary to expectations, not only failed to drop, but actually equaled or exceeded the 1998 passing rate in math and writing and remained the same in reading. In 2000, the passing rate continued to increase in all three subject areas. These results seem to indicate that the inclusion of special education students in the TAAS accountability subset has had little impact on school and district TAAS scores across the State.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the present study was to analyze the effect of including special education students in the TAAS accountability subset of students. The study included an analysis of changes in the accountability subset related to student ethnicity and gender. Specifically, the study compared the accountability subsets of TAAS for 1999 and 2000 with the accountability subsets for the previous three years to determine if:

- the percent of students taking the TAAS changed in 1999 and 2000.
- the percent of students in the TAAS accountability subset increased in 1999 and 2000 as projected.
- the percent of special education students receiving exemptions from the TAAS increased in 1999 and 2000.

Specific research questions to be answered were:

1. Did the percent of students taking the TAAS reading, math, and writing subtests remain constant from 1996 to 2000?
2. Did the percent of students included in the TAAS accountability subset increase as projected in 1999 and 2000?
3. Did the percent of students classified as special education students remain constant from 1996 to 2000?
4. Did the percent of special education students tested remain constant from 1996 to 2000?

5. Did the percent of special education students exempt from the TAAS by the ARD committee remain constant from 1996 to 2000?

Procedures

Data for the study were collected from two sources: the Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) Reports for the State for 1996-2000, and from the Texas Education Agency Office of Accountability. Custom TAAS participation Reports were prepared by John Haetinger of the TEA Office of Accountability. Specific sections of the AEIS report utilized in the study were the Accountability Subset Tables, the TAAS Participation Tables, and the TAAS Preview Indicator Tables. (in the 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999 and 2000 AEIS State Performance Reports, Section I)

Results

Question 1: Did the percent of students taking the TAAS reading, math, and writing subsets remain constant from 1996 to 2000?

Table 2 presents data on the total percent of students tested with the TAAS from 1996 to 2000.

TABLE 2

	PERCENT OF STUDENTS IN TEXAS TAKING TAAS				
	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
All Students	89.6	90.6	91.1	89.3	90.2
Black	88.4	88.4	88.5	86.6	86.6
Hispanic	83.6	86.2	87.2	85.4	87.8
White	94.6	94.8	95.0	93.4	93.4
Male	87.7	88.7	89.3	87.1	88.0
Female	91.6	92.5	92.9	91.6	92.5

Table 2 shows that the percent tested in the "all students" group increased by 1.5% from 1996 to 1998 and declined by 1.8% in 1999. In 2000, the percent tested increased by 0.9% over 1999 but remained below the percent tested in 1998. Since the TEA rule expanding the accountability subset also occurred in 1999, the data seem to indicate that the rule change had a negative impact on the percent of students taking the TAAS in 1999 and that the effect, although less, continued in 2000.

When the data was disaggregated by ethnicity the percent tested in each group remained the same or increased slightly from 1996 to 1998, then decreased in 1999. The decrease in 1998 was apparent among Black, Hispanic, and White students. In 2000 the percent tested remained the same for Black and White students and increased by 2.4% for Hispanics. The increase for Hispanics appears to be related to a decrease in the percent of LEP students exempt from testing.

When the data were disaggregated by gender the pattern was similar to that found with other groups. The percent tested increased from 1996 to 1998 for both males and females, then decreased in 1999 and increased again in 2000. The data also revealed that about 4% fewer male than female students were tested in each of the last five years.

Question 2: Did the percent of students included in the TAAS accountability subset increase as projected in 1999 and 2000?

State-wide there was a projected 10%-12% increase in the percent of students in the accountability subset from 1998 to 1999. However, Table 3 shows that the actual increase was only 8% for all students. Among ethnic groups the percent increase varied. The increase for Black students was 6.3% while the increase for Hispanic students was 10.0% and the increase for White students was 7.8%. Overall, approximately 2% to 3% fewer students were included in the accountability subset than had been projected. AEIS Reports for the State, show that the difference was due to a 2% to 3% drop in the percent of special education students tested from 1998 to 1999. In 2000 the percent tested increased by 1.3% State-wide. This was primarily due to a 3.4% increase in the number of Hispanic students tested. The percent of Black students decreased by 0.1% while the percent of White students tested increased by 0.2%. Except for Hispanic students, the percent of students tested in 2000 was less than had been projected for 1999.

TABLE 3

PERCENT OF STUDENTS IN ACCOUNTABILITY SUBSET						
	1996	1997	1998	1999 Projected	1999	2000
All Students	74	76	76	86.1	84.2	85.5
Black	73.4	75.6	74.9	83.3	81.2	81.1
Hispanic	66.8	69.6	69.9	82.1	79.9	83.3
White	79.9	81.2	81.2	90.8	89	89.2
Male	70.1	71.9	71.9	84.6	82.1	83.3
Female	78.3	80.3	80.4	88	86.5	87.9

The disaggregated data also revealed that there were significant differences between the accountability subsets of the three ethnic groups and that these differences have changed over time. In 1996 74.3% of the Black students were in the accountability subset compared to 79.9% for Whites (a difference of 6.4%). In 2000, 81.1% of the Blacks and 89.2% of the Whites were in the accountability subset and the difference had increased to 7.8%. The data indicated that the percent of students in the accountability subset increased for both ethnic groups but the increase was greater for White students.

In contrast, 66.8% of the Hispanics were in the accountability subset in 1996 , 13.1% fewer than for White students and 6.6% fewer than for Black students. In 2000, the percent of Hispanic students included in the accountability subset had increased to 83.3%. This was 5.9% fewer than for White students and 2.2% more than for Black students. This increase in the percent of Hispanic students was primarily due to changes in exemption rules for Limited English Proficient (LEP) students in 1999 and 2000 that allowed Spanish TAAS scores in grades 3-6 to be included in the accountability subset.

When the data was disaggregated by gender, the accountability subset for males was about 4% less than the accountability subset for females. There was approximately an 8% increase in the accountability subsets of both males and females from 1998 to 1999. This increase was 2%-3% less than projected.

Question 3: Did the percent of students classified as special education remain constant from 1996 to 2000?

Table 4 presents the percent of special education students in grades 3-8 and 10 in the State during 1996 to 2000. The percent of special education students identified by the State increased from 1996 to 1998 and then decreased slightly in 1999 and again in 2000.

When students were disaggregated by ethnic group, a higher percentage of Black students were classified as special education than any other group. During 1996-2000 the percent of students in special education ranged from 17%-18.2% for Black students, 12.5%-13.5% for Hispanic students, and 13%-13.4% for White students.

TABLE 4

PERCENT OF STUDENTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION					
	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
All Students	13.2	13.5	13.9	13.8	13.5
Black	17	17.2	18.1	18.2	17.8
Hispanic	12.5	13.1	13.5	13.4	13.1
White	13	13.3	13.4	13.3	13.1
Male	17.1	17.5	18	17.8	17.5
Female	9	9.3	9.5	9.6	9.3

When the data were disaggregated by gender, 17.5% of the males and 9.3% of the females in the State were classified as special education in 2000. The five year trend showed steady increase from 1996 to 1998 and a slight decreases in 1999 and 2000.

In summary, the data showed that the percent of special education students increased from 1996 to 1998, then had slight decreases in 1999 and 2000. It also showed that the percent of Black students identified as special education was consistently higher than the percentage for White and Hispanic students. Furthermore, the data revealed a significant gender difference. Males were almost twice as likely to be classified as special education as females.

Question 4: Did the percent of special education students tested with the TAAS remain constant from 1996 to 2000?

Table 5 presents the percent of special education students tested from 1996 to 2000. State results show that the percent of the special education students tested increased from 1996 to 1998 and decreased in 1999 and 2000. From 1996 to 1998 the percent of special education students taking the TAAS increased by 4% (from 58% to 62%) then dropped by 14% from 1998 to 2000 (from 62% to 48%).

When the data are disaggregated by ethnic group, the percent of Black students and White students taking the TAAS increased by about 3% from 1996 to 1998 then declined by 12% from 1998 to 2000. For Hispanic students there was a 6.5% increase from 1996 to 1998 followed by a 16.6% decrease from 1998 to 2000.

TABLE 5

PERCENT OF SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS TAKING TAAS					
	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
All Students	58.3%	60.7%	62.6%	50.0%	48.3%
Black	44.1%	44.2%	47.0%	36.3%	34.8%
Hispanic	52.8%	56.5%	59.3%	44.0%	42.7%
White	67.7%	69.9%	71.6%	60.2%	59.6%
Male	58.5%	60.6%	62.8%	50.0%	49.1%
Female	57.8%	60.2%	62.1%	49.0%	47.3%

Question 5: Did the percent of special education students exempted by the ARD committee remain constant from 1996 to 2000?

Table 6 shows that for all students in Texas, there was a 12.6% increase in exemptions from 1998 to 1999 and an additional 1.7% increase in exemptions from 1999 to 2000.

TABLE 6

PERCENT OF SPECIAL EDUCATION EXEMPT FROM TAAS					
	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
All Students	41.7%	39.3%	37.4%	50.0%	51.7%
Black	55.9%	55.8%	53.0%	63.7%	65.2%
Hispanic	47.2%	43.5%	40.7%	56.0%	57.3%
White	32.3%	30.1%	28.4%	39.8%	40.4%
Male	41.5%	39.4%	37.2%	50.0%	50.9%
Female	42.2%	39.8%	37.9%	51.0%	52.7%

When the data were disaggregated by ethnicity, Table 6 shows that the five-year trend in exemption rates exhibited the same pattern for all three ethnic groups. From 1996 to 1998 the percent of students receiving exemptions decreased or showed little change. However, in 1999 and 2000 every ethnic group had significant increases in the percent of exemptions. There were, however, significant differences in the exemption rates of minorities and whites. Every year from 1996 to 2000, a greater percentage of minority students were exempt from testing than were white students. Among minority students, Black students were more likely to be exempt than Hispanic students. In both 1999 and 2000 almost two-thirds of Black special education students and three-fifths of Hispanic special education students received exemptions from testing.

When the data were disaggregated by gender, the exemption rates for males and females were very similar in each of the five years.

Summary

The data show that clear trends in the percent of students taking the TAAS and the percent in the accountability subset are present in the five years from 1996 to 2000. There were slight increases in the percent of students tested in 1996-98 and decreases in the percent tested from 1998 to 1999 and 1999 to 2000. The decrease in percent of students tested in 1999 coincided with the inclusion of special education students in the TAAS accountability subset. This would seem to indicate that a larger percent of students were being exempt from the test in 1999 and 2000.

The percent of students included in the TAAS accountability subset increased in 1999 because special education students who took the TAAS were included for the first time. The inclusion of special education students should have caused an increase of 10-12% in the accountability subset in 1999. The percent of students in the accountability subset did increase but the increase was 2%-3% less than projected. The pattern was consistent for all ethnic and gender groups. From 1999 to 2000 the accountability subset remained constant with the exception of Hispanic students. The percent of Hispanic students tested increased by 2.4%, primarily because of a decrease in the percent of LEP exemptions and the inclusion of grade 5 and 6 Spanish TAAS results in the accountability subset.

A five-year trend analysis showed that the percent of special education students tested with the TAAS increased 1996 to 1998 and decreased sharply in 1999 and decreased again in 2000. The percent of students receiving exemptions generally declined from 1996 to 1998 and increased sharply in 1999 and increased again in 2000.

Analysis of the data by ethnic group indicated that Black and Hispanic groups tended to have higher percentages of students placed in special education than white students. Furthermore, Black and Hispanic students were more likely to receive exemptions from the TAAS by their ARD committee. Statewide, almost two-thirds of the Black students and three-fifths of the Hispanic students in special education were exempt from the

TAAS in 1999. These figures increased by an additional 1.5% in 2000. In contrast, only about 40% of white special education students received exemptions in 1999 and 2000.

Analysis of the data by gender revealed that males were twice as likely to be classified as special education than females. This finding was consistent for each of the five years in the study. However, no gender differences were found when TAAS exemption rates for males and females were compared.

Conclusions

In 1999 the TAAS accountability subset, used by TEA to calculate school rankings and passing rates, was enlarged to include special education students. TEA predicted that the change would cause 1999 TAAS passing rates to drop by about 5%. The predicted drop failed to materialize, as the passing rate remained constant in reading and increased in math and writing. In 1999 and again in 2000 the percent of students identified as special education leveled off or declined while the percent receiving exemptions from the TAAS increased significantly. While a causal connection has not been established, it seems likely that these events are related to the TEA rule change. Based on the available data, it is reasonable to infer that:

- The percent of students identified as special education declined across the State because school districts could no longer use the special education classification as a way of exempting TAAS scores from the calculations for school rankings.
- The percent of special education students tested declined sharply in 1999 and 2000 because school districts across the State increased the exemption rates for special education students. Exempting special education students who were considered likely to fail the TAAS would minimize the impact of including them in the accountability subset of the AEIS.

This would not be particularly startling since the TAAS is a high stakes test and school leaders in Texas feel tremendous pressure to produce higher and higher test scores. According to the "rules of the game" school districts are allowed to exempt special education students if testing would be harmful or unfair to the student. However, the sudden increase in the percent of special education students exempt from the TAAS is cause for concern and raises some troubling philosophical and ethical issues. If, as the data indicates, school districts are exempting special education students from the TAAS in order to achieve and maintain high passing rates and school rankings, the focus of testing is no longer a question of "is the test a valuable experience for the child?" but rather "how will the child's test score affect the school's test scores and AEIS ranking?" This concern for high test scores and school rankings could have a detrimental effect on special educational placement decisions and curriculum content offerings for special education students.

The study identified several additional issues, which should be of concern to Texas educators. The following trends in the data merit further investigation.

- the percent of students identified as special education has increased over the last 5 years and 13.5% of TAAS eligible students in Texas were classified as special education in 1999. Membership in special education seems high but may decrease because special education students' TAAS scores are no longer exempt from the accountability subset.
- the percentage of students identified as special education differed significantly across ethnic groups. One of every five Black students in the State was classified as special education. In contrast, one of every seven Hispanic and Whites students were classified as special education.
- there is a significant gender difference in the percentage of identified special education students. The data showed that two of every three special education students in Texas were male.
- TAAS exemption rates differed significantly across ethnic groups. In Texas, 65.2% of the Black students and 57.3% of the Hispanic students in special education were exempt from the TAAS. In contrast, 40.4% of the White special education students were exempt.

These trends indicate widespread racial/ethnic and gender differences in the special education population in Texas. The data presented in this study indicates that there is a need to review the whole process of identifying special education students to insure that selection criteria are free from ethnic/racial and gender bias.

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