

## TAKS CHEATING? REPORT SAYS YES By Christine DeLoma

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About one in 12 Texas schools appear to have had suspicious student test scores on the 2005 Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) test according to a report commissioned by the Texas Education Agency (TEA). Critics are also calling into question the validity of TAKS as a high-stakes testing tool in measuring student achievement.

According to the report conducted by Caveon Test Security, testing irregularities may have occurred in 8.9 percent of public schools in Texas .

Questions revolving around students cheating on the TAKS test is nothing new. Last year the Dallas Morning News published an expose on alleged TAKS cheating within a school district on Dallas ' south side. Nearly every student at the poor-performing Wilmer Elementary School received a perfect score on the TAKS exam.

The TEA commissioned Caveon to look into testing irregularities for the Spring 2005 TAKS test. The report "identified several types of statistical inconsistencies which indicate that testing irregularities may have occurred." Caveon, however, states that the statistical inconsistencies "represent a very small fraction of all TAKS 2005 test results."

Here's what they found:

\* In 609 of the 7,112 public schools throughout Texas , statistical inconsistencies were found in the TAKS test results, representing 1% (702 of 73,793) of classrooms throughout Texas .

\* A greater proportion of statistical inconsistencies were found in the Math and Science tests than the Reading and Social Studies tests.

\* Very similar test responses between student tests was cited as the largest contributor to the statistical inconsistencies found on the TAKS tests. According to Caveon, testing irregularities may happen when students copy answers from each other, when teachers erase and modify answers in blocks so the same set of answers appear across multiple answer sheets, or when students study together in pairs or groups.

Extreme example of cheating

One of the most extreme examples cited by Caveon &ndash; albeit an isolated incident &ndash; occurred in an 11 th grade math class where 100 percent of the 91 students passed the test. The state average passing rate is 81 percent. Every single test examined in the class had some form of anomaly.

\* 98 percent of the tests had very similar answers, when statistically only 6 percent should have shown similarities.

\* 55 percent of the tests were labeled "aberrant." A test can be labeled aberrant when the student is able to answer difficult questions correctly, but is unable to answer the easy questions correctly. The average rate of aberrance on the TAKS test is only 4 percent.

\* 49 percent of the students in this 11 th grade math class also posted unusually high gains in their test scores, when compared to last year's scores. The statewide average for very high gains in test scores is only 5 percent.

The TEA issued a response to the report cautioning that Caveon's finding of statistical irregularities at 8.6 percent of schools does not mean that the report found testing irregularities in 8.6 percent of schools. The report "cannot be taken as evidence of the percent of testing irregularities occurring during the spring 2005 administration." Their point being that a correlation does not necessarily imply causation.

Nonetheless, the Caveon report noted that it took a very conservative approach in performing its analysis so that it is reasonable to infer that testing irregularities may be a likely reason for the statistical anomalies. Caveon recommended that TEA investigate each incident to determine if actual cheating occurred.

The TEA also emphasized that according to the report, the statistical irregularities found within the TAKS 2005 test results were not evidence of a widespread phenomenon but that it "cannot afford to dismiss the findings either."

"TEA takes seriously the security of the state assessment program and needs to identify a reasonable approach to following up on the Caveon findings given resources available for this effort," wrote the agency.

Caveon recommended that the TEA increase its monitoring efforts during administration of TAKS. However according to

TEA, "this is not a practicable suggestion for limited staff resources, given the number of campuses and districts in a state the size of Texas ."

The TEA's response to the findings of the Caveon report didn't sit well with Democratic gubernatorial candidate Chris Bell who held a news conference May 24 on the subject. "Cheating on the TAKS test is unacceptable. Anything short of a serious investigation is equally unacceptable," Bell said.

According to TEA, its Security Task Force in the Student Assessment Division will use the Caveon report and compare it to its own irregularity reports from the spring 2005 TAKS test to "determine if there is supporting evidence of testing irregularities."

Are TAKS scores relevant?

Student TAKS scores are up in most grades this year according to the Texas Education Agency which recently released the Spring 2006 test results.

Highlights of the statewide findings released this week by the TEA:

\* 94 percent of 11 th grade students passed the social studies portion of the TAKS test.

\* 90 percent of seventh graders passed the writing exam

\* 90 percent of fourth graders passed the Spanish version of the writing exam.

Are kids are really smart or is it really easy to pass the TAKS test?

What must be taken into account is the fact that on some on the tests the bar is set so low, it is very difficult to for students to fail. For example, the 94 percent of eleventh grade students who passed the social studies portion of the TAKS exam needed to answer only half of the questions correctly in order to pass. Seventh graders needed only 59 percent to pass the writing test and fourth graders taking the Spanish writing exam needed only 56 percent to pass.

According to testing expert Don McLaughlin, the problem with many standardized tests is that some states set the passing standard too low. McLaughlin conducted research for the National Center for Education Statistics to compare state-designed tests to the federally administered test, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). He found that state "achievement standards vary haphazardly from state to state&hellip;"

In fact, McLaughlin found that Texas ranks near the bottom in 4 th grade reading standards, second only to Mississippi . Only Mississippi 's 4 th grade reading exam is easier than Texas ' TAKS test.

In other words, a student may pass the Texas 4 th grade reading TAKS test with flying colors where the standards are much lower, but the same students may fail miserably if he took the test in Massachusetts where the standards are much higher.

In a similar study, researchers Paul Peterson and Frederick Hess of the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research gave the TAKS 4 th grade reading test an F. Peterson and Hess graded the states based on how much easier it was to be labeled "proficient" on a state assessment test as compared to the NAEP.

On the positive side, Peterson and Hess noted that Texas was among the handful of states that "significantly boosted their proficiency standards relative to NAEP" over the past two years. Texas overall grade improved from an F in 2003 to a D+ in 2005.

The higher grade may be due in part to the State Board of Education's phase-in approach that moves the passing standard from a lower standard in the first year of the TAKS test to subsequent higher standards each year thereafter.

Why cheat on an easy test?

Even though the passing standards on the TAKS test are low compared to other states, Texas public schools are held to certain standard accountability measures which, in part, depend upon the success or failure rate of students taking the TAKS. Low-performing schools, although rare, can be shut down if a high percentage of their students do not pass the TAKS year after year.

It may be that the high-stakes nature of state assessment tests can create an incentive for mischief.

"Tests can be very useful to teachers, parents, and students when they identify areas in which teaching and learning should be concentrated, but when they are used to guide instruction, with high stakes for teachers and school

administrators, they become an enemy of schools," McLaughlin wrote in an essay on his website. "Let's have tests and test scores that are meaningful to teachers and parents, and drop the use of reporting percentages of students achieving standards as a way to identify schools as 'bad.'"

Although the Caveon report did not identify the 609 schools which were found to have statistical anomalies in their TAKS test results, it did note that many of problems were found within individual classrooms, as opposed to district wide.

In some cases the incentive to get students to pass the TAKS test is so great that some schools have resorted to free giveaways as a reward for passing the TAKS. This week the J.R. Harris Elementary School in concert with the Harris County Republican Party announced that it is giving away 300 new bikes to any student who passes the TAKS.