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## So Much for No Child Left Behind

School test scores rise as more low-scoring students drop out.

By [Margaret Downing](#)

Published: April 10, 2008

Daniel Kramer



Researcher Linda McSpadden McNeil says some kids had to take ninth-grade courses — even ones they'd passed — over and over again.

**Subject(s):** [No Child Left Behind](#), [school graduation rates](#), [low-scoring dropouts](#), [misleading test scores](#), [Texas schools](#)

A few years ago, I signed on as a volunteer tutor at my local elementary. I was matched with a student — I'll call him Eddie — who was failing miserably at both the math and English portions of the TAAS (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills), a statewide minimal skills test that was the precursor to today's TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills).

I took him on in math, it being the worst of all his subjects, and began a series of one-on-one weekly meetings. It soon became apparent that while Eddie's multiplication

and division skills were very shaky, his ability to subtract once we got into double digits was no better. Asked to compute 25 minus 17, Eddie's eyes darted around the room looking for an escape hatch. There were too many numbers to count on his fingers.

Word problems only ramped up the agony.

We continued meeting. I took him back to subtraction and then up to multiplication and division. I talked with his teacher, who'd show me more failed papers, and then Eddie and I would go over them.

He began to improve. I wasn't the perfect teacher but I was someone paying extra attention. The grades on his class math tests weren't stellar, but better.

The week after the TAAS, I showed up for my session with Eddie. Of course the scores wouldn't be reported for a while, but we were optimistic. Then the teacher asked what I was

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doing there. The TAAS is done, she said. You're through.

There were several weeks still to go in the school year. Eddie was still Eddie. He still needed a lot of extra help with his math and his English and probably other subjects as well.

As I walked out of the school after being dismissed, I realized I hadn't been helping a kid. I'd been helping a kid prepare for the state test, which really meant that I'd been helping that school toward a higher accountability rating so the teacher and the principal could be sure of their jobs.

I thought of Eddie when I was talking with Rice professor Linda McSpadden McNeil, who has co-authored a study showing that the increase in Texas's statewide test scores directly correlates to lower graduation rates.

In fact, it contributes to them, she believes.

Scores have been rising, not because all these students have suddenly mastered the TAKS, but because low-scoring students have been forced out by administrators whose own job success depends on good student scores.

After all, who wants to carry an Eddie on his record?

Originally the idea of No Child Left Behind was that by using standardized testing, the weak areas in a student's education could be discovered and rectified. Like a diagnostic test on a car's engine, problems would be identified and repaired. Teachers would be retrained to become better educators. No child, especially no minority child, would be overlooked, and because of that, a lot of minority leaders bought into the change big time.

In Texas, we didn't have to wait for No Child Left Behind. By the time it was signed into law in 2002, our kids had already experienced years of state tests from TABS to TEAMS to TAAS. In fact, NCLB was modeled on the Texas program — then being referred to as the Texas Miracle — and basically used the model that HISD employed (HISD Superintendent Rod Paige tied the state test scores to principals' performance evaluations). All this was endorsed by the former governor and now President George W. Bush. According to NCLB, all students should be performing at grade level by 2014.

The reality is that NCLB has saddled public school students with unending tests and drills. With practice tests (starting with learning how to "bubble" in kindergarten) and the tests themselves, Texas students now may spend 36 days in testing hell each year, out of 185 days they have to go to school, according to a recent article in the *TSTA Advocate*, a publication of the Texas State Teachers Association. (This doesn't include tutoring, taking field tests to help the Texas Education Agency develop future tests or taking re-tests.) Administrators like to insist that the testing matches what the curriculum is teaching, but that's obviously not the case or else why would the normal course of studies be shoved aside for practice drills?

And if the tests are supposed to be helpful, why are they given toward the end of the school year instead of

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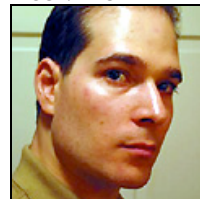
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at the start, when there would be time for teachers to actually teach to the deficits?

There are honors/GT science classes in Texas at the high school level doing absolutely no lab work, or at least none until after the spring TAKS tests. According to Sherrie Matula, a veteran teacher who's running for a state representative seat out of Pasadena, "project" work in which students write about scientific principles often replaces any hands-on experimentation. There is no time (and little money) for lab work that more and more these days is reserved for college students, she says.

In the study, entitled "Avoidable Losses: High-Stakes Accountability and the Dropout Crisis," McNeil (with the Rice Center for Education) along with Eileen Coppola and Judy Radigan from Rice and Julian Vasquez Heilig from the University of Texas at Austin, analyzed data from more than 271,000 students in an unnamed urban school district over a seven-year period ending in 2002. They not only ran numbers, they interviewed students and educators and recorded their sessions.

McNeil refuses to disclose what school district was studied. In presentations she has made around the state, teachers from several big-city districts have approached her, certain she is talking about them.

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