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FUTURE DAWGS

Members of Jefferson youth baseball teams pose with members of the Jefferson High School squad prior to the start of Tuesday's game against Tatum. The annual Youth Baseball Night drew a large crowd. Photo by Wayne Grubbs.

Is STAAR too hard on young readers? The standardized test is in lawmakers' crosshairs again.

By ALIYYA SWABY
Texas Tribune

Texas' unpopular statewide standardized test is once again caught in legislative crosshairs, this time after a controversial *Texas Monthly* article has questioned whether the test was evaluating elementary and middle school students based on reading passages that were one to three grades above their level.

Texas Education Commissioner Mike Morath, along with academic experts and educators, will appear before the House Public Education Committee on Tuesday to answer questions about the test, known as the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness, or STAAR. Then, the panel will consider a slate of bills proposing slashing the number of state-required STAAR exams.

Educators and parents have been arguing for years that the STAAR is too high-stakes and an inaccurate measure of whether students are academically succeeding. Lawmakers have generally been sympathetic to this argument, passing laws over the last several years to drastically reduce the number of required exams and shorten the length of some assessments.

But the *Texas Monthly* story has brought a new round of scrutiny. The article is based on two studies, from 2012 and 2016, which ran test passages through formulas designed to analyze their complexity and found they were generally too challenging for students. Education advocates are pointing to the studies to argue that the state is wrongly judging whether students can read at grade level, placing them in needless remedial instruction and unnecessarily penalizing schools and districts.

Student scores on the STAAR are the main component in determining school and district ratings, and part of determining whether students have learned enough to move up a grade or graduate. In 2018, just 46 percent of Texas students were at or above grade level for reading or English.

"Politically, there's probably more of an appetite this session to do something about STAAR," said state Rep. Gary VanDeaver, R-New Boston, a member of the House Public Education Committee. "What that is remains to be seen."

VanDeaver will present a bill to the committee Tuesday rolling back the number of state-required STAAR exams, closer to the federally-required minimum.

"This new information coming out certainly gives us an opportunity to push the pause button and do some real research" on STAAR's merits, he said.

Texas Education Agency officials, meanwhile, are defending the test. Two days after the *Texas Monthly* article was published, the agency sent a letter to lawmakers saying that the formula used in the studies is "inappropriate" for judging whether STAAR exams are on grade level.

That formula — called a "Lexile measure" — uses factors such as the number of syllables per word to judge the complexity of a book or passage. Generally, teachers use Lexile measures to match students with texts that match their reading ability or monitor whether their skills are growing, according to Eleanor Sanford-Moore, senior vice-president of

research and development for MetaMetrics, which owns Lexile.

Lexile measures are not used to match a text to a certain grade level, and they have limited use in determining whether a state assessment like STAAR is grade-appropriate.

"These types of [state standardized] tests will have a range in the difficulty of passages so that students of differing ability levels can have access to passages at their reading level," Sanford-Moore said in a statement to the Tribune.

But advocates argue that teachers are expected to teach grade-level text in the classroom, and use Lexile measures as one piece of evidence showing whether students are succeeding.

"If you have a kid and you've told their parents in parent conferences that their student is doing well, they're making progress, they're reading on grade level, and here's all the data we have to show your student is doing well — and then it comes back with the label of approaches grade level? That is confusing to teachers," said Dee Carney, associate at consulting firm Moak, Casey and Associates, and part of the coalition calling for the state to reconsider using STAAR.

The TEA's memo also said Texas' performance in elementary school reading has stagnated since 2007, according to national measures, and the STAAR results match this trend. It also pointed out that the TEA already updated the STAAR to better align with grade level after similar outcry in 2016, in order to "increase public confidence in the STAAR." Despite the change, STAAR results still remain flat.

The intensified backlash against STAAR could have immediate ramifications for legislation this session, since lawmakers earlier this session mulled school finance reform measures that could tie school or teacher funding to standardized test results.

"It's no surprise that opponents of tying small amounts of state funding to critical student outcomes like literacy have resurrected outdated analyses of STAAR," said Will Fullerton, executive director of Texas Aspires, a policy group that often advocates for stricter state accountability. "But it's much easier to try to convince people that STAAR has flaws than it is to defend the low number of students in Texas who can read on grade level."

The backlash could also impact the state's decision to levy sanctions on districts like Houston ISD, which has four chronically low-performing campuses. At least one lawmaker is already calling for a reprieve until an investigation of STAAR's difficulty is complete.

"During the investigation, all school closures and school accountability evaluations should be halted until there is certainty about STAAR's reliability," said state Rep. Diego Bernal, D-San Antonio, in a statement the night the *Texas Monthly* article ran. "TEA owes a public explanation of the current situation to the thousands of parents and students who are now questioning whether their children are underperforming."

It is unclear whether the Senate will carry out its own investigation of the test. Sen. Larry Taylor,

More on STARR on page 6

STEP ONE: Learning How to Deal with Feral Cat Colonies

By BOB PALMER
Jimblecute News Editor

Almost everyone talks about annoying feral cats in Jefferson.

One group finally has decided to do something about it. Or, they are learning what they can do about it.

"This is not something that is going to happen tomorrow," said Sharon Goolsby, one of the organizers of an informational meeting last week. "We've got a long way to go. There are a lot of steps that have to be put in place, first."

Jefferson Police Chief Gary Amburn recognizes the size of the problem.

"They're (feral cats) everywhere," Amburn said. "There must be hundreds of them."

Representatives of Longview's Gatos Amigos met with interested residents to lay out the essentials of a "Trap Neuter Release" program Thursday.

Gatos provides traps to capture the feral cat colony. The cats are then neutered and returned to the person who will provide post-operative care for a day and then continue to ensure the cats have food and water.

"We are anxious to get this going," Laura Goldman of Paws and Claws on the Bayou said. "Several things must happen first. We must find a veterinarian who will perform the surgeries, hopefully at a discounted rate. We will need enough volunteers to care for the cats for about 24 hours, in a climate-controlled environment, after the surgery."

Goldman noted Amigos representatives said last week they only trap during moderate seasons, not extreme heat or cold and that trapping is most successful at dusk.

"We also must have people available to transport the animals to and from the vet," Goldman said. "Whoever is feeding or caring for the feral cats (known as caregivers) must sign an agreement also."

A lot more is involved than just catch and return.

"After initial trapping, cats must be refused food and water overnight for successful surgery," Goldman said. "We need to purchase several traps, at a cost of about \$75. It would be nice if we could ask the public and businesses if they are interested in donating the cost of a trap."

Kimberly Parsons, president of Friends of Jefferson Animals, also supports the TNR concept.

"It is one of those situations," Parsons said. "It's going to take a village. We have to get our ducks in a row."

Literature distributed by Gatos Amigos praised TNR as "a method for humanely and effectively managing feral cat colonies and reducing cat populations."

The group also rejected alternatives like denying food to feral cat colonies.

"Attempts to make feral cats go away by banning

feeding usually results in suffering for the cats and increased conflict with people who want to feed them," Gatos Amigos maintained.

Not everyone agrees.

Joan Meiners, an Ecology Ph.D. candidate at the University of Florida and a summer environmental reporter for NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune, disparaged feral cats in a July post last year.

"Decades of research calls for greater measures to control feral cats," Meiners, who also reported claims of alleged connections between cats and schizophrenia in humans, wrote. "Meanwhile, evidence that cats can control rat populations or can be controlled by trap-neuter-release programs is lacking. Scientists suspect the disconnect between the public perception and the reality of the risk derives from our emotional attachment to cats."

Parson's experience has been different.

"My husband and I lived in Waco a long time," Parsons



Mary Jo Murphy and Cathy Griffin with Longview's Gatos Amigos explain that city's "Trap Neuter Release" program to help manage the feral cat population to interested Jefferson residents last week.

said. "The largest city park had hundreds of cats. I realize this is anecdotal, but Waco began a TNR program and the number of cats went down."

The Parsons also own cats.

"We have two cats and we have not had rats or snakes," Parsons said.

Goolsby agreed.

"The cats do serve a good purpose," Goolsby said. "They kill the vermin like rats, mice and pigeons."

Goolsby had one caveat.

"The feral cats have to be controlled," Goolsby said. "The best way, the most humane way, is through TNR."

More on FERAL CATS on page 7



Voting Box Changes

Marion County Clerk Vickie Smith explains to commissioners, Monday, their vote endorsing Countywide Election Day Polling Precincts would be a "first step" toward reducing the number of Election Day polls from 10 to seven. Voters would be allowed to cast their ballots, however, in any box in the county without having to return to the poll associated with their residence. If the move to seven boxes proved successful, the county could go to five polls, Smith said. "I think this is a really good thing," County Judge Leward LaFleur said.

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