

March 9, 2021

The Honorable Diego M. Bernal
The Honorable Alma A. Allen
The Honorable Steve Allison
The Honorable Rafael Anchía
The Honorable Trent Ashby
The Honorable Ernest Bailes
The Honorable Michelle Beckley
The Honorable Rhetta Andrews Bowers
The Honorable John Bucy III
The Honorable Elizabeth “Liz” Campos
The Honorable Terry Canales
The Honorable Philip Cortez, Ph.D.
The Honorable Jasmine Crockett
The Honorable Joe Deshotel
The Honorable Harold Dutton, Jr.
The Honorable Art Fierro
The Honorable Barbara Gervin-Hawkins
The Honorable Jessica González
The Honorable Mary González, Ph.D.
The Honorable Vikki Goodwin
The Honorable R.D. “Bobby” Guerra
The Honorable Ryan Guillen
The Honorable Sam Harless
The Honorable Cody Harris
The Honorable Ana Hernandez
The Honorable Able Herrero
The Honorable Gina Hinojosa
The Honorable Donna Howard
The Honorable Celia Israel
The Honorable Julie Johnson
The Honorable Ann Johnson
The Honorable Jarvis Johnson
The Honorable Julie Johnson
The Honorable Kyle Kacal
The Honorable Stan Lambert

The Honorable Lyle Larson
The Honorable Oscar Longoria
The Honorable Ray Lopez
The Honorable Eddie Lucio III
The Honorable Armando “Mando” Martinez
The Honorable Trey Martinez Fischer
The Honorable Morgan Meyer
The Honorable Terry Meza
The Honorable Ina Minjarez
The Honorable Joe Moody
The Honorable Christina Morales
The Honorable Eddie Morales, Jr.
The Honorable Penny Morales Shaw
The Honorable Sergio Muñoz, Jr.
The Honorable Claudia Ordaz Perez
The Honorable Lina Ortega
The Honorable Leo Pacheco
The Honorable Mary Ann Perez
The Honorable Ana-Maria Ramos
The Honorable Richard Peña Raymond
The Honorable Ron Reynolds
The Honorable Eddie Rodriguez
The Honorable Ramon Romero Jr.
The Honorable Toni Rose
The Honorable Jon Rosenthal
The Honorable Carl Sherman
The Honorable Hugh D. Shine
The Honorable James Talarico
The Honorable Shawn Thierry
The Honorable Senfronia Thompson
The Honorable Chris Turner
The Honorable Armando Walle
The Honorable Gene Wu
The Honorable Erin Zwiener

Texas House of Representatives
P.O. Box 2910
Austin, Texas 78768

Representatives-

Thank you for your correspondence requesting TEA create a formal opt-out mechanism for students who do not wish to take the 2020-2021 administration of the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) exam.

STAAR is required by state law to be offered by school systems. Law also requires that students take the assessment. Additionally, STAAR fulfills the federal requirements as established in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. On February 22nd, the United States Department of Education indicated that no waiver requests on the administration of assessments would be granted.

The state and federal legislatures have adopted these laws as evidence has shown that using common assessments aligned to rigorous state standards helps improve the quality of education students receive. Similarly, these assessments were put in place because of the evidence that without a common statewide system to determine student mastery, certain groups of students disproportionately received educational opportunities that were consistently at a lower rigor level than their peers.

It is critical we use all available tools, including standardized tests, to measure student performance and help address any possible learning loss from the COVID-19 disruptions. Parents need to see clear information on where their students are, compared to previous years and progress that has been made so far this year. Teachers need information on how students are doing relative to a consistent set of state standards, which is hard for individual classroom assessments or even entire courses to do, given all the other factors teachers must take into account when evaluating student work (e.g., effort, completion, etc.). School district leaders need the information from these assessments to properly lead their school systems as they maximize support for their students, and many of our state's Superintendents have been vocal about this need. Ultimately, looking at STAAR results will help inform plans to address learning loss developed by teachers, schools, and districts as they adjust in the coming year to help our students, including summer school planning and additional supports offered to students in the fall.

TEA has taken a variety of steps to give school systems more flexibility in administering state assessments this year so they can be taken by most students. This flexibility includes lengthening all spring testing windows to at least 5 weeks, allowing students who are not scheduled to test to learn remotely on testing days, and aligning guidance changes to ensure districts can offer in-person testing in socially distanced environments to maximize safety.

This flexibility provides an added level of safety on top of the extensive measures school systems have already made to ensure on campus learning remains as safe as possible. The results of these measures is ultimately the most important factor for our students. On campus learning has proven to be safe during the pandemic, and we should work to encourage as many families as possible whose students have been struggling remotely during the pandemic to choose on campus learning for their students.

Even though the data indicates on campus instruction is safe, some parents will ultimately still choose to keep their students learning remotely throughout the entirety of this school year. When the testing windows open, they will be able to send their children in safely so they can see the results of grade level mastery provided by the STAAR.

This has been an extraordinarily difficult year for Texas educators and families. But given the factors at play, the assessment framework we have announced will help us meet the moral imperative to do all we can to support the educational growth of our students while also remaining focused on preserving the health and safety of our students and employees. Thank you again for your letter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mike Morath', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Mike Morath
Commissioner of Education