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Texas
Education
Agency

1701 NORTH CONGRESS AVENUE

AUSTIN, TEXAS 78701-1494

(512) 463-9000

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U.S. Department of Education denies state's double-testing waiver request

AUSTIN – The U.S. Department of Education has advised the Texas Education Agency that the state's waiver request to address the issue of multiple assessments for students taking Algebra I at the middle school level will not be granted.

In spite of this federal decision, Commissioner of Education Michael Williams is discouraging local school districts and charters from double-testing middle school students taking Algebra I. However, the Commissioner noted the decision about whether to administer multiple assessments is ultimately a local one. Eighth grade mathematics testing in Texas is scheduled to begin on April 1.

“The waiver request was submitted because I do not believe that double testing middle school students is instructionally appropriate nor a valid evaluation of mathematics for Texas middle schools and high schools,” said Commissioner Williams. “Given state and federal testing requirements, federal denial of our amendment request, and the Texas Legislature’s decision to reduce end-of-course testing to one high school mathematics assessment, I am eliminating any perceived incentives a district might have had for double testing students for accountability purposes.”

The Commissioner has formally notified all Texas school districts and charters that for 2014 and 2015 state and federal accountability, if a student takes the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR®) Algebra I end-of-course assessment and a STAAR mathematics grade level assessment, only the results of the Algebra I assessment will be included in the accountability calculations for the campus and the district where the student tested. Although taken while in middle school, the Algebra I EOC would count toward a student’s high school graduation requirements under House Bill 5.

Commissioner Williams acknowledged his primary concern remains that some school districts may make poor instructional decisions regarding accelerated students. For example, to avoid the dilemma of having these students' scores attributed to a middle school campus (instead of the high school campus), some districts might reconsider offering Algebra I at the middle school level.

“Such a move would seriously disadvantage students who move quickly through the mathematics curriculum in grades K-8 and would benefit from taking advanced coursework in middle school,” said Commissioner Williams. “Should a Texas district or charter elect to make such a move, this stalls students’ academic progress and provides them with one less opportunity to take an advanced mathematics course or another relevant upper-division course in high school.”

Given his concern, Commissioner Williams said the Texas Education Agency will be analyzing course completion data submitted by school districts to ensure that enrollment in Algebra I by middle school students does not precipitously decline beginning with the 2014-2015 school year. Based on this annual analysis, some school districts may be contacted to explain reductions in Algebra I enrollments by middle school students.

Current federal accountability requirements call for students to have a mathematics score every year in grades 3–8, as well as a mathematics score in high school. The federal government requires states that offer only one mathematics assessment at the high school level (which can also be taken by middle school students) to ensure there is a separate mathematics result that can be attributed to a high school.

Late last year, Commissioner Williams advised the U.S. Department of Education that Texas would be seeking to amend its conditional waiver of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) provisions. In its communications with the agency, U.S. Department of Education officials informed the Texas Education Agency that similar waiver requests from other states have not been approved.