TO THE ADMINISTRATOR ADDRESSED:

Subject: Assessment Participation Requirements for Students Receiving Special Education Services

Recent communication (8/21/14) from the Commissioner of Education regarding the elimination of the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR®) Modified; the availability of the online accommodated version of the general STAAR assessment, called STAAR A; and implementation of the redesigned STAAR Alternate assessment, known as STAAR Alternate 2, provides an important opportunity for school districts to assure their admission, review, and dismissal (ARD) committees carefully consider participation requirements when making decisions about the appropriate assessment for students receiving special education services. This assurance at the district level is also important given trends the Texas Education Agency (TEA) has observed over the last several years in meeting its obligation under federal law to evaluate districts’ use of alternative assessments.

During the former assessment system, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), districts initially reported fairly moderate rates of participation in TAKS-Alternate and TAKS-Modified by students receiving special education services. However, shortly before the TAKS assessments were phased out, some districts began to report significant increases in the rates of participation in both of these alternative assessments. These increases were particularly evident in two special education participation rate indicators reported through the Performance-Based Monitoring Analysis System (PBMAS). By the third year of the STAAR program, the state rate of students participating in the STAAR Alternate was nearly twice the rate of students participating in the TAKS-Alternate six years earlier, and the state rate of students participating in the STAAR Modified was approximately one-third higher. Districts subsequently evaluated by TEA monitors for their students’ participation in the STAAR Alternate or STAAR Modified were not always able to provide documented evidence in students’ individualized education programs (IEPs) that the students’ present levels of academic achievement and functional performance, annual goals, and prerequisite skills or modified curriculum justified the administration of an alternative assessment.

As planning for the administration of the 2014-2015 state assessments begins, districts must ensure their ARD committees are aware that students can only be assessed with the redesigned alternate assessment, STAAR Alternate 2, if they meet ALL of the following participation requirements. The student must:

- have a significant cognitive disability;
- require specialized supports to access the grade-level curriculum;
- require intensive, individualized instruction; and
- access the grade-level Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) through prerequisite skills.

Students not meeting the STAAR Alternate 2 participation requirements must be assessed with the general STAAR or STAAR A, as appropriate. Students requiring a higher degree of accommodation than what is allowable on the general STAAR must be students:

- with identified disabilities who are receiving special education services; or
- identified with dyslexia or a related disorder (as defined in Texas Education Code §38.003) who are receiving Section 504 services.
Additionally, the ARD or 504 committee must document that any student being considered for STAAR A participation routinely uses at least two separate accommodations aligned to those available on STAAR A during regular classroom instruction and assessment.

Districts must ensure that the IEP of each student whose ARD committee determines the student will not take the general STAAR or STAAR A includes a clear statement of why the student cannot participate in these assessments and why the alternate assessment selected is appropriate. Districts must also ensure they complete any forms required by TEA to document a student’s eligibility for a particular assessment.

If you have questions regarding the STAAR program, please call the Student Assessment Division at 512-463-9536.

If you have questions regarding appropriate documentation in students’ IEPs to substantiate assessment participation determinations, please call the Program Monitoring and Interventions Division at 512-463-5226.

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