

Texas educators demand halt to in-person state standardized testing

Texas Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
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Last week, the state of Texas sent tens of thousands of students to schools in order to take the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) test, a standardized annual exam. The Texas Education Agency plans to send students back to take STAAR tests in April and May, when even by optimistic estimates children and young adults will likely still be waiting to be vaccinated.

We, the Texas Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, categorically oppose the plans for standardized testing in May and denounce the recent tests as a grave threat to the lives and well-being of Texas students, educators, and their families. A quick look at last year's STAAR English I and II examinations reveals the extent of the health danger; in 2019 over 200,000 pupils took the exams, with over 460,000 taking them in May.

There has been a surge of opposition against taking the test in the spring in response to the TEA's continued statements supporting the test, with some parents refusing to send their kids back into crowded classrooms to take the test. Many teachers, parents and students have rightfully called the test "useless" and "pointless," noting the obvious danger in the context of the pandemic.

The state government's claim that they are conducting the STAAR tests out of concern for students' welfare is fraudulent. Sending students back to school buildings during a pandemic will needlessly put thousands of lives at risk, including those of teachers proctoring the exam. Further, the results will then be used to insist that students are "failing" due to remote learning and must return to in-person learning in the spring. Already schools and districts have released statements citing high failure rates in the last grading period as a justification for restarting face-to-face teaching. If the state was truly concerned about test scores, it would have put much more funding into online schooling as well as public schools in general instead of trying to shut down schools.

Poor performance on the STAAR test, which is widely anticipated because of the educational crisis caused by the pandemic, will also be used to justify further attacks on public education funding.

STAAR tests play a role in determining each school's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as required under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. Under the NCLB, if AYP targets are not met for four years, "low performing" staff may be fired. After five years, the school district can be reopened as charter schools, all staff can be fired, and the schools can be privatized, put under private management, or shut down.

Texas Tribune reported that as of 2019 three Texas school districts, including the state's largest, Houston ISD, had schools which fit this criteria and will likely be "forced to shut down their chronically under-performing schools or submit to state takeover." The number of schools fitting this criteria has likely increased significantly, in part as a result of the recent change from a pass/fail system for school AYP results to an A-through-F system that places penalties on schools with results under a C.

While the TEA recently announced a "pause" on grading of schools for the 2020-21 school year and claimed it would not be used as an "accountability metric," this would only mean that the shuttering of "failing" schools would potentially be delayed until the 2021-22 school year.

The Texas state government used the Great Recession in 2011 as an excuse to cut over \$5 billion in state funding for education. During the pandemic, state officials have diverted aid from the CARES Act intended for schools to instead go towards the state budget, with a combined \$163 million taken from the Houston, Dallas and San Antonio school districts. In May, Texas Governor Greg Abbott instructed many state agencies and universities to cut their budgets by five percent. The Texas government refuses to use its "rainy day fund" in order to offset the fall in revenue caused by the COVID-19 fiscal crisis.

In opposition to the policies of the entire political establishment, we demand the following:

1) For the cancellation of the STAAR test and its elimination as a graduation requirement!

As a result of the pandemic, the majority of students will underperform on the exams. The normalization of death promoted by the ruling elites through their "herd immunity" policies, combined with the complete and intentional neglect by the government of online learning, have taken an immense toll on students' and teachers' mental health. No accommodations have been made to ensure the psychological well-being of students going into the exams.

The state already waived all STAAR testing on March 18 of this year upon the announcement of new restrictions and lockdowns in the face of the emerging pandemic. In addition, the STAAR testing graduation requirements for the Class of 2020 were entirely waived for students who had failed no more than two EOC (End of Course) exams, so that they would not be prevented from graduation by poor performance on a standardized test during a pandemic. By any metric—cases, positivity rates, ICU capacity, or

deaths—the situation facing us today is more dire than when the tests were canceled in March, and these same measures must be implemented. Given that the first vaccine is beginning to arrive in Texas, there is no sane reason for the STAAR exams to take place now or in the spring.

2) For an end to the victimization of educators and schools for low test scores!

Public education has been turned upside down by the pandemic, yet teacher evaluations tied to standardized testing goes on as before. Virtual teachers are observed and penalized if students are not “highly engaged.” Absurdly, some teachers are still required to host “gallery walks” in empty classrooms. But the pandemic has only highlighted the long-established role of teacher “evaluations” as a means to blame educators for a social crisis over which they have no control.

3) For an immediate end to all in-person learning and the closure of nonessential business across Texas!

The pandemic is raging out of control throughout Texas and across the US, and genuine science proves unequivocally that schools and nonessential businesses are two major vectors for the spread of the virus. The closure of these workplaces is a necessary measure to contain the pandemic and prevent any further loss of life. The potential to vaccinate the population in the coming months only underscores the urgent need for these measures!

4) For a massive infusion of resources to provide high-quality virtual learning!

All educators and parents must receive systematic training in the use of instructional technologies to facilitate at-home learning. Workers should not be forced to choose between their health and their financial well-being. The education of a child is a community effort in which parents and educators must work in tandem, and parents must be given money to facilitate those efforts without risking their lives.

5) For full transparency of all COVID-19 outbreaks in schools, and an end to state attacks on whistleblowers, such as Rebekah Jones!

The police raid on the home of Rebekah Jones in Florida on Monday, during which they seized her cell phone, laptop and hard drives, underscores the dangerous assault on free speech that has escalated during the pandemic. Jones was targeted because she is the co-founder of The COVID Monitor, the most thorough tracker of COVID-19 infections in schools across the US, including here in Texas. We demand that her equipment be returned immediately and that the state provide full funding required to track and report COVID-19 infections across the US.

6) Provide direct financial assistance to families and workers suffering from the effects of the pandemic, including Navajo Nation families, to be paid for by the expropriation of the wealthy!

All of the claims that there is “no money” to provide for the needs of workers are invalidated by the massive wealth of the financial oligarchs in Texas. As the title of a recent *Dallas Business Journal* article stated, “Nearly a tenth of this year’s Forbes 400 richest Americans are Texans.” These include the tenth richest American, Alice Walton, who owns part of Walmart and has a net worth of \$60 billion. Michael Dell from Austin has a net

worth of \$35.6 billion. A rough sum of the 36 Texas billionaires on the Forbes 400 reveals a net worth of \$242.2 billion between these oligarchs. A fraction of this money would be sufficient to fund all Texas schools for years. As a reference point, the total state budget for 2020 was \$250 billion.

Our committee fights for the unity of educators across the Southwest region, and we draw attention to the uniquely difficult situation facing Native American families, students in reservation school districts, and residents of reservations who have been disproportionately endangered by policies that are equal parts neglectful and reckless.

The Navajo Nation in New Mexico, among many others, has been victimized by lockdown policies that fail to provide sufficient material support for those afflicted communities. Given that New Mexico’s Governor, Michelle Lujan Grisham, has recently authorized medical professionals in hospitals to ration care, the urgency with which both these communities and reservations receive financial and material relief is paramount.

We call for residents of reservations to receive assistance with the same fervor that animates our call for families across the country to receive assistance. We will settle for nothing less than a full commitment to the preservation of all workers’ lives and well-being.

Teachers have been forced to shoulder the burden for far too long in this educational system that prioritizes the needs of Wall Street and large corporations over those of students, teachers and their families. The state testing mandates that exist and the Texas Educators Association’s (TEA) refusal to accommodate students, their families, or teachers during the pandemic showcase the extent to which corporate interests are in contradiction to the interests and very lives of workers.

We call on all those in Texas and throughout the Southwest who agree with these demands and seek to build a powerful movement of educators, parents, students and the broader working class in order to close schools and all nonessential businesses and stop the spread of the pandemic to sign up today to join our committee at wsws.org/edsafety.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact