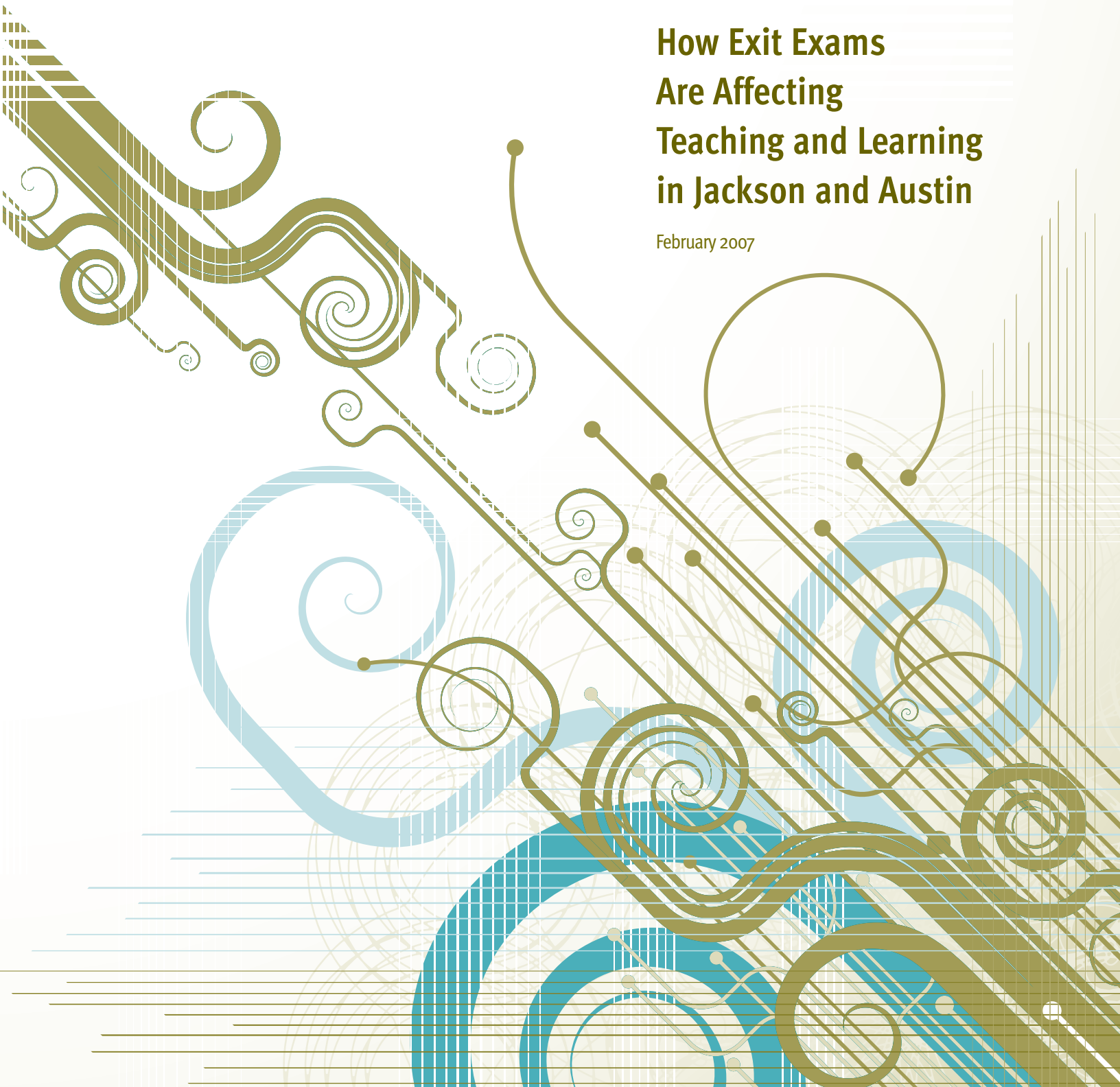


“It’s Different Now”

How Exit Exams Are Affecting Teaching and Learning in Jackson and Austin

February 2007





Center on Education Policy
1001 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 522
Washington, D.C. 20036

tel: 202.822.8065
fax: 202.822.6008

e: cep-dc@cep-dc.org
w: www.cep-dc.org



“It’s Different Now”

**How Exit Exams
Are Affecting
Teaching and Learning
in Jackson and Austin**

Center on Education Policy

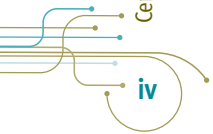
February 2007



Table of Contents

Summary of Key Findings	1
Purpose of the Study	1
Key Findings Across Districts	2
Influences on Curriculum and Instruction	2
Supports for Success	3
Pipeline to Higher Education	3
Key Findings Unique to Each District	4
Jackson Public Schools	4
Austin Independent School District	4
Case Study of the Mississippi Subject Area Testing Program in the Jackson Public Schools	5
Significant Findings from the Jackson Case Study	5
Data Sources for the Case Study	6
Background on the District and Schools Studied	7
History of Exit Exams in the JPS	8
Long-Term State Experience with Exit Exams	8
Exams Linked to Coursework	8
Pass Rates on the SATP	9
SATP and NCLB Accountability	10
Discussion of Findings from the Jackson Case Study	10
Increased Accountability	10
Instructional Changes and Student Supports	11
Effect of SATP on Student Attitudes about Education	16
Supports for Enrollment in Higher Education	17
Case Study of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills in the Austin Independent School District	19
Significant Findings from the Austin Case Study	19
Data Sources for the Case Study	20





Background on the District and Schools Studied	21
History of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills	22
Discussion of Findings from the Austin Case Study	24
Increased Accountability	24
Instructional Changes and Student Supports	25
Influence of Teaching to the TAKS on Curriculum and Instruction	29
Additional District Initiatives to Support High School Success	31
Effects of TAKS on Student Attitudes about Education	32
Supports for Enrollment in Higher Education	33
Use of TAKS Exit-Level Results in College Admissions	34
Case Study Methods	37
Study Questions and Design	37
Data Collection	39
District Approval	39
School Approval	39
Survey Demographic Data	39
Limitations of the Study	40



Summary of Key Findings

With 25 states now implementing or phasing in exit examinations—tests students must pass in order to receive a high school diploma—many policymakers, educators, and parents are wondering how these exams are affecting schools and students. To learn more about these effects, the Center on Education Policy (CEP) examined the implementation of high school exit exams in 2006 in two school districts: the Jackson Public Schools (JPS) in Mississippi and the Austin Independent School District (AISD) in Texas. Our work in these two districts is part of a comprehensive national study of exit exams that CEP has been conducting since 2002.

Purpose of the Study

Much of the previous research on exit exams, including CEP's own work, has looked at national patterns of implementation and passing rates. This study aims to benefit policy and practice by focusing on the local level. In particular, we conducted case studies in Jackson and Austin that examined how classroom instruction and other initiatives are preparing students for exit exams, as well as how these exams are affecting students' engagement in learning and their plans for postsecondary education.

CEP chose to study the Jackson and Austin school districts because of their substantial experience implementing the exit-level exams of the Mississippi Subject Area Testing Program (SATP) and the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), as well as earlier versions of state exit exams. We also wanted to look specifically at how high school exit exams may be affecting students of color. Toward this end, we chose two urban districts that serve significant numbers of students of color. Lessons learned from these districts' ongoing implementation of exit exam requirements could benefit similar urban districts in other states that have newer exit exams or are considering an exit exam requirement. In addition, both Jackson and Austin are home to a variety of higher education institutions that attract local students, providing the opportunity to examine the effects of exit exams on the pipeline to postsecondary education.

In conjunction with researchers from Policy Studies Associates (PSA), our contractor for this study, CEP staff collected case study data primarily through interviews with district and school administrators, teachers, students, and representatives of community organizations and postsecondary institutions. CEP and PSA researchers also surveyed students in both districts and examined policy documents.

This report describes what we learned from our work in Jackson and Austin. This opening section of the report summarizes our key findings across the two districts and within each district. The two longer middle sections of the report consist of detailed case studies of each district. A final section describes the study methods.

Key Findings Across Districts

After examining the interview and survey data from both case studies, CEP arrived at several findings common to both districts. These findings can be grouped into three categories: influences on curriculum and instruction, supports for success, and pipeline to higher education.

Influences on Curriculum and Instruction

Overall, the data collected in the Jackson and Austin school districts suggest that, after several years of implementation, exit exams have shaped curriculum and instruction. Some of these influences appear to be intended outcomes while others may be unintended.

- **Districts and schools reported common changes to curriculum and instruction.** These include:
 - Providing instructional or pacing guides aligned to the tests for teachers
 - Increasing instructional time in the tested subject matter
 - Decreasing flexibility in the core curriculum—for example, by restricting electives
- **Exit exams may be increasing consistency in curriculum and instruction.** Administrators at both the district and school level often talked about how exit exams make teachers accountable for the curriculum they teach. The exam is seen as a way to ensure that teachers teach the prescribed curriculum and provide consistent instruction across schools in the district.
- **The emphasis on exit exam preparation may be detracting from other instructional experiences.** For example, interviewees said that less time is available to study longer pieces of literature, go into topics in depth, or take electives. These concerns were especially pronounced in AISD, perhaps due to the nature of the TAKS test compared with the SATP. Mississippi’s Subject Area Tests are end-of-course exams, and teachers reported that instruction to prepare students for these tests was mostly seamless with the course curriculum. In contrast, the TAKS exit-level tests are not as closely aligned to specific courses, so preparation sometimes detracts from the ongoing curriculum and instruction.

Many curricular and instructional changes in the two districts are closely linked to providing supports to help students pass exit exams. These include the following policies and practices:

- **Districts have implemented interim assessments aligned with the state exit exams.** These benchmark assessments allow schools and teachers to monitor students’ progress throughout the year, predict success on the exit exams, and provide early interventions. For example, every student in Austin has a personalized graduation plan that addresses TAKS deficiencies based on interim assessment results.
- **Students are placed in remediation when they fail any portion of an exit-level or end-of-course exam, so they often receive a “double dose” of the same subject.** Typically, remediation is scheduled in addition to students’ regular classes. For example, a student who fails the English portion of the exam would be placed in a remedial English class that would focus on the skills necessary to pass that exam, but the student would also continue in a regular English class, such as 12th grade English.
- **Teachers and students in both districts reported the frequent use of test-preparation strategies during class time.** Data from interviews and surveys revealed that teachers in both Jackson and Austin are using common test-preparation strategies. These include practicing sample test questions during class, using old exit exam questions on classroom tests, and spending class time reviewing test-taking skills.

Supports for Success

Both districts have created policies and practices to prepare students for exit exams, and both provide remediation as necessary. For the most part, interventions occur at school rather than through outside partnerships. Community organizations provide general academic support and tutoring but this support is not targeted to exit exam success.

- Districts and schools reported using common policies and practices to support students. These include:
 - Saturday classes and remediation programs
 - Summer school preparation programs
 - Before- and after-school tutoring
 - Restructuring the school day in the weeks before the exams
- Students have multiple opportunities to retake the exit exams before their expected graduation. Participants reported that by the time of graduation, few students have not yet met the exit exam requirements.

Pipeline to Higher Education

CEP found little connection between the exit exams and the path to higher education in either Jackson or Austin. Representatives of districts, schools, and community groups described initiatives to encourage high school students to go to college that were distinct from instructional initiatives to support success on exit exams. Similarly, students reported little association between their perceptions of the exit exams and their plans to attend a postsecondary institution. This apparent disconnect likely emerges because colleges in both states, on the whole, do not place emphasis on exit exam results in their decisions about admissions or scholarships.

- ***Colleges and universities in Jackson and Austin do not typically pay attention to results on the state exit exams in admissions decisions.*** The only evidence we could find of colleges and universities using exit exam scores was in Texas, where achieving a certain score on the exit exam would indicate that the student is exempt from remedial courses in public universities. However, none of the college or university personnel we interviewed reported that exit exam scores are used in the admission process.
- ***There is little evidence that exit exam requirements are a significant factor in students' decision to remain in school or drop out.*** Some interviewees (including students) said that students do not consider the exit exams to be high-stakes tests, unlike their course exams or the SAT or ACT.
- ***Districts, community organizations, and local colleges provide a variety of other supports to encourage students to enroll in postsecondary education.*** These supports, which are separate from programs to help students pass exit exams, include the following:
 - Expansion of Advanced Placement (AP) courses
 - Dual-enrollment initiatives that enable high school students to take college courses
 - Workshops on college applications and financial aid
 - In Austin, a partnership with the local community college to guarantee admission to all graduates of AISD

Key Findings Unique to Each District


Findings unique to each district also emerged from our case studies in Jackson and Austin. These unique findings may be due to differences between the two districts in school characteristics, students served, and types of exit exams (end-of-course exams in Mississippi versus standards-based exams in Texas). More research is needed to understand why some school-specific findings are present. Additional significant findings about exit exams in the two districts appear at the beginning of the Jackson and Austin case studies that make up the bulk of this report.

Jackson Public Schools

- ***In the three high schools studied in Jackson, the SATP seems to be influencing perceptions about the value of curriculum.*** Administrators, teachers, and students reported an increased emphasis on courses that have an end-of-course exit exam. Both teachers and students contended that students took these SATP classes more seriously and devoted more effort to them.
- ***Data from benchmark tests are used to identify the strengths and weaknesses of teaching staff and to make timely changes in teaching assignments.*** In some cases, faculty members with proven success in particular content areas are moved within the school so their skills can be used to help students pass the Subject Area Tests.

Austin Independent School District

- ***In the three Austin high schools studied, TAKS appears to influence curriculum and instruction differently depending on the characteristics of students.*** In the school that served greater numbers of higher-performing students, higher-income students, and white students, teachers reported that TAKS has exerted a less invasive influence on curriculum. Preparing for and taking the TAKS were characterized as more of an inconvenience than a dominant influence. In the schools that served greater numbers of lower-performing students, lower-income students, and students of color, teachers reported that the TAKS had influenced every aspect of the curriculum, from affecting the length of individual pieces of literature studied to shortening the curriculum in some subjects to make time to learn or review material most likely to be tested on the exam.



Case Study of the Mississippi Subject Area Testing Program in the Jackson Public Schools

The Jackson school district, the largest in Mississippi, serves a student body that is largely African American and mostly low-income. Among the district's many schools are eight high schools and one career center. In addition to collecting information from the district level, CEP focused on three high schools in this case study of exit exams in the Jackson Public Schools. The schools participated on the condition that they would not be identified by name. In this report, they are referred to by the pseudonyms of Elmore James High School, Muddy Waters High School, and Charlie Patton High School. This policy of anonymity was intended to encourage participants to frankly share their views of exit exams.

Significant Findings from the Jackson Case Study

Several specific findings about the impact of the SATP emerged from CEP's case study of Jackson. These findings are explained in detail in the Discussion section of this case study.

- **Increased accountability.** Teachers and administrators reported that the SATP has brought greater accountability to JPS by ensuring that teachers cover the key content and skills in the curriculum.
- **Benchmark assessments.** JPS has developed benchmark assessments to gauge how well students are prepared for the SATP exams. Teachers use results from these assessments to identify student strengths and weaknesses and target instruction on improving the weaker areas. In addition, administrators use data from benchmark assessments to assign teachers to classes based on their teaching strengths and weaknesses.
- **Pacing guides.** The district has also developed pacing guides to ensure that the curriculum is consistent from school to school and that teachers cover the material students need to know to pass Subject Area Tests. Although teachers sometimes alter or add to the pacing guides, the teachers we interviewed noted the value of the guides in raising student performance on state tests.
- **Changes in student schedules and coursework.** Jackson high schools offer support courses, which give struggling students a double dose of instructional time during the school day in content and skills tested by the SATP. Administrators, teachers, and students reported that tested subjects have priority over non-tested subjects.

- **Classroom instruction in test-taking skills.** Teachers and students reported that class time is spent teaching test-taking skills for multiple-choice exams.
- **Additional remediation outside the regular school day.** Schools provide SATP-related tutoring before and after school and sometimes on Saturdays or during the summer. Remediation offered outside the regular day is optional, and often students with the greatest need for assistance do not attend. In partnership with the schools, community groups also offer tutoring and mentoring to students.
- **Little impact on high school completion.** The SATP exit-level exams are generally perceived to have little, if any, effect on whether students graduate from high school because most students at risk of dropping out have other academic problems that could keep them from graduating. Nevertheless, students expressed anxiety about their ability to pass the exams.
- **Student effort.** Case study participants generally agreed that students put more effort into passing courses that have a Subject Area Test.
- **Limited role in college preparation and placement.** According to interviewees, postsecondary institutions do not take into account students' performance on the SATP in decisions about admissions or placement. Moreover, the SATP plays only a minimal role in preparing students for college. Students do not consider the exit-level SATP exams to be a very important factor in shaping their plans for postsecondary education.

Data Sources for the Case Study

CEP and PSA researchers collected four main types of data to conduct the Jackson case study. (More detailed information about study methods appears in the last section of the report.)

- **District interviews.** In spring 2006, two researchers visited Jackson and met with two district-level administrators.
- **School interviews.** Researchers also spent a day visiting each of the three high schools in spring 2006. At each school, the researchers interviewed the principal, a group of teachers who teach in the SATP subject areas, and a group of students in grades 11 and 12 whose parents had given consent for them to participate in the study.
- **Student survey.** At all three high schools participating in the case study, the researchers administered surveys to students in May 2006, following the SATP examinations. CEP received a total of 264 completed surveys from the three schools (74 from Elmore James, 112 from Muddy Waters, and 78 from Charlie Patton).
- **Community and higher education interviews.** Six telephone and in-person interviews were conducted with a variety of community members knowledgeable about high school and postsecondary education in Jackson.

Background on the District and Schools Studied

In school year 2005-06, the Jackson Public Schools enrolled 32,403 students, including 7,939 students in grades 9-12.

As shown in **table 1**, 97% of the students in the Jackson school district are African American, according to data from the Mississippi Assessment and Accountability Reporting System. A high percentage of the district's students (81%) qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Three percent are students with disabilities receiving special education.

Table 1 also includes basic demographic data for each of the three schools included in the case study. All three schools serve a largely African American student body, and roughly two-thirds or more of their students come from low-income families. Still, the percentages of low-income students in the three schools are somewhat lower than the district average.

Most of the teachers who teach core academic subjects in the three schools are considered “highly qualified” according to the definition in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). In the 2005-06 school year, 86% of the core academic teachers at Elmore James High were highly qualified, as were 89% of core academic teachers at Muddy Waters High and 92% at Charlie Patton High.

Based on 2005-06 test data, all three schools in the case study were classified as *Level 3—Successful* under the Mississippi state accountability system. But the three schools have different standings under the accountability system used for the No Child Left Behind Act. As explained in more detail below, Muddy Waters and Charlie Patton High Schools have been identified for improvement under NCLB, while Elmore James High has not.

The graduation rate for the entire JPS district was 77% in 2005-06, and the average daily attendance rate was 94%. Graduation rates are also available for the three case study schools for 2004-05; these rates are based on the number of 9th graders enrolled in 2001-02 who graduated on time in 2004-05. The graduation rates were 78% for Elmore James, 68% for Muddy Waters, and 74% for Charlie Patton.

7
“It’s Different Now”: How Exit Exams Are Affecting Teaching and Learning in Jackson and Austin

Table 1.

Percentage of Students from Various Demographic Groups in the Jackson School District and Three Case Study Schools, 2005-06 (except where noted)

	JPS District (32,403 students)	Elmore James (1,222 students)	Muddy Waters (871 students)	Charlie Patton (1,119 students)
African American	97%	99%	100%	96%
White	2%	<1%	0%	4%
Free or reduced-price lunch eligible	81%	62%*	73%*	68%*
Students with disabilities	3%	6%	10%	3%

* Data marked with an asterisk are from the 2004-05 school report cards. Other data in the table are from 2005-06.

Source: Mississippi Assessment and Accountability Reporting System (<http://orsap.mde.k12.ms.us:8080/MAARS/index.jsp>), and JPS 2004-05 school report cards (www.jackson.k12.ms.us/schools/schools.htm).

History of Exit Exams in the JPS

The exit-level tests of the Subject Area Testing Program build on a long history of testing requirements in Mississippi. These end-of-course exams are significant not only because they are used for graduation purposes, but also because they are used to assess whether students have mastered key academic coursework and to determine progress under NCLB. Mirroring statewide trends, students in the Jackson Public Schools, as well as in the three case study schools, usually pass the Subject Area Tests on their first attempt.

Long-Term State Experience with Exit Exams

The predecessor to Mississippi's SATP, the Functional Literacy Exam (FLE), was first administered in the mid-1980s to ensure that students achieved at least basic competency in reading, written communication, and mathematics. Between 2002 and 2006, the FLE was phased out test by test and replaced by the SATP. The Subject Area Test in U.S. History was first introduced as a graduation requirement for the class of 2003, as shown in **table 2**. The English II SATP became a graduation requirement for students in the class of 2004. The Biology I test was phased in as a graduation requirement for the class of 2005. The introduction of the exit-level Algebra I test made the class of 2006 the first class of Mississippi students required to pass all four Subject Area Tests. The SATP exams are all multiple-choice tests; however, the English II test includes a writing component. Students must complete the requirements for the year they actually graduate.

Table 2. Transition from FLE to SATP Exit Exam Requirements

Graduation Class Year	Exams students had to pass to graduate
2002	All three sections of FLE (reading, written communication, mathematics)
2003	All three sections of FLE plus SATP U.S. History from 1877
2004	Mathematics section of FLE plus SATP English II and U.S. History from 1877
2005	Mathematics section of FLE plus SATP Biology I, English II, and U.S. History from 1877
2006	SATP Algebra I, Biology I, English II, and U.S. History from 1877

Source: Mississippi Department of Education, www.mde.k12.ms.us/acad/OSA/phasefle.htm.

Exams Linked to Coursework

Because each SATP test is an end-of-course exam that is intended to cover the material taught in the parallel course, students may take their Subject Area Tests at various times, depending on when they take the course. For example, students who took Algebra I in 8th grade typically take the Algebra I SATP at the end of 8th grade. Similarly, students who do not take U.S. History from 1877 until 12th grade will not take the accompanying SATP until they have completed the course. However, they must take the test at the end of the year that they are enrolled in the course.

According to information from the Mississippi Department of Education, each SATP test is scored on a scale of 100 to 500 points. To pass each test, a student must achieve a score of 300 points.

Students who do not pass the test on their first attempt may sit for up to five retests each year. If a student fails a test twice, he or she can appeal for a substitute evaluation. In the Jackson Public Schools, students who do not pass a Subject Area Test on their first attempt are targeted for remediation and are encouraged to attend before- or after-school tutoring. These students are also enrolled in a support course to help them prepare for the exam. A student who passes a Subject Area course but fails the accompanying test is required to retake the test only, not the course. Similarly, a student who passes the test but fails the course is required to retake the course only, not the test. Students who fail both the test and the course are registered to take the course again during the next school year. After completing their senior year, students who have yet to pass a Subject Area Test may take the tests as many times as necessary to achieve a passing score. No data are available, however, on student performance on tests taken after 12th grade.

Students who do not pass the SATP and do not receive a regular diploma can receive a certificate of completion, certificate of attendance, alternate, or occupational diploma. If a student receives any of these certificates or a GED and later passes the necessary SATP exams, he or she is awarded a regular high school diploma.

Pass Rates on the SATP

In 2005-06, the majority of JPS students passed the SATP exams on their first attempt, as shown in **table 3**. Historically, initial pass rates have been lowest on the English II multiple-choice test. In 2005-06, 70% of JPS students who took a Subject Area Test for the first time passed the English II multiple-choice exam. (JPS pass rates on the English II writing test are higher—91% in 2005-06.) Initial pass rates on the other exams for 2005-06 were 86% in Algebra I, 88% in Biology I, and 94% in U.S. History from 1877. Except for a decline of 7 percentage points in English II, the JPS initial pass rates on the exams have varied little over the past three years, as table 3 illustrates.

Table 3. Percentage of JPS and Mississippi Students Passing Subject Area Tests on Their First Attempt, 2003-04 through 2005-06

Group	Percentage of Students Passing SATP Exams on the First Attempt											
	English II Multiple-Choice			Algebra I			Biology I			U.S. History		
	03-04	04-05	05-06	03-04	04-05	05-06	03-04	04-05	05-06	03-04	04-05	05-06
JPS	77%	74%	70%	87%	87%	86%	84%	88%	88%	94%	96%	94%
State	83%	83%	78%	91%	92%	91%	89%	92%	93%	96%	96%	96%

Source: Mississippi Assessment and Accountability Reporting System, <http://orsap.mde.k12.ms.us:8080/MAARS/index.jsp>.

In the three case study schools, a majority of students passed the exit-level Subject Area Tests on their first attempt in 2005-06, but pass rates varied by subject and by school. As illustrated in **table 4**, the school-level data reflect the overall district pattern of lower pass rates on the English II multiple-choice test than on the other subject tests. On the English II multiple-choice test, initial pass rates for the three schools in 2005-06 ranged from 62% to 75%, while in writing, Biology I, and U.S. History the percentages of students passing on the first try ranged from the high-80s to the mid-90s. A notable difference among schools occurred in Algebra I, where the initial pass rates ranged from 79% to 92%.

Table 4.

Percentage of Students in Three Case Study Schools Passing SATP Exams on Their First Attempt and Percentage Scoring at Proficient or Above, 2005-06

SATP Subject Area	Elmore James		Muddy Waters		Charlie Patton	
	Percentage Passing	Percentage Proficient & Above	Percentage Passing	Percentage Proficient & Above	Percentage Passing	Percentage Proficient & Above
English II Multiple-Choice	75%	30%	62%	14%	63%	19%
English II Writing	96%	NA	91%	NA	88%	NA
Algebra I	79%	24%	88%	29%	92%	41%
Biology I	89%	60%	88%	43%	92%	47%
U.S. History	96%	59%	95%	46%	92%	34%

Source: Mississippi Assessment and Accountability Reporting System, <http://orsap.mde.k12.ms.us:8080/MAARS/index.jsp>.

SATP and NCLB Accountability

Results from the Algebra I and English II multiple-choice SATP exams are also used to determine whether high schools have made adequate yearly progress (AYP) under NCLB. Only students' first test attempts are counted for NCLB purposes. Moreover, the cut scores set by the state to determine whether students are considered "proficient" under NCLB are higher than the graduation cut score of 300. (As shown in table 4 above, the percentages of students scoring at the proficient level or above on the SATP are consistently lower than the percentages achieving a passing score.)

Based on its SATP scores and other state-determined measures, Elmore James High made AYP in 2005-06 for all students and all subgroups in both English language arts and mathematics, and was not identified for NCLB improvement. Muddy Waters High was in its second year of NCLB improvement in 2005-06; the school made AYP in 2005-06 for all students and all subgroups in both subjects, so if it makes AYP again this year it will exit school improvement. Charlie Patton High was also in its second year of NCLB improvement in 2005-06; the school failed to make AYP in 2005-06 in English language arts for all students and for the low-income and African American subgroups.

Discussion of Findings from the Jackson Case Study

Several findings emerged from the interviews and surveys conducted in the Jackson Public Schools. This section of the report discusses these findings in detail.

Increased Accountability

Teachers and administrators at JPS talked about the increase in accountability associated with the SATP. Administrators reported that the SATP serves as a tool to ensure that teachers cover all required curriculum, particularly the material likely to be assessed. One administrator described this effect as follows:

[Prior to the test] it was scary because teachers said that they just didn't even teach certain subjects. Testing started with the end in mind [and] has helped teachers and the school adhere to the curriculum more correctly. That has been a plus for students, who then stand a good chance of getting the instruction they need in order to pass the test.

Another administrator observed that after the SATP became a requirement, “teachers began to spend time on things that they may have previously not thought were important.”

SATP results can also be used as a monitoring tool. “I can monitor principals, the principals can monitor the teachers, and we can all monitor the students,” an administrator explained.

Instructional Changes and Student Supports

Since the transition to the SATP, the Jackson school district has worked with high school administrators and faculty to develop instructional strategies and initiatives to prepare students to succeed on the exit exam and receive their high school diploma. These efforts are also intended to help teachers ensure that all students master the material covered by the exit exam.

District, school, and community representatives discussed various ways in which the SATP has affected instruction in Jackson. The instructional changes implemented by the district and schools include the following:

- District-designed benchmark assessments
- District-designed instructional pacing guides
- Changes in teacher assignments
- Changes in student schedules and course assignments to increase instructional time in tested subjects
- Remediation offered outside of the regular school day by schools and community organizations

Each of these changes is discussed below.

Benchmark assessments

Beginning in the late 1990s, the Jackson Public Schools developed a set of “benchmark” assessments in various subjects and for all school levels. These assessments, which are given every nine weeks, are designed to gauge how well students have mastered content and whether they are prepared for the state assessments. As state standards and assessments have changed, the benchmark assessments have also been adjusted to accurately reflect changes in expectations. One administrator characterized these district-scored assessments as “another way to tell what teachers and students are doing.”

Teachers and school administrators use results from the benchmark assessments to assess students’ strengths and weaknesses and to differentiate or alter instruction to address the weaknesses. The district has made it a priority to provide students with the necessary assistance well before the SATP examinations. Both administrators and teachers said that data from the district assessments have been helpful in determining which students need more targeted assistance in particular content areas. One teacher made the following observation about the nine-week tests:

They illustrate where we are and where we need to work . . . We know when our kids need more help and what they need it on, so that when they go to remediation, we know what we should do.

Another teacher reported:

My children have continually had problems with some areas. I try to spend more time on those areas each year. It affects the next year because I change my instruction because the district gives us a sheet on what objectives students are doing well on.

Instructional pacing guides

The district has also developed pacing guides aimed at improving the consistency of instruction across schools. In particular, the pacing guides are intended to help teachers know what topics and skills they must cover to prepare students effectively for the benchmark assessments. For courses covered by the SATP, the district pacing guides are specifically designed to prepare students to succeed on the exams.

Administrators reported that before the SATP became a requirement, some teachers would spend time covering only the concepts they were interested in. But this has changed, as one administrator explained using math as an example:

If [teachers] liked slope, they might spend a week teaching slope, but there are only a few questions on slope. So, in reality, they should have spent more time on equations and inequalities. There are things that teachers would spend so much time teaching that were not even on the benchmarks or on the state exam, but now that is not acceptable. [The SATP] has changed what they teach and how much time they spend on certain things. It has them on a lockstep methodological pace.

Another administrator agreed that “for years teachers have taught whatever they wanted to teach” but that after the benchmark assessments were introduced, teachers could no longer “put emphasis only on the things they like.”

Although teachers do not necessarily follow the benchmarks and pacing guides without question, they noted their value in improving students’ test performance. One teacher discussed how the pacing guides helped overcome initial resistance to teaching to the test:

I was at first hesitant to teach students to pass a test; I felt like it took away my creative part. I realized, however, that our students have to compete with other students from other countries and they have to be able to pass all sorts of different tests, so it is important for me to know what they are expected to learn. I have a broader view now. My students have been successful in the past with them and they continue to be. I still focus on the objectives.

Another teacher reported following the pacing guides but adding to them when the guidance is not enough:

If I see . . . that what [the pacing guides] give is not enough, I try to give them more help . . . I know that some students learn at a different pace, and [for] the ones who are working at a slower pace, we have peer tutoring [and] work in groups, and they learn to present and get up and talk to a group of people. And some days I tell them that they have a question and that they have to come and teach it to me, so I understand that they know what they learned the week before.

Case study participants also reported that the pacing guides ensure that curriculum is consistent across schools in a district with high student mobility. Said one teacher:

Previously, each teacher made their own order. This school would teach something at one time and another school would teach it at a different time. By implementing a pacing guide, it allows for transient students to still be on the same subjects.

Changes in teacher assignments

Using teacher-level data from the benchmark assessments, school and district administrators in JPS can make timely decisions about teaching assignments based on teachers' strengths and weaknesses. An administrator reported:

We can look at data at all eight schools and in each of the subject areas and then by teachers . . . and they can look at it by student . . . We can use a peer group of teachers to help intervene with students; teachers who are stronger in particular areas can be used to help other teachers improve their work.

In some cases, faculty members who have been successful in teaching particular content areas are moved within the school so their skills can be used to help students pass the Subject Area Tests. One administrator described this process:

Personnel have been reallocated to those subject areas that are tested: English, history, biology, algebra. Instead of maybe our former, more natural matriculation process where the veteran teachers were the people teaching senior-level English, now the veteran teachers are teaching English 10, or [if not a veteran] it is one of the people who we know will produce for us.

Changes in student schedules and course assignments

The SATP has also affected school schedules and students' course assignments. All high schools in the Jackson district now operate on block schedules. Within this schedule, support courses have been developed to give struggling students extra instructional time during school in areas tested by the SATP. Support courses are offered in such areas as technical writing, science skills, and academic transitions to algebra. Students' grades and their scores on the benchmark assessments are often used to help to determine whether they should be enrolled in a support course. As one administrator described it, students enrolled in these courses may receive a "double dose" in specific subjects:

[W]hen the [benchmark] scores come back, the scores are studied and from there, students are often double scheduled in math. For example, they might have a second basic math course in addition to their regular course in the fall. We are on a block schedule; this helps because a student might take two math courses or two English courses.

Sometimes students miss other subjects or activities to attend remediation. For example, said one academic teacher, students who need extra help “don’t go to gym; they come back to my class for another dose if they are doing poorly. The other students will have to come back for remediation if they don’t have the class during gym class.”

Case study participants also said that tested subjects have priority over non-tested subjects. One administrator described how efforts to help students succeed on the SATP can affect elective courses:

Sometimes when we have elective course teachers leave or retire, they are replaced by a teacher in a core subject area. It has up- and down-sides; they spend more time in those areas and less time in electives that they are able to pick from. They still have electives, but now they are courses that support the subject area—transitions to algebra or creative writing or, if the intervention that the child needs is in the science area, it may be scientific reasoning.

Students similarly noted that considerable time is spent on the tested subjects, to the point that these subjects take precedence over non-tested subjects. “Most of the time we are preparing for [the SATP tests], it is basically all we do, even in other classes,” said one student.

Principals, teachers, and students reported that teaching test-taking skills, such as how to respond to multiple-choice questions, has become more common in classrooms. One teacher described this change as follows:

I teach test-taking skills to some degree. I try to remind [students] at least before the first nine weeks that you never leave one blank. And then we try to go through multiple-choice questions; you know that one [choice] is ridiculous and then you look at the next and try to knock them down, and then you take your best guess out of the two. There are some basic strategies.

Students participating in the case study confirmed this point. “We get a lot of practice tests,” said one. “Instead of spending so much time on one [question] they give us process of elimination,” explained another. “We learn test-taking strategies all the time, as soon as you walk in the door,” noted a third.

As shown in **table 5**, 93% of the students responding to our Jackson student survey reported that they practice sample SATP questions during class, while 92% said that teachers spend time reviewing test-taking skills. And 83% said old questions from the SATP tests appear on class tests.

Remediation outside the regular school day

Although teachers, principals, and district officials agreed that remediation is most effective when it occurs during the regular school day, all JPS high schools offer tutoring, both before and after school, to help students prepare for the SATP. Schools also provide tutoring on some Saturdays and over the summer. The topics covered in remediation are relevant to the district benchmark assessments and the SATP.

Schools target students for tutoring based on data from the benchmark assessments, SATP results, and teachers’ own assessments of student performance. Most tutoring is offered to all students who need assis-

Table 5.

Percentage of Students Reporting Various Types of Classroom Test Preparation for the SATP

Which of the following strategies have been used in your classes to help prepare you for the Subject Area Tests? (242 students responding)

We practice sample Subject Area Test questions during class	93%
Teachers spend time reviewing test-taking skills	92%
Old questions from the Subject Area Tests are on class tests	83%
Old questions from the Subject Area Tests are assigned for homework	65%

Source: Center on Education Policy, survey of students in Jackson Public Schools, fall 2006.

tance, whether or not they have failed a Subject Area Test. But teachers and administrators reported that students who perform poorly on benchmark assessments are particularly encouraged to take advantage of additional support. As one teacher said:

We target those students who score below 50 [on the benchmark tests]. Once we tell them that they need to be there, that is when we normally contact parents by phone. We found out that in the past, the parents will help us if they know that it is important.

Students also reported that they are encouraged to take advantage of tutoring sessions. As one student noted, the school offers tutoring in the library before and after school. “They have teachers go and monitor,” said the student. “You get extra points for going.”

The only tutoring specifically targeted at students who have failed a Subject Area Test is a 20-hour block offered in the weeks before a scheduled retest. Students who must retake an exit-level exam are strongly encouraged, but not required, to attend this tutoring in the subject in which they need help.

Because remediation outside the regular school day is optional, the students who need assistance the most often do not attend, even though teachers may recommend that they do so. Participants in the case study reported that students’ family and work obligations, extracurricular activities, or lack of motivation often make it difficult for students to attend tutoring. One administrator described the situation this way:

We do after-school tutorials and there is limited participation. Our students either participate in after-school or they work . . . those who have parental support, they are often already in after-school programs and they don’t have the need for the intervention. Those kids who really need it might not be the ones who stay . . . We provide those services like transportation, but we have had limited success. At the high school level, you better do it during the school day.

While most of the tutoring in JPS is provided by teachers, all three high schools in our case study also have partnerships with local organizations to provide mentors and tutors for struggling students. While none of these organizations have an explicit purpose of helping students pass the SATP exams, they offer general academic or career-planning assistance to students. For example, the director of one organization explained that the organization works with students who have difficulty in school or on the SATP exams:

We actually invite students who have had difficulty passing them to work with us; we have found the number one issue is motivation and little pieces that build them up. It is not that the kids can't do the work, but they need someone to hold their hand, support them, and tell them that they can do it. Some kids do not have that at home, and we need to provide that. If they take the algebra test and then they fail it, they might not know what to do next. What we try to do is to work closely with the schools, and we say that if you have students who need help, we can give them that individual attention.

Effect of SATP on Student Attitudes about Education

Our case study interviews and surveys shed light on the impact of the SATP on students' prospects for graduation, the effort they make in their courses, and their general anxiety about school.

SATP not a main reason why students fail to graduate

Case study participants perceived the SATP exit-level exams to have little, if any, effect on students' high school completion. School administrators and community members said that students are at greatest risk of dropping out of school during or right after 9th grade, well before they take the SATP exams. Recognizing this, principals underscored their work to address risk factors such as poor reading and writing skills when students enter high school.

Interviewees also reported that most students who are at risk of not graduating have many other graduation requirements to fulfill beyond the Subject Area Tests. While some students at risk of dropping out have indeed failed one or more of these tests, most have other academic issues that are keeping them back, such as low academic skills, poor attendance, or failing grades in courses required for graduation. One administrator expressed a common concern that students need to be targeted for remediation and extra help long before the SATP threatens to keep them from receiving their diploma:

Not many are dropping out because of the state test . . . [The] general trend is this—our kids come, and they are at a 6th grade reading level. Unfortunately, we have to use the 9th grade year to bring them up three grade levels. The dropouts occur after the 9th grade year. This is the fallacy about the exit exams: if [students] don't pass in middle school, they are socially promoted and we have to catch them up; otherwise we get the notoriety of them dropping out. When they realize that they have to improve a Carnegie unit, that is huge, and when they see that, that is when they are dropping out.

Both teachers and students reported that very few students, if any, fail to graduate solely because they have not passed a Subject Area Test. As one teacher observed:

The number of students who have passed all the required tests and courses and only lack an SATP is really small. It is sad when it happens, because often it is one component. It does happen, but it is few and far between. Of course, the kids who are struggling may not stay through May of their senior year.

In response to a survey question that asked students how sure they are to complete high school, 81% said they are very sure. An additional 18% said they will probably graduate. Of the students who expressed uncertainty about whether they will graduate, 19% (about 10 students out of 264 responding) cited a fear that they may not pass all the required Subject Area Tests as the reason for their uncertainty.

Impact on course effort

Administrators, teachers, and students generally agreed that students are aware they must put effort into their SATP courses because their high school diploma is at stake. Consequently, many felt that students devoted more effort to classes that have a Subject Area Test. One teacher expressed a commonly held sentiment:

It makes a big difference whether you are a SATP teacher or not. I feel that students are more serious if they are in a Subject Area class. When they come to Algebra I, they have some sense of value in the course and the tests and that influences their performance in my class.

Another teacher echoed this view: “I can see some of them put forth more effort in biology because they have to pass. But in science skills they will be like ‘whatever’ because it’s not a Subject Area Test.”

However, some teachers and students reported that students sometimes wait until the testing periods to step up their level of effort. One teacher described this situation:

It is my first year, but I can tell you that [students] start getting psycho serious at the end of March. But I want to shake them and say that if they had paid more attention in August, they would know it . . . But you go on and try to reach them.

Other students agreed. High school seniors “don’t really get serious until they find out they are not graduating,” one student explained.

Impact of SATP on student anxiety

Although administrators said they made efforts to provide students with supports to succeed on the SATP, teachers and students still reported that students felt anxiety about the exams. One of the three case study schools organizes a school rally right before the exams to help motivate students to feel good about the tests. Teachers emphasized that it is important to build students’ confidence about their ability to do well on the Subject Area Tests, as this teacher comment illustrates:

They all express a certain bit of anxiousness and what it means for them, the school, and the community, those who are at a lower level of achievement. And I think that there is an added bit of stress for those [students] because they do not know if they can do it. That is why we have the tutoring and the pep rallies, to let them know that we have the confidence that they will excel and that they are capable of doing a good job . . .

Another teacher reported encouraging students to think positively. Despite the support they receive, several students still expressed anxiety about exit exams. “It’s just pretty much stress,” said one student, summing up the attitudes of many.

Supports for Enrollment in Higher Education

As part of the case study, CEP and PSA researchers collected data about district initiatives to encourage JPS graduates to enroll in postsecondary education. We also collected data on three issues concerning the relationship between the SATP and college attendance:

- Whether and how institutions of higher education are using SATP results to inform decisions about admission or course placement
- Whether the SATP has affected student admission or access to institutions of higher education
- Whether the SATP has influenced students' plans to enroll in higher education

While JPS has a variety of initiatives aimed at promoting higher education, we found little or no association between the SATP and these initiatives.

Use of SATP in admissions and placement

Most district and school staff said they did not know whether the SATP is used by postsecondary institutions. But college interviewees reported that SATP results are not used in decisions about admissions or course placement. A higher education representative made the following comment in response to a question about the use of SATP results:

[W]e don't use them in any way. Come to think of it, I don't even know if they are reported on a student's transcript—they might be, but I just can't recall if I have ever seen them reported. We are more interested in how they do on more rigorous tests, and those designed with college in mind, the AP tests and other things like that.

Role of SATP in postsecondary preparation


According to our interviewees, the SATP plays a minimal role in preparing students for academic pursuits beyond high school. Most case study participants said they do not see a connection between the SATP and the creation of a more rigorous atmosphere in the district that emphasizes college preparation. Because the level of competency needed to pass the SATP is less than that required to succeed in college, interviewees said that JPS has undertaken other efforts to prepare more students for postsecondary education. These include a stronger focus on AP classes, dual enrollment programs that allow high school students to take college courses, and training to prepare students for the ACT college entrance exam. Schools also make efforts to provide scholarship opportunities for students and other information about financing for higher education. And all case study schools reported having partnerships with local organizations to provide additional learning opportunities for students, such as internships and tutoring.

Impact of SATP on students' college plans

Most case study participants—from district officials to students—said that although the SATP is required for high school graduation, it does not appear to have any effect on students' goals and expectations for postsecondary education. "I think that those who are interested in college are interested; the SATP just is about graduating from high school with all of your credits," said one teacher.

Students echoed this view, often noting that other things, like ACT scores, have much more bearing on their college plans. As one student observed, "the ACT is what is important—that is not close to the tests that you have to pass to graduate."

In the student survey, the SATP ranked fourth among the factors listed for getting into college; 65% of students rated the SATP as very important. High school grades were rated as the most important factor; 88% of students cited grades as very important in getting into college. Students ranked college entrance exams, such as the ACT or SAT, as second in importance (87%) and high school coursework as third (73%).



Case Study of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills in the Austin Independent School District

The Austin Independent School District is a large urban district, enrolling more than 80,000 students. A majority of AISD students are Latino and almost one-fourth are English language learners. The district has many years of experience with the exit-level exams of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills and the previous state exit exam.

In addition to collecting information from the district level, CEP focused on three high schools for this case study of exit exams in Austin. These schools were selected to participate with the help of district administrators, based on variations in their demographics and achievement levels. The schools participated on the condition that they would not be identified by name. In this report, they are referred to by the pseudonyms of Albert Collins High, Santiago Jimenez High, and Bob Wills High. This policy of anonymity was intended to encourage participants to frankly share their views of exit exams.

Significant Findings from the Austin Case Study

Several specific findings about the impact of the TAKS emerged from CEP's case study of Austin. These findings are explained in detail in the Discussion section of this case study.

- ***Increased accountability and consistency in instruction.*** In our interviews, teachers and administrators in AISD often talked about the increase in accountability associated with the TAKS exams and said they felt pressure to raise test scores. Administrators see the TAKS as a tool to ensure that teachers teach the district's curriculum consistently. In addition, district-developed instructional planning guides encourage teachers to focus instruction on the state curriculum standards and on preparation for the TAKS exams.
- ***In-class time for TAKS preparation.*** Teachers reported spending from two and six weeks each spring reviewing material likely to be covered on the exit-level TAKS exams. Because these exams are not tied to particular courses, in-class reviews sometimes cover material taught in previous grades or in classes students have not yet taken.

- ***Interventions for struggling students.*** The Austin district has implemented a tiered approach to intervention to help struggling students pass exit exams. These interventions include personalized graduation plans aimed at accelerating progress for students having difficulty; individualized TAKS study guides developed by the state to help students pass the exams; special supports for students in underperforming schools; and remediation and extra learning opportunities inside and outside of regular school hours. Administrators believe these targeted programs are helpful.
- ***Differences among schools in impact of the TAKS.*** Interviewees in the higher-performing case study school tended to see TAKS preparation as an inconvenience rather than a dominant influence, and some questioned the value of this preparation for higher-achieving students. Interviewees in lower-performing schools reported that TAKS preparation shaped every aspect of the curriculum. Some teachers in the lower-performing schools expressed concern that the time spent on TAKS-related remediation may limit some students' exposure to electives or to other instructional experiences, such as studying literature or focusing on a topic in depth.
- ***Other high school reforms.*** The Austin school district has undertaken a variety of other high school reforms that go beyond specific TAKS preparation and are intended to raise academic achievement. Among them are an initiative to redesign high schools as smaller learning communities focused on academic rigor; an international school to help immigrant students and English language learners get up to speed academically; and tutoring and mentoring assistance provided in partnership with local businesses.
- ***Student motivation and test anxiety.*** Case study participants suggested that increases in student motivation spurred by the TAKS are largely confined to grade 11. Some teachers, students, and principals expressed the view that TAKS requirements overstress students.
- ***College readiness and the TAKS.*** Although Texas higher education institutions do not use TAKS scores in their admissions process, they do use them to determine whether students are ready for college work and can be exempted from remedial courses. Students surveyed in Austin had mixed views about the importance of TAKS scores in getting into college. To help prepare students for college, AISD sponsors a wide range of programs, including a partnership with Austin Community College that offers dual enrollment courses and “pre-admission” to the college for AISD students.

Data Sources for the Case Study

CEP and PSA researchers collected four main types of data to conduct the Austin case study. (More detailed information about study methods appears in the last section of the report.)

- ***District interviews.*** In fall 2006, two researchers visited Austin to interview five key AISD district staff about programs related to TAKS exit-level exams and postsecondary education.
- ***School interviews.*** Our researchers also spent one day at each of the three participating AISD high schools in fall 2006. At each school, we interviewed administrators, a group of teachers who teach the TAKS subjects, and a group of students in grades 11 and 12 whose parents had given consent for them to participate in the study.
- ***Student surveys.*** At the three participating high schools, the researchers administered surveys to students in September and October 2006. CEP received a total of 425 completed surveys from the three schools (147 from Albert Collins, 158 from Santiago Jimenez, and 120 from Bob Wills).
- ***Community and higher education interviews.*** The researchers conducted telephone and in-person interviews with four representatives from local community organizations and higher education institutions.

Background on the District and Schools Studied

In school year 2005-06, the Austin Independent School District enrolled 81,155 students, including 20,410 high school students. Austin’s many schools include 12 high schools. As illustrated in **table 6**, the student population of the district is 55% Latino, 28% white, 14% African American, and 3% Asian. Sixty percent of the district’s students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

The three schools in our case study vary significantly in terms of their size, ethnic makeup, and poverty rates. As shown in table 6, Albert Collins High serves almost 2,700 students, while the other two schools are somewhat smaller. About two-thirds of the students at Albert Collins and half the students at Santiago Jimenez High are white—higher than the district average—while at Bob Wills High, almost three-fourths of the students are Latino. Just 8% of the students at Albert Collins come from low-income families, compared with 79% of the students at Bob Wills.

Table 6. Percentages of Students from Various Demographic Groups in the Austin Independent School District and Three Case Study Schools, 2005-06

	AISD District (81,003 students)	Albert Collins (2,673 students)	Santiago Jimenez (1,671 students)	Bob Wills (1,589 students)
Latino	55%	24%	27%	73%
White	28%	67%	51%	9%
African American	14%	4%	22%	15%
Asian	3%	4%	1%	3%
Native American	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%
Free or reduced-price lunch eligible	60%	8%	34%	79%
English language learners	24%	1%	4%	28%

Source: Texas Education Agency Academic Excellence Indicator System, 2005-06 District Performance, www.tea.state.tx.us/.

Teachers at Albert Collins and Santiago Jimenez High Schools tend to be more experienced than the typical Austin teacher. The average teacher at Collins had 14 years of experience and the average teacher at Jimenez had 15 years, compared with the AISD average of 11 years. Bob Wills High had the least experienced staff of the three case study schools, with an average of 11 years of experience.

In 2005-06, all three AISD case study schools received a 2006 state accountability rating of *Academically Acceptable*. (Possible state ratings include *Exemplary*, *Recognized*, *Academically Acceptable*, *Academically Unacceptable*, and *Not Rated*.) Albert Collins was also commended for its success in social studies and for its improvement in mathematics, while Santiago Jimenez was recognized for its success in social studies and its improvements in English language arts. Bob Wills was recognized by the state in 2005 for its improvement in English language arts and mathematics.

Both Albert Collins and Santiago Jimenez High Schools met all AYP targets in English language arts and math under the No Child Left Behind Act in 2004-05, and neither school was identified for NCLB improvement. Bob Wills, however, did not make AYP in 2004-05 and was in year 2 of NCLB improvement. Bob Wills did make AYP in fall 2006, but continues to be identified as “needs improvement” because it takes two years to exit improvement status.

Graduation rates in the three schools vary. Based on the percentage of students who were enrolled in grade 9 in 2001-02 and who graduated on time in 2004-05, graduation rates were 96% for Albert Collins, 87% for Santiago Jimenez, and 71% for Bob Wills. Across the entire Austin school district, 81% of the class of 2005 graduated from high school on time, while the dropout rate for this cohort was 6%. Average daily attendance for 2004-05 was 94%.

Students in the three schools also differ in measures of college readiness. At Albert Collins, 32% of students completed an AP or dual enrollment course in 2004-05; at Santiago Jimenez and Bob Wills, the percentages were 23% and 11%, respectively. For the class of 2005, the average ACT score were 22.8 at Collins, 21.7 at Jimenez, and 16 at Wills. The percentage of 11th graders taking the test were 92% at Collins, 74% at Jimenez, and 75% at Wills.

History of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills

In 1999, Texas began to implement a new statewide testing program, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills. The TAKS exams are standards-based exams rather than the end-of-course exams found in Mississippi and some other states. The TAKS was first administered in spring 2003, when all eligible Texas public school students were tested in mathematics (grades 3-11), reading (grades 3-9), writing (grades 4 and 7), English language arts (grades 10-11), science (grades 5, 10, and 11), and social studies (grades 8, 10, and 11). These assessments were designed to measure students’ knowledge of the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), the state’s curriculum standards to which the tests are aligned. The TAKS replaced the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills, a state assessment that had been used since 1990.

TAKS Requirements

Starting with the spring 2004 administration of the TAKS, students in grade 11 were required by law to pass four subject exams to receive a diploma from a Texas public high school. The TAKS exit-level exams assess the following subjects:

- English language arts (English III and writing)
- Social studies (early American and U.S. history)
- Mathematics (Algebra I and geometry)
- Science (biology, integrated chemistry, and physics)

Students take the TAKS exit-level exam in English language arts in February and the math, science, and social studies exams in April of 11th grade. The TAKS has three performance levels: “did not meet the standard,” “met the standard,” and “commended performance.”

The state reports test scores to districts and schools about two weeks after testing and generates confidential reports for each student as well as for schools, districts, regions, and the state. These reports include a pass/fail indication, subject-area scores, subscores for skills and content within each major subject area, and scores on individual test items. The state releases all tests, answer keys, and scoring guides every other year.

Students may retake any failed TAKS exit-level exam in July, October, February, and April after grade 11. If they meet all graduation requirements except for passing one or more TAKS exams, they may retake the exams as many times as needed after grade 12 with no age limit. Students with disabilities and English language learners may use accommodations for the exit-level exams and receive a regular diploma if they pass. In addition, the state has alternate TAKS tests for certain students with disabilities.

Students' performance on the exit exam is a factor in the state's accountability system, which includes accreditation sanctions for low-performing schools and districts. However, the TAKS 11th grade exams are not used to determine adequate yearly progress under the No Child Left Behind Act; instead, Texas uses the 10th grade TAKS tests, which are not exit exams.

TAKS Cut Scores

To help districts comply with the new graduation requirements, the state board of education phased in increasingly higher cut scores for passing, as shown in **table 7**. For 2002-03, the passing scores were within two standard errors of measure (SEMs) of the final recommended passing score of 2100 in all subjects. The next year, the passing scores were within one SEM, and in 2004-05 students were expected to achieve the recommended score. One administrator interviewed for our case study agreed with the phase-in, noting that if the state had immediately implemented the final recommended score, "our kids would never get there."

In April 2004, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board established a "college-ready" score of 2200 on the exit-level TAKS in math and English language arts.

School Year	Mathematics	English Language Arts	Social Studies	Science
2002-03	2015	2045	2033	2035
2003-04	2058	2072	2067	2068
2004-05	2100	2100	2100	2100

Source: Texas Education Agency, www.tea.state.tx.us/student.assessment/taks/standards/scalescorecutso305.pdf.

Pass Rates on the Exit-Level TAKS

In 2006, 88% of AISD 11th grade students met the standard on the English language arts exam and 78% met it in math. These rates mirror the statewide pass rates of 89% in English language arts and 78% in math. Altogether, 67% of 11th graders in the Austin district in the state met the standard on all TAKS tests taken; the statewide rate was 66%. The district's pass rates in other subjects range from 76% in science to 93% in social studies, as shown in **table 8**.

Table 8 also displays pass rates for the three case study schools. Students at Albert Collins tend to do well on the TAKS exit-level exams. The percentage of 11th graders who met the TAKS standard in this school in 2005-06 ranged from 90% in science to 98% in social studies; 82% met the standard on all tests taken.

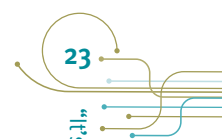


Table 8.

Percentage of 11th Graders Passing Exit-Level TAKS Exams, 2005-06

TAKS Subject Area	Percentage of Students Who Met the TAKS Passing Standard*				
	State of Texas	AISD	Albert Collins High	Santiago Jimenez High	Bob Wills High
English language arts	89%	88%	93%	96%	76%
Mathematics	78%	78%	93%	89%	68%
Science	76%	76%	90%	85%	60%
Social studies	94%	93%	98%	98%	89%
Met standard on all tests taken	66%	67%	82%	81%	48%

* These percentages include 11th graders who passed the test in the primary spring administration, plus June 2005 and October 2006 first-time testers who passed all four tests.

Source: Texas Education Agency, 2005-06 Academic Excellence Indicator System School Performance Reports.

Students at Santiago Jimenez High also tended to do well in general on the TAKS exit-level exams; the percentage who met the standard in 2005-06 ranged from 85% in science to 98% in social studies. Eighty-one percent of 11th graders in this school met the standard on all tests taken.

Students at Bob Wills faced greater challenges as a group in passing the exit exams. The percentage of 11th graders who met the TAKS standard in 2005-06 ranged from 60% in science to 89% in social studies. Less than half (48%) of the students in this school met the standard on all tests taken.

Discussion of Findings from the Austin Case Study

Several findings emerged from the interviews and surveys conducted in the Austin Independent School District. This section of the report discusses these findings in detail.

Increased Accountability

In our interviews, teachers and administrators in AISD often talked about increased accountability. Teachers felt pressure to cover the required curriculum, while principals felt pressure to ensure teachers taught the curriculum. Teachers, principals, and district administrators all felt pressure to raise test scores. Administrators viewed the TAKS as a powerful tool to ensure that teachers taught the district curriculum. As one administrator said:

It's hard to convince teachers to concentrate on science, for example, if it's not tested in their grade. Over time, it's not stressed as much, and you get gaps, and by the time a kid's tested on it, he struggles. It's difficult for teachers to take it seriously if they aren't being made accountable for it.

Another administrator observed that the TAKS has had a “big impact on teachers,” as more teachers have come to understand they are accountable for the level of instruction. “It’s different now from the time when all [teachers] had to do was give a grade,” the administrator added.

The public availability of test scores has also increased accountability for administrators and teachers. Said one administrator: “[T]he test has made things more rigorous . . . Now we have no choice because the data doesn’t lie.” Another administrator reported that “the public doesn’t tolerate [students] failing the 11th grade test. The community was willing to do whatever, even additional funding.” And a teacher made this observation: “We have to be accountable if students don’t pass the test. We are given a list and have to answer why.”

Instructional Changes and Student Supports

The Austin school district has implemented a range of policies and instructional approaches to ensure that all students pass the TAKS exit-level exams. These instructional changes and student supports include the following:

- Instructional planning guides (IPGs) for teachers
- In-class review time for TAKS-related material
- Use of assessment data to guide instruction
- Individualized plans for students
- Support classes and remediation opportunities
- District initiatives to promote high school improvement

Instructional planning guides

In 2002, AISD implemented instructional planning guides that give teachers lesson plans for each nine-week (elementary schools) or six-week (secondary schools) period of the school year. These planning guides detail skills that students should learn; the guides are available in all grades for English language arts, math, science, and social studies, and in grades K-8 for instructional technology. The guides mirror the district curriculum, which is aligned to the TEKS, the state’s learning standards. Austin revamped its curriculum to better prepare students for the TAKS exams and ensure consistent instruction across the district. As a result, the entire curriculum became TAKS-focused, and teaching and learning in the district have been reoriented to make the state standards and assessments the ultimate priority.

In our interviews, district and school administrators reported that the IPGs create a uniform curriculum and a sense of accountability. While teachers are given some leeway over their own teaching, administrators said that the IPGs have been a useful guide, especially for less experienced teachers. As one administrator noted:

When I came here, we didn’t have a language of learning or a theory of action. So I built in a scope and sequence, where teachers can pull down what needs to be covered. It empowers teachers and principals to teach the standards over a period of time, and it doesn’t micromanage. But all are still expected to have the students learn the standards over a particular period of time.

Another administrator pointed out that the TAKS compels teachers to teach all of the required curriculum, not just the parts that interest them:

[When I was teaching], some [teachers] weren't teaching the entire curriculum because of the passion they had for a particular subject. If they liked the Civil War, they spent more time on that, so it brings uniformity in curriculum.

The IPGs also encourage teachers to focus on teaching the TEKS standards and preparing students for the TAKS exams. Most teachers indicated that their instruction is TAKS-focused, from the structure of their courses to the TAKS-style questions in their classroom assessments and homework. “We teach to the test,” “we focus everything on the test,” and “we are totally TAKS-driven” were common remarks made in our teacher interviews.¹ One administrator characterized this new focus as follows:

I'm impressed with the development of the test; it's not an end-of-course exam but it touches on all of the objectives taught. Teachers sometimes find difficulty in how to teach it and not accelerate through the process; it's the curriculum that is being tested. The test questions require the child to take the question, assimilate it, and come up with an answer based on the knowledge, so it's not a rote test. For the math part, there are lots of reading and word problems. The [English language arts] test, for example, has essay and short-answer questions, which require them to interpret literature with short answer responses, and that requires a lot of higher-order thinking.

In-class review time for the TAKS

In the weeks before the TAKS exams each year, teachers break from the guided curriculum to review content that might appear on the tests. These reviews typically focus on material covered in the current class or in previous classes in the same subject and include practice with old TAKS items.

Teachers in our case study reported spending anywhere from two to six weeks each spring intensively reviewing topics that are likely to be covered on the TAKS. Even with the pacing in the IPGs, teachers still viewed this review period as necessary for students to pass the TAKS. Because the TAKS exit-level exams are standards-based assessments rather than end-of-course exams, teachers said that sometimes it is a challenge to make sure students have mastered all the necessary content before testing begins. One teacher reported taking two weeks before the TAKS to “stop to practice everything,” while another said that “a month before the test, I will start with warm-up [questions], and I'll go over what they will ask them on the test.”

Students similarly reported that teachers used specific strategies in class to help them prepare for the TAKS exams. As displayed in **table 9**, 76% of the students surveyed in Austin reported practicing sample TAKS test questions during class, and 75% said they spent class time reviewing test-taking skills.

Because the TAKS exit-level exams are taken at designated times during high school rather than at the end of specific courses, TAKS in-class reviews sometimes cover material from previous grades or from courses students have not yet taken. Teachers often noted how this influenced the curriculum in their classes. “A third of the questions are on 8th grade American history up to 1877,” said one teacher, “so we have to spend time reviewing things they had two years ago.” Some administrators admitted this was a concern, as this comment illustrates:

¹ When AISD district officials reviewed this report, they felt it important to emphasize that “teaching is TEKS-driven” as opposed to TAKS-driven. We chose to include the original wording of participants because the term “TAKS-driven” reflects the interview data.

The science test covers information students had in the 9th grade but they don't see it until the 11th grade. Biology won't even come up during their classes and that presents a challenge. So teachers may have to integrate biology in the curriculum in chemistry or do a crash course a week or two before the exam.

Table 9.

Percentage of Students Reporting Various Types of Classroom Test Preparation for the TAKS Exit-Level Exams

Which of the following strategies have been used in your classes to help prepare you for the TAKS? (315 students responding)

We practice sample TAKS test questions during class	76%
Teachers spend time reviewing test-taking skills	75%
Old questions from the TAKS tests are on class tests	58%
Old questions from the TAKS tests are assigned for homework	52%

Source: Center on Education Policy, survey of students in the Austin Independent School District, fall 2006.

27

"It's Different Now": How Exit Exams Are Affecting Teaching and Learning in Jackson and Austin

Use of assessment data to guide instruction

Many policies in Austin appear to be driven by data. In addition to administering the TAKS exams, the district gives subject-specific benchmark tests at the beginning, middle, and end of each year. Scores from the benchmark and TAKS tests are entered into a custom-built student information system that displays data by learning objective and subject level. Teachers and schools receive student performance data from the benchmark tests and the TAKS. District and school administrators encourage teachers to use these assessment results to adapt their instruction to assist struggling students with more precision. "We want to see how kids are doing on objectives at various points and determine which level of intervention they need," said one administrator. "Data are helpful if we use them and get them to the teacher in time." Another administrator described how data can be used strategically:

Some principals and leadership teams have long been avid consumers of data, but by providing everyone with a baseline, some of them will go into incredible analyses to figure what needs to be done with their schools. We're being strategic and not wanton with the data; we're not just throwing interventions at them.

Teachers also reported using data from the benchmark and TAKS tests to better focus their instruction and determine which students should be referred for extra remediation.

Individualized student plans

AISD has implemented structured interventions to help students who are struggling in the classroom and to ensure that they have the supports needed to pass the TAKS exit-level exams. The district has a three-tiered method of intervention that is designed to be an academic safety net for students and includes the following steps:

- Classroom interventions with modifications and/or differentiation of the instructional planning guides, including multiple instructional strategies and small-group instruction
- Academic supports outside the classroom to target students' identified learning gaps; these may include intensive small-group instruction, tutoring targeted to students' needs, assessment-based intervention, and extended instruction periods
- More intensive extended learning opportunities, including individual or group instruction, additional courses or classes, an Impact Team assessment and plan, credit recovery or summer school, or a referral to special education by the local support team

In keeping with a 2003 state law, AISD also designs personal graduation plans for secondary school students who do not pass one of the TAKS exams or are at risk of dropping out. These plans aim to help students perform on grade level by the end of the school year. The plans include several specific actions: (1) identify educational goals for the student; (2) include diagnostic, monitoring, and intervention information and other evaluation strategies; (3) designate an intensive instructional program; (4) address parental participation and expectations for the student; and (5) provide innovative methods to promote the student's advancement, such as flexible scheduling, alternative environments, online instruction, and other interventions proven to accelerate learning.

Since 2004, the Texas Education Agency has provided free, individualized study guides to high school seniors who have not passed all the required TAKS exams. The state sends the guides to districts after each administration of the grade 11 TAKS. The guides are customized, based on the student's individual test scores. The guides explain the student's scores by objective in each subject area. They include a personal study planner to help students organize their studying, as well as customized study sections for each subject area in which students fell short of the standard. In addition, the guides contain a tutoring guide so that teachers, tutors, and parents can help students work through the study sections.

Through its High School Completion and Success Grants program, the state also provides additional services to students in high schools with low percentages of students going on to college. Plans developed through these grants ensure that students at risk of not graduating from high school receive instruction from highly qualified teachers, have access to online diagnostic and assessment instruments, and receive accelerated instruction in areas of academic weakness.

Support classes and remediation

Consistent with Austin's three-tiered intervention model, students who fail any portion of the TAKS exams receive remediation outside of the classroom. Remediation outside class is also available to students before they take exit-level exams, if they are struggling in core subject classes leading to the TAKS. The following types of remediation opportunities are available:

- ***Double-blocked classes.*** Schools place students who failed a TAKS exam in double-blocked classes, including a regular subject class and a second class focused specifically on TAKS material in the same subject. Sometimes this leaves little time for other courses, as one administrator explained:

For freshmen and sophomore students who have failed the core areas of math and science, there's no time for social studies and geography. Spring recovery is mandatory, with double blocking and all-day Saturday school.

- **Extra support classes during the school day.** Other students who have failed or are at risk of failing a TAKS exam may be pulled out of elective classes to participate in special intensive preparation classes before the TAKS.
- **Tutoring outside of class hours. Students who need additional academic support can receive TAKS assistance before and after school and during lunch.** Usually this involves small-group tutoring led by a teacher. Schools also offer Saturday review classes and tutoring. In addition, students who failed a TAKS exam may participate in intensive “TAKS camps” in the summer before their retest. However, both teachers and administrators commented on the difficulty of getting students to attend these after-school and summer sessions. Of the 308 Austin students responding to a survey question about tutoring, 72% answered either “very true” or “somewhat true” when asked if they had too many other responsibilities (such as job, family, etc.) to attend a TAKS test preparation program.

School and district administrators reported that the combination of early identification of student needs, benchmark tests, and intensive academic supports during and outside of regular school hours have helped students meet the TAKS graduation requirements. As one administrator told us:

Many schools do targeted remediation work involving tutorials or specific classroom work targeted at students’ weaknesses. I think the remedial programs are effective because very few students fail to graduate because of the TAKS . . . [I]t is because of these interventions that they are able to recover them.

The students we interviewed and surveyed seemed to agree. Of the students responding to our survey, 88% agreed or strongly agreed that they are well-prepared for the TAKS, and 75% agreed or strongly agreed that their classes cover the material tested on the TAKS.

While administrators believed the TAKS interventions and supports were successful, they also acknowledged they were costly. One administrator revealed:

We’ve aligned the curriculum for the outcome to pass the TAKS test. And as we move from year to year, we spend a lot of money—probably about a million dollars for recovery of course work. If we don’t do that, they won’t be prepared for TAKS in their junior year. If a sophomore comes in, we would have spent about 3 million dollars.

Some administrators justified the cost based on the needs of their students, whom they often described as having skill gaps. One administrator reported:

[T]he way the test is designed, it can be difficult for some to succeed. A lot of them missed skills earlier on, and it’s hard, especially with the sequential nature of math, to get them over the hump. We’ll spend time to get them there.

Influence of Teaching to the TAKS on Curriculum and Instruction

Although all high schools in AISD implement the strategies described above, a pattern emerged when we compared all three schools. Our interviews, primarily those with teachers, suggest that the impact of TAKS preparation on the school day and curriculum may vary based on school performance.

Teachers in the highest-performing case study school (Albert Collins), which serves more white students and fewer low-income students than the other two schools, were more likely to view TAKS exam preparation as a burden that interrupted instruction than were teachers in the other two schools. Teachers at Albert Collins reported spending less time on test preparation. “We take about two weeks and stop and practice everything,” said one teacher, adding that the school is “fortunate” in this respect because other schools devote more weeks to TAKS preparation.

Teachers in different schools also described the influence of TAKS on curriculum and instruction in different ways. For example, one teacher at Albert Collins said of the instructional planning guides that “you don’t have to follow it to a tee, but you have to cover it at some point.” By contrast, a teacher in one of the other schools reported that “we teach to the test. We focus everything to the test.”

Furthermore, students at Albert Collins High who participated in AP courses spent less time on TAKS review, suggesting that TAKS preparation is not as valuable for higher-achieving students. When questioned about the amount of time dedicated to reviewing TAKS material, one teacher in this school responded that students in AP classes “take about a week.” An administrator supported the notion that AP students spend significantly less time on review for the TAKS: “The pre-AP kids . . . tend to do well on the test and usually get ‘commended.’ They’ll just do a small review, and it’s not as specific or intense.”

Teachers in different schools also talked differently about their students’ performance on TAKS. One teacher at Albert Collins High said that “we want our kids to be exemplars, as many as possible.” Teachers from Santiago Jimenez and Bob Wills—the lower-performing case study schools that enroll significantly more students of color and low-income students—often commented that “everything in the curriculum is affected by the TAKS,” as one teacher put it. In interviews, these teachers often focused on students’ academic deficits and maintained that an intense focus on TAKS skills was necessary because many students struggled with basic skills.

Teachers at Santiago Jimenez and Bob Wills High Schools also noted how the TAKS had dramatically changed the curriculum. Some teachers voiced concerns about these changes, as captured by the following comment:

*The part I regret is that we don’t have time for any of the longer pieces like we used to have, like *The Scarlet Letter*. I like the romantics and other literature but we don’t have time to cover it all. We were told to focus on shorter pieces, like literary and expository things. There is value in it but it takes away from the depth. It has taken the shift away from the canon of literature and an historical look at literature to more skill-based learning. Most of our students come with weakened skills, so before you read *The Scarlet Letter*, you have to be able to read.*

Another teacher explained how changes in one part of the curriculum affected other areas: “It also spills over into history,” the teacher said. “Broad, general knowledge suffers. I can’t say, ‘Remember when you read in English . . .’”

Still, teachers at Santiago Jimenez and Bob Wills reiterated that these changes were necessary because their students did not have the basic skills needed to pass the TAKS. Some commented specifically on students’ reading comprehension skills. “Reading comprehension is a problem,” said one teacher, adding that in “every single problem, they are being asked to read.”

Some teachers expressed particular concern and frustration about the demands the TAKS places on the district’s sizeable population of English language learners, as the following comment indicates:

Writing is the hardest thing [English language learners] do. Most can't write, but not for lack of effort, and they are the most anxious about it . . . We have several juniors who will take the test but who can't speak English. I called to find out but was told that there was nothing that could be done because they had all their requirements.

Another teacher voiced concern about the limited amount of time available for some ELLs to learn the material being tested. “[T]he test poses lots of constraints for ELL students because they have to compress 12 years of learning into two,” said the teacher. “They have the language barrier and some of them bump up against the age limit.”

Some teachers at Jimenez and Wills expressed concern about whether the overall focus on remediation had altered the curriculum in less than positive ways. One teacher compared the experiences of students in lower-performing schools with those of students in more advantaged schools:

I look at my daughter's experience at her school, which is a magnet school. She took the TAKS and they moved on. She was able to get the depth of the curriculum. But here it hurts the kids that go off to college and who have to compete with her and others like her.

Specifically, teachers pointed out that students may lose the opportunity to take electives, which might actually hurt them in the college admission process. When asked how changes associated with the TAKS affect students who may want to go to college, one teacher asserted that “it rips them off!”

Even some administrators in the lower-performing schools noted the pervasive influence of the TAKS on curriculum and instruction. Among their comments: “It’s all we do.” “It influences classroom instruction a lot.” “Every day and everything focuses on TAKS.”

A representative from a community organization that sponsors professional development for AISD teachers echoed some teachers’ frustrations with the prescriptive nature of teaching to the TAKS. This person also mentioned concerns from the business community that the types of skills being taught in school do not fully reflect the skills needed in the workforce:

Exit testing is distorting classroom instruction in a way that administrators and teachers are not happy, especially teachers . . . They tell us that they don't feel that students are learning information on a deeper level. Teachers feel a loss of control over students' educational experiences. And I think the pressure of testing is bearing down on [students]. They aren't having a typical educational experience their siblings had five to ten years ago and certainly not the same one as their parents.

Additional District Initiatives to Support High School Success

AISD has undertaken a variety of other initiatives beyond TAKS-specific preparation to improve high school achievement. One notable example, the High School Redesign initiative, seeks to create smaller learning communities, focus on academic rigor, improve adult-student relationships, implement more relevant schoolwork, and produce graduates who are prepared for postsecondary success.

Another district initiative, the International High School, provides intensive supports to Austin’s ELL and immigrant students, a growing group that often has difficulty passing the TAKS exams and that tends to have low graduation rates. When students leave the International High School, they are placed in other

AISD high schools. However, they still may need targeted assistance because they may not be proficient enough in English to pass the TAKS. Other schools provide resources such as integrated block scheduling, ESL teachers, and TAKS workbooks in Spanish.

AISD also partners with the Austin business community to improve all students' skills and prepare them for postsecondary success. In the past decade, businesses invested in the infrastructure of public schools to help meet the demand for workers in the area's high tech industries. Several public-private partnerships blossomed, and many of them continue to play a significant role in helping students achieve academic success. Local businesses have partnered with schools to provide mentoring and tutoring assistance in addition to financial supports.

One community-based organization has a long history of working to inspire collaboration among businesses and school districts in central Texas on workforce development issues. The organization also provides professional development for math and science teachers during the summer, showing them ways to incorporate industry and the community into the teaching process within the framework of the curriculum standards.

Effects of TAKS on Student Attitudes about Education

Perhaps as a result of the supports available, students in AISD have a relatively high pass rate on the exit-level TAKS. Interviewees did not characterize the TAKS as a serious threat to students' high school completion. While interviewees mentioned a few cases of students not passing the exit-level TAKS, these students often take advantage of retest opportunities before giving up altogether on their high school diploma.

Case study participants suggested that increases in student motivation due to the TAKS is largely confined to grade 11. Although students take TAKS tests that are not exit exams in other grades, typically students show little concern about their performance until the tests count for graduation in grade 11, according to study participants. This perceived tendency of students to focus mainly on the grade 11 TAKS has raised some concerns among administrators because the grade 10 TAKS exams are the high school tests that count for NCLB accountability. Teachers also see a risk of students being inadequately prepared for the exit-level exams if students postpone preparation until grade 11.

Some teachers, students, and principals believe that TAKS requirements overstress students. Interviewees noted that high-stakes assessments can create an unproductive motivational environment in which students, who have been tested since 3rd grade, become "burned out" and less enthusiastic about school. One teacher complained, "The kids are 'TAKSed' out. They are like, 'What are we going to get out of this?'" Some students acknowledged they were burned out; TAKS "makes it too competitive," said one student. Another student said that by the end of the review tests, "you don't want to go back and look at it."

As the test approaches, students become more concerned about passing the test, according to some case study participants. One administrator observed:

TAKS puts a lot of pressure on [students] because it's a one-time test. For the freshmen and sophomores, they don't look too far down the road. When they become juniors, their stress level changes.

Some interviewees suggested that lower-achieving students may be affected differently by the tests than their higher-achieving peers. Students who normally do well on tests generally worry less about the TAKS, according to teachers, students, and principals. But lower-achieving students may see the exit-level TAKS as an intimidating challenge. "Bright kids aren't concerned about it, but those who struggle are worried about it," said one teacher. "It's human nature."

While lower-achieving students may feel overburdened by the tests, higher-achieving students may feel that they are not being challenged enough and lose interest in school, according to some teachers. One teacher commented:

Some students who can do well suffer at the expense of students who struggle with basic skills. We have students who have lots of problems with basic skills, and time is taken in the classroom to review for them.

Another teacher observed that “the kids who seem to learn more quickly shut down when we start covering the TAKS exam. In the AP classes, there is not much given to the TAKS exam.”

Students also commented on how higher-achieving students are affected by a schoolwide focus on TAKS. One student maintained:

It hinders upper-level classes. There will be a six-week period that will focus on TAKS. We have an AP class and they are taking time out for TAKS. They don't cater to the education styles of students. There are resource classes for students who have failed but there is not enough specialization. You are holding some students back and not pushing some students enough.

Another student asserted that “the TAKS is geared towards a pretty basic level, and it is sort of a waste of time for us to have to go back and take this test.”

Supports for Enrollment in Higher Education

As part of the Austin case study, CEP and PSA researchers collected information about AISD initiatives to encourage graduates to enroll in postsecondary education. In addition, we collected data on the use of TAKS results in higher education admissions.

AISD initiatives

The Austin Independent School District has implemented a wide range of programs to help prepare students for the academic demands of college and encourage them to enroll in college. These initiatives are independent of other district initiatives that help students pass the TAKS exams.

AISD's College Readiness Initiative coordinates a range of programs, including the following:

- The Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program targets students in the academic middle of their class for a rigorous course of study, encouragement, and academic support. The program starts in grade 7; its goal is to assure that all AVID seniors will apply and be accepted to a four-year university. The program also helps the students apply for scholarships.
- The foundation-sponsored Project ADVANCE (Assess, Decide, Visit, Apply Now for your College Education) assists students and their parents through the college admission process, beginning in middle school.
- The Dell Math Academy, also sponsored by a foundation, seeks to increase the number of students who make a successful transition to high school, improve their achievement, encourage them to pursue a college education, and pair successful students with a counselor or other resource.

- AP Strategies works with high school staff and students to increase the number of students enrolling in Advanced Placement courses and raise their AP test scores to 3 or better.

AISD carries out other college preparatory programs. GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) works with 8th graders and their parents for five years. Operating in 10 Austin middle and junior high schools, the program focuses on study skills enhancement, career exploration, job shadowing, financial planning, and scholarship opportunities. Project SOS (Supporting Optimal Scholarships) seeks to increase college attendance among minority students by improving AP participation and performance among low-income students.

Through a partnership with AISD, Austin Community College (ACC) offers two programs to encourage students to go to college. The first, Early College Start, allows high school juniors and seniors to earn college credit by taking up to two ACC courses per semester at their high schools, free of tuition and other fees. Students may also earn credit toward high school graduation requirements by completing dual credit courses. The second program, College Connections, pre-admits AISD students to community college during their senior year of high school. The program recruits students who may not have considered going to college, are intimidated by the admission process, or may not understand financial aid options for attending college.

Use of TAKS Exit-Level Results in College Admissions

Texas postsecondary institutions do not use TAKS scores in the admission process. However, the TAKS exit-level exams include a higher education readiness component that indicates students' readiness for college-level work. Students who achieve a score of 2200 on the English and mathematics portions of TAKS and a score of 3 on the writing component are exempt from taking developmental courses in college. Some administrators believe that higher TAKS scores can save parents money. As one administrator emphasized, "those remedial courses don't count for college credit, but they are a part of tuition. So the goal is to lift students' scores so they won't have to be placed in those classes."

Some district officials and community stakeholders observed that a cut score on a test may not be the best indicator of college readiness; nor is it always clear how colleges use the scores. One administrator spoke to this concern:

There's a possibility the state will use that measure to rate high schools in the future, and that would be unfortunate because the test was aligned with curriculum, which was never meant to be a measure of future success in college. TAKS in some instances are on a scale higher and better developed than some college entrance exams, so what are you really measuring? At some point, there could be additional questions on the TAKS to measure for college readiness, but there needs to be funding to develop the items and time to check reliability, as well as training and awareness.

Overall, most case study participants did not believe that TAKS scores alone influenced students' decisions about higher education. But a few raised concerns about the negative impact that TAKS could have on students' decisions about higher education. For example, one teacher made the following comment:

It makes kids feel bad that are not going to college. I mean these kids have no alternative to speak of. You are either college bound or you are here. What do we do with all the kids who need to pass the TAKS? There are good kids who have worked hard and are just slow. They are stymied or nailed, and it has to be horrible.

Table 10.

Student Attitudes about the Importance of Various Factors in College Admissions

How important do you think the following factors are in getting into college? (403 students responding)			
Factors that could affect college admissions	Percentage of students choosing response		
	Very important	Somewhat important	Not important
High school grades	79%	19%	3%
Admission tests (ACT or SAT)	74%	22%	5%
College admissions essays	69%	25%	6%
High school coursework	59%	34%	7%
Extracurricular activities	51%	43%	7%
Teacher or counselor recommendations	47%	46%	8%
TAKS test scores	33%	33%	35%
Family income	31%	37%	32%
Athletic achievement	21%	44%	35%
Race or ethnic background	16%	35%	49%

Source: Center on Education Policy, survey of students in the Austin Independent School District, fall 2006.

The Austin student survey yielded mixed responses about the importance of TAKS test scores for college admission, as shown in **table 10**. One-third (33%) of the responding students believed their TAKS scores to be a “very important” factor for getting into college, and another 33% viewed them as “somewhat important.” However, 35% of students surveyed rated TAKS scores as “not important” in getting into college. The students we surveyed cited high school grades as the most important factor in college admissions.





Case Study Methods

Study Questions and Design

In October 2005, CEP convened a meeting of experts on high school education and research methodology to discuss and make recommendations on the key issues to address during data collection and analysis. The following study questions emerged from these recommendations:

Supports for high school success

- What supports are available to encourage high school completion and help students pass the exit exams required for graduation?
- What targeted programs have been developed to help poor students and students of color?

Student engagement in learning

- In what ways are exit exams influencing high school completion patterns?
- In what ways are exit exams influencing students' postsecondary educational aspirations?

Pipeline to postsecondary education

- What supports are available to encourage postsecondary education and prepare students for college?
- In what ways do local postsecondary institutions use exit exams for decisions about admissions, course placement, or scholarships?
- What is the perceived effect of exit exams on applications, remediation, and student achievement in local colleges and universities?

To answer these questions, CEP developed a study plan and a set of instruments to collect data. In collaboration with Policy Studies Associates, we collected data from the following sources in each of the two participating school districts:

- Interviews with key district administrators
- Interviews with principals of three high schools, representing a range of high schools in the district
- Group interviews with about five teachers in each of the three high schools

- Group interviews with up to 10 students in grades 11 and 12 in the three schools
- Interviews with representatives of community organizations that help to prepare students for exit exams or for college
- Interviews with representatives of local higher education institutions
- Surveys of up to 150 students in grades 11 and 12 in each of the three schools

Table 11 shows the number of teachers and students interviewed in the Jackson and Austin schools.

Interviews with district administrators focused on policies and programs related to exit exams. The principal interviews and teacher group interviews provided information about instruction and resources to prepare students for exit exams, as well as perceptions of the effects of the exams on student performance and decisions to pursue postsecondary education. Both the student group interviews and the student surveys asked students to reflect on their experiences with exit exams and their plans after high school. In addition, our researchers interviewed staff at local postsecondary institutions and community organizations about district partnerships and initiatives targeting high school students.

Table 11 Number of Teachers and Students Interviewed in Case Study Schools		
School	Jackson Interviews	
	Number of Teachers	Number of Students
Elmore James	4	6
Muddy Waters	5	6
Charlie Patton	2	5
School	Austin Interviews	
	Number of Teachers	Number of Students
Albert Collins	6	8
Santiago Jimenez	8	9
Bob Wills	5	10

Source: Center on Education Policy, January 2007.

Data Collection

District Approval

In accordance with the external research policies of the Jackson Public Schools and the Austin Independent School District, our research team submitted a study proposal to the research department of each district in late 2005 and secured approval in early 2006. As part of the research agreements, districts were assured that in all reporting, the names of the schools, district and school staff, students, and other individuals would not be identifiable and would remain confidential. In addition, districts were informed of CEP's policy of permitting the district to review reports for accuracy prior to publication, and were told that findings would be made available to the districts. Participants in both AISD and JPS had the opportunity to review the inquiry and provide feedback.

Once the districts had approved the study proposal in spring 2006, researchers traveled to Jackson and to Austin to interview district staff and representatives of community organizations and higher education institutions. Additional interviews with community organization and higher education representatives were conducted by telephone through fall 2006. These education representatives were also given assurances of confidentiality by CEP.

School Approval

Our research team collaborated with district staff to select three high schools in each district to participate in this study. Schools were selected to represent a range of demographic characteristics and achievement levels in the district. Information about the study was sent to each school to solicit the principal's consent for data collection activities at the school.

In collaboration with each school's principal, we identified a school staff member (such as a counselor or teacher) to serve as study liaison. Our research team worked with this liaison to develop a plan for securing parental consent for students to participate in the survey in a way that was consistent with district procedures.

We also coordinated with the study liaison to schedule a day for two researchers to visit the school to interview the principal and conduct group interviews with teachers and students. Researchers from both Policy Studies Associate and CEP collected interview data. In Jackson Public Schools, these interviews were conducted and surveys were administered in spring 2006. Because the high schools in Austin were busy in spring 2006 with such activities as administering tests and preparing proposals for the district's High School Redesign initiative, we agreed with the district's recommendation to delay data collection in AISD schools until the beginning of the 2006-07 school year.

Survey Demographic Data

Table 12 provides data about the students we surveyed in Jackson and Austin. The demographics of the students should be considered when evaluating the survey results.

Table 12. Percentage of Students Surveyed Who Reported Various Demographic Characteristics

Student Characteristics	Jackson Public Schools (264 students responding, spring 2006)	Austin Independent School District (418 students responding, fall 2006)
Grade 11	42%	41%
Grade 12	58%	59%
Female	56%	54%
Male	44%	46%
Black	97%	9%
White	2%	50%
Asian or Pacific Islander	1%	5%
American Indian or Alaskan Native	0%	1%
Hispanic	0%	35%
Does not participate in English as a Second Language (ESL)	99%	94%
Participates in ESL	1%	6%
Learned English as a first language	98%	76%
Did not know English as a first language	2%	24%

Source: Center on Education Policy, surveys of students in the Jackson Public Schools and the Austin Independent School District.

Limitations of the Study

The method of selecting students to interview and survey varied by school. Because of the challenge of obtaining consent and securing survey responses, the student survey and interview data collected reflect a convenience sample rather than a representative sample. Although the schools selected for the study represented a range of the schools in each district, it is likely that the students who were surveyed and interviewed within each school represent a select group of highly motivated, and perhaps high-achieving, students. Because of these considerations, student data presented in this report focus on themes consistent with those identified through other data sources, rather than themes unique to student respondents.

Credits and Acknowledgments

This report was written by Dalia Zabala, CEP research associate, and Angela Minnici, CEP senior research associate, with assistance in research and writing from Policy Study Associates staff. The PSA team was led by Christina A. Russell, senior research associate, and included Jennifer C. Johnson and Dwayne L. Smith (research associates), and Kolajo P. Afolabi and Mark A. Wilson (research analysts). Nancy Kober, a CEP consultant, edited the report.

This study of exit exams in two districts has been sponsored by the Ford Foundation. We are grateful for this assistance, which has enabled us to study the impact of exit exams in greater depth at the district level. We also draw on general resources from The George Gund Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and the Phi Delta Kappa International Foundation. The statements made and the views expressed in this report are solely the responsibility of the Center.

Based in Washington, D.C. and founded by Jack Jennings in January 1995, the Center on Education Policy is a national, independent advocate for public education and for more effective public schools. The Center works to help Americans better understand the role of public education in a democracy and the need to improve the academic quality of public schools. The Center does not represent any special interests. Instead the Center helps citizens make sense of the conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create conditions that will lead to better public schools.

© Center on Education Policy February 2007

www.cep-dc.org



Center on Education Policy
1001 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 522
Washington, D.C. 20036

tel: 202.822.8065
fax: 202.822.6008

e: cep-dc@cep-dc.org
w: www.cep-dc.org