

Texas steps up security to prevent cheating on TAKS tests

(a) pledges (b) random monitors (c) seating charts (d) all of above

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Texas testing officials are trying out a new strategy to prevent cheating on TAKS tests: Ask students to sign pledges that they won't cheat.

That's one of several new steps the state is taking this spring to make sure scores on the state exams truly reflect what students know – and aren't the product of cheating. Others include having teachers keep track of where each student sits and sending state monitors on surprise visits to campuses.

Although many students and educators welcome the changes, some testing experts say they doubt the changes will prevent much cheating, and they argue more effective tools are available.

George Wesolowsky, a professor in Canada who studies cheating, said the new measures "create the impression of toughness but are mainly procedural. ... I have seen a lot of cheating by students under similarly tight administration of tests."

The next round of Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills testing begins Wednesday for 2.6 million children in Texas public schools. It's a pencil-chewing, nerve-racking time because so much rides on the results: Graduation for high school seniors. Teacher evaluations and bonuses. School and district academic ratings.

The Texas Education Agency introduced 14 new measures to prevent cheating by students and educators alike. Some start now, while others, like a wholesale statistical analysis of TAKS scores, are planned for future years.

TEA announced the changes last year after *The Dallas Morning News*, working with Dr. Wesolowsky of McMaster University, reported that tens of thousands of students cheated on the TAKS test over two years. The work was based on his statistical method to detect copying and other cheating on multiple-choice tests like the TAKS.

In school systems across North Texas, testing coordinators have informed principals, teachers and others of the new rules. They've fielded some questions, like: What will state monitors look for at the campuses they visit? (TEA isn't saying.) How will campuses know monitors are really from TEA? (They'll have IDs.) But overall, district testing coordinators say they don't sense much extra concern or worry.

In fact, many local districts have already adopted some new procedures on their own, given recent public concern and published reports about cheating. The Dallas school district, for instance, tells students where to sit and keeps seating charts. Testing officials in the Duncanville, Garland and Richardson districts say some of their schools began keeping seating charts in the last year or two.

Some educators and testing coordinators see the extra scrutiny as a chance to prove they're following the rules.

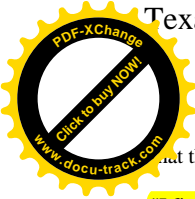
"Our philosophy is we're doing everything right, so let them come in," said Jeremy Resnick, Richardson's assessment director.

Still, not everyone's convinced every new measure will work.

Take the pledge not to cheat, which earned mixed reviews from students at W.T. White High School in Dallas. Junior Jessica Sanchez said the pledge – which will be voluntary and given only to high school students – will remind students to take the test seriously. But junior Renee French said anyone who wants to cheat won't be deterred by signing a piece of paper.

Junior Brandon Walker said assigning students to seats so they can't sit with friends – which Dallas does but the state doesn't require – is another good idea. His general thinking: "If you don't know the person next to you, you're less likely to cheat."

Some testing experts say that TEA officials deserve credit for taking extra steps but



that they could do more.

"I find it disappointing that they're not doing what has been time-honored around the globe: You scramble the seats and scramble the exams," said David Harpp, a professor at Montreal's McGill University who studies cheating.

By scrambling exams, Dr. Harpp means giving different versions of the test, with questions in different order, making it pointless to copy off a classmate.

TEA officials said they didn't do that for several reasons, including cost, printing deadlines and concern that changing the order of questions could affect the validity of scores.

Instead, the agency will analyze the block of questions on every TAKS test that don't count toward a student's score and are being tried out for use in future exams. For each grade and subject, TEA has about 40 different sets of those so-called field questions. The rest of the test is identical for everyone.

Testing experts consider using multiple versions of each test one of the most effective ways to prevent answer copying.

"If TEA can produce 40 different forms for the field test items without making errors, then I don't see why they would be concerned in creating, say, four versions of the real questions," Dr. Wesolowsky said.

Mr. Resnick said he agrees different versions of the TAKS would prevent cheating.

"It's frustrating that we can put all these measures in place, and a lot of them wouldn't be necessary if the test were designed more securely to begin with," he said.

Criss Cloudt, the TEA associate commissioner over testing, said such changes require careful consideration by test developers.

"We were too far down the path this year in terms of test development to consider modifying our practice," she said.

But she added: "Nothing is off the table for future consideration."

SIGN HERE - MAYBE

To deter cheating, students in ninth, 10th and 11th grades will be asked, but not required, to sign an honor statement right before taking the TAKS. It states:

"By signing my name, I agree that I will not give or receive unauthorized assistance during the test. I understand that giving or receiving unauthorized assistance during the test is cheating and may result in the invalidation of my test results."

TAKS TIPS

The season of TAKS begins Wednesday in school districts across Texas. Here are some tips for kids who'll be in the testing hot seat:

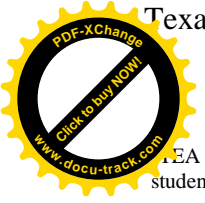
- Go to bed early the night before the test.
- Eat a healthful breakfast the morning of the test.
- Wear comfortable clothes; layers let you adjust to the room's temperature.
- Picture yourself doing well. A positive attitude will help you score higher.
- If you feel nervous, close your eyes and breathe deeply to calm yourself.

EXTRA STEPS TO PREVENT CHEATING

The Texas Education Agency is taking extra precautions starting this year to prevent and detect cheating on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills tests. Here are some of them:

BEFORE THE TEST

- High school students are asked to sign an honor code saying they won't cheat.



TEA has added more information in state testing manuals about penalties for students and teachers caught cheating.

DURING THE TEST

- State monitors will visit all campuses with persistently low TAKS scores to make sure proper testing procedures are followed. Monitors will also make surprise visits at other campuses across the state.
- Teachers must keep seating charts for all tests. If students are later suspected of copying answers from classmates, the charts will show whether they sat near one another.

AFTER THE TEST

- The state will analyze blocks of test questions for evidence of students copying off one another. The questions to be analyzed don't count toward a student's score; they're being tried out for inclusion in future exams.
- School districts must keep copies of seating charts and other testing materials for five years. Previously, it was just one year.