



Performance Descriptor Advisory Committee Report September 30–October 1, 2010

Introduction

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) is in the process of developing the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR), which will replace the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS). The STAAR assessments will be administered beginning in the 2011–2012 school year and include the 12 end-of-course assessments mandated by Senate Bill (SB) 1031 during the 80th legislative session and the new grade 3–8 assessments mandated by House Bill (HB) 3 during the 81st legislative session.

As part of the development and implementation of this new assessment program, TEA, in conjunction with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), convened a Performance Descriptor Advisory Committee (PDAC) to make recommendations for the performance labels and policy definitions that will define the performance standards for STAAR. The purpose of the performance labels and policy definitions is to describe the general level of knowledge and skills evident at each performance level for all grades and subjects. The labels and definitions are a prerequisite for the standard-setting process because they will provide the standard-setting advisory panels with a consistent understanding of the levels of student performance as they develop recommendations for the cut score that will be associated with each performance standard.

The committee was comprised of individuals representing the diversity of stakeholders in public education and higher education in Texas. The meeting was facilitated by Dr. Gregory Cizek, a professor in Educational Measurement and Evaluation at the University of North Carolina.

The Commissioner of Education provided the following charges to the panel:

1. Assume that the state assessment system will be implemented under current federal and state statute, both of which require a minimum of three performance levels.
2. Reach consensus on recommendations for the names of the performance labels (categories of performance) for student achievement on the assessments (general, modified, and alternate).
3. Make recommendations for key words/phrases to be used in drafting the policy definitions that will define student performance within each category.

Following the meeting, TEA and THECB staff members will consider the committee's recommendations for performance labels and will use its recommendations for key words and phrases to draft the policy definitions. Once the labels and definitions are drafted, representatives from the PDAC will review these performance labels and policy definitions prior to final review and approval by the commissioner of education and commissioner of higher education, as appropriate.

Overview of the STAAR Program

STAAR will become the state-mandated assessment program beginning in spring 2012 for elementary, middle, and high school students who attend Texas public schools. For grades 3–8, the STAAR program will assess the same subjects and grades that are currently assessed on TAKS. At high school, however, grade-specific TAKS assessments will be replaced with a series of 12 end-of-course assessments:

Algebra I, geometry, Algebra II, English I, English II, English III, biology, chemistry, physics, world geography, world history, and U.S. history. Students entering ninth grade in 2011–2012 will be the first cohort of students who must meet the STAAR assessment requirements to earn a high school diploma.

The state assessments will continue to be based on the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), the content standards designed to prepare students to succeed in college and careers and to compete globally. However, consistent with a growing national consensus regarding the need to provide a more clearly articulated K–16 education program that focuses on critical skills and addresses those skills in a deeper manner, TEA is implementing a new assessment model for the STAAR tests for elementary, middle, and high school.

By focusing on the TEKS that are most critical to assess, STAAR will better measure the academic performance of students as they progress from elementary to middle to high school. Based on educator committee recommendations, TEA has identified for each grade or course a set of knowledge and skills drawn from the TEKS and will emphasize this set of knowledge and skills, called readiness standards, on the assessments. The remaining knowledge and skills are considered supporting standards and will be assessed, though not emphasized. STAAR will also be aligned vertically so that performance on lower-level assessments indicates not only preparedness for the next grade or course but, ultimately, readiness for college and the workplace.

The overall rigor of STAAR will be increased by assessing content and skills at higher levels of cognitive complexity, requiring students to apply content and skills in a variety of familiar and new contexts, increasing the number of open-ended (griddable) items on science and mathematics assessments, including a broader range of reading genres, and requiring students to respond to two writing tasks rather than one task. Performance standards will be informed by both test content and empirical data from external studies. These studies will include the use of data from national and international assessments and will link performance from grades 3–8 to high school and from specific high school courses to college and career readiness.

The development of STAAR provides an opportunity to better align the assessments across the program and to consider the modified and alternate assessments, linguistic accommodations, and the growth measure from the beginning of the development process. Assessment staff members are collaborating with curriculum staff as content standards are revised, with accountability staff as the new accountability system is developed, and with the THECB as measures of college and career readiness are developed. To help the committee better understand the new assessments and to assist committee members in making recommendations for the performance labels and definitions, TEA and THECB provided specific information about the following topics:

- The cumulative score requirement a student must meet in each of the four core content areas (mathematics, English, social studies, and science)
- The EOC assessment requirements for each high school graduation plan: distinguished, recommended, and minimum
- The college and career readiness component of the STAAR Algebra II and English III assessments
- The incorporation of the college and career readiness standards into the TEKS, thereby allowing a student's college and career readiness score to be based on the entire Algebra II or English III assessment rather than on a separate section

- The development of Spanish STAAR and other linguistically accommodated assessments for eligible English language learners
- The development of modified and alternate versions of STAAR for students who are served by special education and receive modified or alternate instruction
- The current and future direction of college readiness assessments under the Texas Success Initiative and the relationship of these requirements to the STAAR end-of-course assessments, particularly as they relate to determining college readiness of students who will not be assessed under STAAR EOC assessments (i.e., private high school graduates, out of state high school graduates, GED recipients, etc.)

Overview of the Standard-Setting Process

TEA provided a brief overview of the standard-setting process. Performance standards communicate the expected level of achievement to students, schools, parents, and the general public. As such, these standards must clearly define the level of performance necessary for students to do on-grade-level work and to make academic progress toward college and career readiness. If performance standards are to have the desired effect—i.e., strengthen instructional programs as well as improve student achievement—these standards must differentiate among students with regard to their individual performance on the assessment.

Standard Setting for STAAR

It is anticipated that STAAR will have a minimum of three performance categories and two performance cuts that divide these three categories. As one of the first steps in the standard-setting process, the PDAC will provide recommendations for developing the names of the performance labels as well as the key words and phrases that will be used to draft the policy definitions. These labels and definitions should accurately describe student performance in each of the three categories for all STAAR 3–8 and end-of-course assessments.

Following the PDAC meeting, several other standard-setting activities will occur. Once approved, the performance labels and policy definitions will be used to develop descriptors of the specific content and skills that students should be able to demonstrate for each grade, subject, and course. The performance labels and policy definitions will also be provided to standard-setting panel members during the STAAR standard-setting meetings to help panel members develop a shared understanding of the level of student performance students must demonstrate to achieve each cut score. To mitigate the initial impact of the STAAR performance standards on individual students and schools, the standards may be phased in over time. In addition, HB 3 mandates that the standards be reviewed at least once every three years.

Process for Developing Recommendations for Performance Labels and Policy Definitions

Dr. Cizek led the committee through a six-step process to develop recommendations for the performance labels and policy definitions that will be used to describe student performance on the assessments for the STAAR program.

- Step 1: Brainstorm key words/phrases to be used in developing the policy definitions
- Step 2: Share recommendations for key words/phrases
- Step 3: Reach consensus on recommendations for key words/phrases to be used in developing the policy definitions
- Step 4: Brainstorm performance labels for each of the performance categories
- Step 5: Share recommendations for performance labels
- Step 6: Reach consensus on recommendations for performance labels

Step 1: Brainstorm key words/phrases to be used in developing the policy definitions

Dr. Cizek shared preliminary guidelines for developing the policy definitions, read the charges to the PDAC from the commissioner of education, and reviewed the guiding principles. The committee was asked to consider the range of student performance within each category but to focus on the students in the middle of the category when making recommendations for key words/phrases to be used in drafting the policy definitions.

The committee members were divided into four groups, each of which represented a cross-section of panelists from K–12 education, higher education, special populations, business, and Texas state government. The groups were asked to brainstorm key words/phrases to be used in developing the policy definitions for the three performance levels. To ensure that the groups had a common understanding of performance levels as they discussed the labels, Dr. Cizek had the groups use “placeholder” labels—Level I, Level II, and Level III—with Level I being the lowest level of performance and Level III being the highest. For purposes of discussion, Level II was considered “passing.” The committee was also reminded that HB 3 requires Level III performance on the STAAR Algebra II and English III assessments to indicate college and career readiness.

Step 2: Share recommendations for key words/phrases

Once the four groups completed the brainstorming activity, a panelist representing each group was asked to share major points from the group’s discussion and the group’s recommendations for key words/phrases.

Step 3: Reach consensus on recommendations for key words/phrases to be used in developing the policy definitions

After the groups shared their recommendations, Dr. Cizek had each group present key words/phrases for the committee’s consideration. The committee discussed the key words/phrases presented and reached consensus on those they recommended be used in developing STAAR policy definitions.

Committee Discussion of Key Words/Phrases: Level I

In the discussion as committee members worked toward reaching consensus on the recommendations for key words/phrases to be used in developing the policy definitions for Level I, the following general comments from the groups were shared.

- Level I should provide a warning sign to students, parents, teachers, and district staff.
- The definition for Level I should communicate a sense of urgency and a substantial need for intervention.
- Use of the word “failing” in the definition was considered. However, the committee did not want students to be labeled as “failures”; instead, they wanted to communicate in a way that would motivate students to improve.
- The committee wanted to avoid any language in the definitions that implied that students in this category did not have the capacity to achieve academically, especially since the test is a one-day measure of student performance.

Committee Recommendation for Key Words/Phrases: Level I

Inadequately prepared for the next level

Lacking some fundamental knowledge and skills

Does not demonstrate grade-level knowledge and skills

Substantial, urgent interventions necessary

Some knowledge and comprehension but not at the level required to successfully progress

Serious likelihood of failure at the next level without substantial and immediate intervention

Committee Discussion of Key Words/Phrases: Level II

The activity was repeated for Level II. In the discussion as committee members worked toward reaching consensus on the recommendations for key words/phrases to be used in developing the policy definitions for Level II, the following general comments were shared.

- Students who perform at this level should be prepared for a variety of postsecondary options (a 2-year or 4-year degree, a certificate program, or a career). Students entering the workforce need the same set of skills students need to be prepared for college.
- Performance at this level indicates that a student is on track and prepared to be successful at the next level with support.
- Level II may represent a wide range of student performance. Because Level I describes only low-level performance and Level III only high level, there may be a broad range of student performance within Level II, making it difficult to define students in the middle of the category without considering students at both ends of the Level II range (lower end and upper end). The committee preferred to divide Level II into two performance subcategories and included recommendations for key words/phrases specific to students at the upper end of Level II as well as students at the lower end.
- Students at the upper end of Level II should be successful in entry level college courses after completing no more than two years of developmental education

Committee Recommendations: Level II

Adequate, on pace, or prepared for success at the next level, with a possible need for support or targeted interventions.

Students at the upper end of Level II:

Demonstrate acceptable progress and understanding of the content standards

Proficient in grade-level knowledge and skills with minimal interventions that may be necessary for success at the next grade level or postsecondary

Students at the lower end of Level II:

Partial mastery of grade-level knowledge and skills

Fundamental/basic/essential

Committee Discussion of Key Words/Phrases: Level III

The activity was repeated for Level III. In the discussion as committee members worked toward reaching consensus on the recommendations for key words/phrases to be used in developing the policy definitions for Level III, the following general comments were shared.

- As outlined by legislation, Level III should represent college readiness for STAAR Algebra II and English III. Students performing at this level have the tools and academic preparation needed to be successful in college or a career. The committee preferred to use the term postsecondary rather than college and career readiness.
- Performance at this level indicates a high probability of success at the next level without intervention.
- Students who perform at this level demonstrate a deep understanding and insightful application of content. They demonstrate higher-order thinking skills—perhaps the synthesis and evaluation levels of Bloom’s taxonomy.
- Students who perform at this level are independent learners and do not need support to make academic progress.

Committee Recommendations: Level III

Postsecondary, college and career ready

Strongly prepared for success at the next level

High probability of success at the next level (without intervention or remediation)

Advanced, deep understanding of knowledge and skills covered by the content standards

Insightful application of grade-level knowledge and skills

Demonstrate critical-thinking skills in diverse contexts at an advanced level

Thoroughly able to manage/manipulate information within a given context

Independent

Key Concepts: Policy Definitions

At the end of the group discussions on key words/phrases, Dr. Cizek noted that the following key concepts had emerged at all performance levels:

- Level of support or intervention required
- Degree of understanding demonstrated/ability to apply content and skills
- Prediction or likelihood of success at the next level

Discussion of Policy Definitions: Modified and Alternate Assessments

After the discussion of STAAR policy definitions for students in general education, the committee was asked to think about the modified and alternate assessments for students receiving special education services and to provide recommendations for issues that TEA should consider in adapting the policy definitions from the general assessments. The following ideas were generated:

- Add “modifications” to the definitions for the modified assessments
- Links to the academic content should be included for the alternate assessment. Those links are identified in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) by the Admissions Review and Dismissal (ARD) committee.
- May want to consider noting the relationship to the minimum graduation plan in the policy definition since students receiving modified or alternate instruction will most likely be graduating on this plan
- The descriptions should avoid negative connotations or focusing on weaknesses.

Step 4: Brainstorm performance labels for each of the performance categories

Dr. Cizek shared general guidelines for developing the labels: they must clearly represent student performance in each performance category, must differentiate across the three levels of achievement, and must avoid unnecessary positive or negative interpretations of students themselves. The committee was reminded that Level I, II, and III, the placeholder labels the committee was using, were options that could be considered as names for the performance labels.

Dr. Cizek then led panelists through a similar brainstorming process to make recommendations for the names of the performance labels. Panelists were divided into four groups, which were asked to consider a three-category system and brainstorm labels for three levels of performance. Then to address the committee’s concern about the challenges in defining the range of students in Level II, the groups were asked to also consider labels for a four-category system.

Step 5: Share recommendations for performance labels

Once the groups completed the brainstorming activity, a representative from each group was asked to share major points from the group’s discussion as well as its recommendations for performance labels.

Discussion: Three Performance Labels

The following ideas were generated in the discussion about recommended labels.

- STAAR is an assessment of student achievement, so it may make sense to include the word achievement in the labels.
- The label for Level II should represent the wide range of student performance.
- Avoid communicating that a student had “met” the standard for Level II because it is difficult to motivate the student to do better if he or she has already “met” the passing requirement. Panelists also noted that the term “met standard” is too similar to the current TAKS system.
- Although the labels should not be unnecessarily negative, the committee wanted Level I to indicate that something needs to be done to help students performing at this level.
- It might be appropriate to tie the labels to the name of the program—State of Texas Assessments of *Academic Readiness*—by using the phrase “academic readiness” in the labels.
- The committee also thought it may be possible to use a three-category system and indicate in reporting and communication that a student’s performance is at the lower end of Level II rather than subdividing one of the performance levels (Level I or Level II).

Step 6: Reach consensus on recommendation for performance labels

After each group shared its recommendations, Dr. Cizek led the committee through a discussion to reach consensus on recommendations for the performance labels.

Committee recommendations: Three Performance Labels

The group reached consensus on the following recommendations, listed in order of preference:

Recommendation #1:

Insufficient Academic Readiness
Adequate Academic Readiness
Advanced Academic Readiness

Recommendation #2:

Insufficient Achievement
Adequate Achievement
Advanced Achievement

Recommendation #3:

Limited Achievement
Sufficient Achievement
Accomplished Achievement

Discussion: Four Performance Labels

The groups then discussed labels for a potential four-category system. The following ideas were discussed.

- There was consideration of whether the split should be made to Level I (not passing) or to Level II (passing–middle level). The committee was asked to focus on creating four hierarchical labels that could be used regardless of whether the split subdivided Level I or Level II.
- It may be preferable to avoid using the word “approaching” in a passing category because of the message that might send to the general public.
- The committee generally liked “advanced” for the top category and “insufficient” for the bottom category (as was recommended for the three-level system). In creating a four-level system, panelists wanted to find a word that was more positive than “adequate” for the higher level and less positive than “adequate” for the lower level.

Committee Recommendations: Four Performance Labels

The group made two recommendations for a four-category system and ranked their preferences as first choice and third choice to clearly indicate that the first choice was highly preferred.

Recommendation #1:

- Insufficient Academic Readiness
- Limited Academic Readiness
- Proficient/Satisfactory Academic Readiness
- Advanced Academic Readiness

Recommendation #3:

- Insufficient Proficiency
- Approaching Proficiency
- Proficient
- Advanced Proficiency

Concluding Remarks

TEA and the THECB closed the meeting by expressing thanks from both agencies for the committee's time and hard work. TEA described the process that would occur following the meeting in which a report would be generated from the meeting, the committee would review the report, and the report would be published on TEA's website. Then draft versions of the performance labels and policy definitions would be written, the draft versions will be reviewed by a representative set of members of the PDAC for fidelity to the group's intent, and ultimately forwarded to the commissioner of education and commissioner of higher education for review and consideration, where appropriate. A timeline for this process and next steps for finalizing the performance labels and policy definitions is included in Appendix A.

**Performance Descriptor Advisory Committee Meeting
Thursday, September 30–Friday, October 1, 2010**

Attendees

- Dana Bedden, Superintendent, Irving ISD
- Reece Blincoe, Superintendent, Brownwood ISD
- Bobby Blount, Director, Vice-Chair of Bylaws, Texas Association of School Boards
- Von Byer, Committee Director, Senate Education Committee
- Jesus Chavez, Superintendent, Round Rock ISD
- Patti Clapp, Executive Director, Greater Dallas Chamber of Commerce
- David Dunn, Executive Director, Texas Charter Schools Association
- Andrew Erben, President, Texas Institute for Education Reform
- Dora Garcia, Teacher, Los Fresnos CISD
- Julie Harker, Public Education Advisor, Office of the Governor
- Troy Johnson, Associate Vice President, University of North Texas
- Sandy Kress, Partner, Akin, Gump, Strauss, Hauer, and Feld
- Russell Lowery-Hart, Vice President of Academic Affairs, Amarillo College
- Donna Newman, Executive Director Of Middle School Performance, Hays CISD
- Esmeralda Perez-Gonzalez, Teacher, Hays CISD
- Anne Poplin, Director, ESC, Region IX
- Richard Rhodes, President, El Paso Community College
- Todd Rogers, Principal, Northwest ISD
- Rod Schroder, President, Texas School Alliance
- Jeri Stone, Executive Director, Texas Classroom Teachers Association
- Tom Torkelson, Chief Executive Officer, IDEA Public Schools
- Rod Townsend, President, Texas Association of School Administrators
- Maria Trejo, Director Of Curriculum & Instruction, Cypress-Fairbanks ISD
- Gabriel Trujillo, Principal, Duncanville ISD
- Lori Vettters, Chairperson, Pre-K Committee, Greater Houston Partnership
- Jenna Watts, Policy Director, House Public Education Committee

Facilitator

- Gregory Cizek, Professor of Educational Measurement and Evaluation, University of North Carolina

Appendix A

Performance Descriptor Advisory Committee Approval and Transmittal of Report and Finalization of the STAAR Performance-Category Labels and Policy Definitions

Date	Activity
September 30 and October 1, 2010	Performance Descriptor Advisory Committee (PDAC) meeting
October 4 through October 21, 2010	TEA staff members draft advisory committee report summarizing the committee process and recommendations
October 22, 2010	Advisory committee members receive draft report via e-mail
October 29, 2010	Comments due to TEA from advisory committee members
October 29 through November 12, 2010	TEA staff members incorporate comments from committee members and post final report from the PDAC meeting; final report incorporated into Transition Plan due to the 82 nd Legislature on December 1, 2010
November 12 through November 19, 2010	TEA and THECB staff members refine (based on committee recommendations) the STAAR performance-category labels and policy definitions
November 19 through November 23, 2010	Performance Descriptor Advisory Committee representatives will review draft STAAR performance-category labels and policy definitions
November 23 through December 31, 2010	Final review and approval of the STAAR performance-category labels and policy definitions by commissioner of education and commissioner of higher education, as appropriate

