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OPINION > COMMENTARY

# Texas, don't throw out the STAAR exam just because you don't like the results

Texas needs a way to compare students' educational achievement.



A student at Spring Creek Elementary in Dallas prepares for the STAAR test with a word exercise. Staff photo by DAVID WOO/DMN

By Anne Wicks and Eva Chiang  
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Texas Rep. Matt Shaheen has vowed to lead the charge to replace the State of Texas Academic Assessment of Readiness (STAAR) exam with a different kind of test. If you [read his critique of the STAAR](#), you would swear that Texas' annual exams are as valid as a Russian Twitter bot.

Shaheen is wrong in his criticism of the STAAR, but he is right that teachers benefit from using a second type of test to ensure students are on track throughout the academic year.

The STAAR test is a summative test designed to provide a yearly snapshot of student progress that allows us to compare groups of students by race, gender, geography and more. It also is designed to show us —Texas taxpayers and voters — the progress of students year-over-year on state standards.

Shaheen, a Republican representing Plano, suggests that we need an entirely new test that instead adapts to each student's level. Adaptive tests are commonly used as formative assessments. Formative tests produce real-time data that help to inform a teacher's instruction to ensure that students are on track over time. But, those tests typically don't let us compare the progress of one group of students with another.

If you are participating in a fitness challenge at your exercise studio, you likely weighed yourself at the start, and you will weigh yourself at the end. That is equivalent to your STAAR results. If you and your coach wanted to check your progress part way through, you might do an interim weigh in and review your attendance and food log. You would use that information to change your approach during the challenge to make sure you are on track. That is the equivalent of an adaptive and formative test.

Success requires using both sources of information — and great teaching uses both approaches. STAAR is a valid summative test, aligned with Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for each subject area and, at this point, giving Texans the benefit of seeing student progress over time.

Shaheen criticizes the STAAR as flawed, citing a study by the Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk at the University of Texas at Austin to make his point that the test isn't readable for students at the appropriate grade level. The study actually says little research exists on how to measure the readability of questions, but the passages are readable.

If Shaheen is upset that far too many Texas students are behind, particularly students of color and English language learners, then we share his outrage. If he is upset at the test for showing these gaps, then that is like getting angry with the thermometer when you are running a fever.

Of course, TEA should strive to make the STAAR exam stronger over time, updating it as new information warrants changes. And teachers should have access to valid formative assessments to guide their day-to-day instruction. But we should not toss out a valid test that helps us understand whether all students are on track for future opportunity and success.

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