



Why Texas Must Keep Individual Graduation Committees

“Testing is driving a huge amount of what goes on in schools. I think it is driving a disproportionate amount of what goes on in schools, and it’s changed the focus to testing rather than a focus on learning...It’s created a negative environment in which kids don’t think about going to school as a point of learning. They think about going to school to take a test. Teachers are quitting in huge numbers. Employees are frustrated because people aren’t learning necessarily the skills that they need in their employment situation. And parents just, quite honestly, want out of the system.”

– *Chairman Jimmie Don Aycock, Texas Commission on Next Generation of Assessment and Accountability, February 2016*

“We also should be concerned about treating the test as some sort of perfect measure.”

– *Senator Kel Seliger, Texas Senate Education Committee, February 19, 2015*

“There seems to be some sort of disconnect between our test and real student capabilities”

– *Chairman Larry Taylor, Texas Senate Education Committee, February 19, 2015*

“We raise the standards, and we test more intensively, and all during that time we have now seen a fairly precipitous decline in our college readiness testing mechanism. I find that both puzzling and somewhat troubling.” – *Chairman Jimmie Don Aycock, Texas House Public Education Committee, October 8, 2014*

“We don’t trust this test.” – *Honorable Dan Patrick, Lieutenant Governor, August 26, 2014*

One test score on one day should not dictate if 12th graders deserve a high school diploma. A single STAAR score should not be holding our children back. Texas is too strong and proud to allow tens of thousands of children to be told that, regardless of all their academic achievements, one STAAR test can prevent them from moving forward.

Individual Graduation Committees are one safety net in place to help Texas students succeed after high school. Only 2% of the 313,387 graduates in 2015 graduated utilizing an IGC. The graduation committees help many of our most at-risk students fulfill their potential with a post-secondary experience in college, military, or technical training programs.

Student Success through Individual Graduation Committees

➤ Regan Lively, a dyslexic student from Flower Mound, failed the U.S. History STAAR test several times before utilizing an Individual Graduation Committee to graduate from high school. Regan received a \$16,000 scholarship to Oklahoma Christian University, where she now attends and earned an A in her U.S. History class.



➤ Mason Stifflemire, 20, graduated from Taylor High School after dropping out. Stifflemire, who has dyslexia, failed the English II exam five times, eventually falling short by one point. Discouraged, he dropped out in April 2014. But after the law passed in May 2015, he returned to school, completed the additional required work, and finished in December. He now attends Texas State Technical College and is pursuing his certification in combination welding.



--Taboada, Melissa B., September 24, 2016, "Three Central Texas Students Who Graduated Thanks to a New Law", Austin American-Statesman.

<http://www.mystatesman.com/news/local/three-central-texas-students-who-graduated-thanks-new-law/Z6Ge4iphK2b9wvh73KINBN/>

District Stories of Students Who Graduated with an IGC

➤ One student, 3 years removed from the Philippine Islands, was still considered an ELL student his senior year. Although this student passed 3 of the 5 EOC assessments, mastery eluded him on both the English I and II assessments...Our district created a Senior Student Portfolio project to incorporate the standards included in the English assessments. We were all amazed by his presentation and his refusal to give up when it became apparent he was not going to satisfy the EOC graduation requirement. The path created by Individual Graduation Committees gave him renewed hope. **Considering that this young man could not speak English three years prior, we believed the legislation provided him with an opportunity that would have been denied him otherwise because of legitimate barriers outside his control.** – *Holland ISD*

➤ One student completed the Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) program. After graduating with an IGC, she was planning to work while continuing her studies to become a Licensed Vocational Nurse (LVN) – *Smithville ISD*

➤ Of the three students graduating by SB149, one was an ESL student, one was a special education student, and one of the students is currently enrolled in the Welding program at TSTC in Breckenridge. He did receive a local scholarship and DARS assistance. – *Gorman ISD*

➤ One Crosby High School student received a football scholarship and would not have been able to attend his 4-year university and play football without the IGC process. Two ESL students (sisters) came to our school 3 years prior to graduation, and could speak very little English. They ended up excelling in their class work, conducting themselves as model students, but were only able to pass ONE of their required English EOC assessments. Without the IGC process, these students would not have graduated; moreover, the IGC committee feels strongly that they both have bright and productive futures. – *Crosby ISD*

➤ One of our students who graduated this year with an IGC was a homeless student who struggles with family issues his entire childhood...The road was not easy, but he ended up speaking with an army recruiter who visits our school, and eventually enlisted. This student was frustrated and did not see much in his future, but the option of an IGC allowed him to earn his diploma and move on to a future that might not otherwise have been possible. – *Whitney ISD*

➤ The IGC process has been invaluable for our students who have had to work full-time, have moved a lot, are young parents, or struggle with other issues that make success on standardized testing a huge challenge. – *Richardson ISD*

➤ As a Bullard High School Academic Advisor, I have personally witnessed the benefit of the IGC decision to graduate one of my former students. High school graduation was a confidence boost that he needed. He has taken the opportunity to grow into a productive, motivated, young man. – *Bullard ISD*

2015 Personal Stories of Students in Need of an IGC for Graduation

➤ My son, a senior in high school, is at risk of not graduating because of this. This child is a well behaved, well mannered, loved by all kind of kids. He does well in all his classes and has NEVER failed a subject. He is involved in FFA and has been a chapter officer for the past 3 years, currently FFA District Vice President, has attended and run leadership development programs for our youth, has been in the Welding program for 4 years and is planning on being a welder after graduation. He is active in his community, plays sports, and holds down a full time job in his career choice field. **Only problem is this young man, who has done so well in everything else, has taken the English 1 STAAR 11 times and English 2 STAAR 9 times,** and has never been able to pass it even after many years of extra classes, before and after school tutoring, and loss of his summers to get extra help so he could graduate. Not to mention the sick to his stomach, can't eat, can't sleep, freak out and cry, test stress moments we have to go through year after year. I know it is not just my son going through this, and we need to do something before they give up. **There is absolutely nothing worse than hearing your child say "I might as well just quit because I'm never going to be able to walk [the stage]."** These children ARE prepared for the next stage in their lives; it's these darn tests that are holding them back.
- Anna White-Horn

➤ Thank you for asking me for my son's story. He is a senior this year, and one of the 28,000 students at risk caught in the net of the state regulations about passing certain EOC STAAR exams to graduate. My son has excellent attendance; he has been very involved in Band all four years and in Leadership. **He is planning on enlisting in the US Air Force and has already passed the entrance exams and has been told he has many wonderful options there. He is excited for his future, but it unfortunately lies in the balance because of the EOC US History exam he must pass to graduate.** He will have all of his credit hours and proven mastery of his courses this year, so I do not understand why the one thing that will ultimately determine my son's future is a high stakes exam. I want to be extremely clear – I do not blame the school, the district or the teachers – my son is not perfect, and I will never claim him to be, and they have done the best they could. But he is so overwhelmed and stressed about this exam that I am afraid no amount of tutoring and extra help will overcome the anxiety he is facing about failing this exam yet again, and I cannot as a parent ignore that. Each time he has had to take it, his score has declined and that is a huge mental hurdle. He is very aware of what is at stake. We have read story after story about good kids who never passed that exam who are now working in restaurants. Conversely, we have also read stories about graduation committees being formed (as I know exist in other states) that can still allow kids like my son to graduate if he has proven mastery of concepts in lieu of passing these high stakes tests. That is what I want for my son. A chance at the life he is dreaming about. - Suzanne Whoolery, a concerned parent

➤ Our son was an A student in every subject but could not pass one of the English EOC tests two years in a row...he graduated this year as a junior but will never receive that certificate and recognition from the state because we home schooled him his 4th year of English and Social Studies...how many kids are labeled "drop outs " because of these insane tests?? - Al Zolli

➤ My son, a junior, who is dyslexic/dysgraphic and receives extra time, was at risk. It took him three times to pass each English EOC. He is an A/B student with a rare C (math), an Eagle Scout, a member of the Academy of Finance, a member of the National Technical Honor Society and a great kid. The toll, stress and pressure on him were immense with extra tutoring on top of academic load and ACT/SAT testing. I was getting prepared to leave the public system so he could realize his dream of going to college with some kind of technology major. Now he is struggling with yet another set of standardized tests for college. I have grown to hate our educational system with all its emphasis on standardized testing! Please stop the madness. - Amy Jean Watkins

➤ Hello. I am the mother of a dyslexic eighth grader who is gifted in the sense of engineering and mechanics. He has taken bicycles, weed eaters and other small motors apart and put them back together brilliantly. He's an extremely hard worker choosing to take accelerated math and science where his interest and intelligence lies ... The problem is this year he has to take the EOC for algebra one. Teachers today have not one minute of training in their college degree to teach dyslexic students. Therefore, we put it on the child to make the teacher's lesson work for them, and then expect him to pass a high-stakes test? ... There are testing accommodations for dyslexics; however, they widely vary but someone's interpretation, skill or knowledge with no training. I will be glad to testify that the state is setting students up for failure. These tests could change my son's goal of wanting a master's degree in engineering to not being able to graduate. - Amanda Lewis Wallace

➤ My son is in 5th grade now, and he is exactly the type of student who would benefit from a common sense approach. He was diagnosed at age 4 with cancer (leukemia) and spent 3+ years on daily chemotherapy. He missed much instructional time during early elementary school. Once he was finished with chemotherapy in 2nd grade, he had a hard time catching up in reading. After testing, we found out he is dyslexic. He was then "placed" into 3rd grade vs. being "promoted" into 3rd grade, which was a good call to allow him flexibility as he caught up. We then spent a few years in private school to address his dyslexia and allow him to catch up in other ways as well. Last year, we moved back into our public school system in 5th grade. He did not pass the Math STAAR test, but was recommended to again stay with his class and move on to 6th grade. He been diagnosed as dyslexic, dysgraphic and dyspraxic but is succeeding in school each day. He has great teachers who do a wonderful job in the classroom and provide appropriate accommodations that allow him to complete assignments and assessments without additional barriers. I'm sure as his education unfolds, he will also face new challenges...as that's the reality of chemo's effects on a young, developing mind. I know he's not alone in the challenges he faces both as a cancer survivor (1000+ kids diagnosed annually with cancer in Texas) and as a kid with learning differences. However, I see him working daily with the support of his teachers and our family to overcome those challenges. And, he's doing this very well in a high-achieving school district (Highland Park in Dallas). There may be a day he can't pass an EOC exam because it's a poor measure of his understanding or because its presentation didn't allow him to show what he knew. Please allow those who can see the "whole child" the ability to make the final call about his readiness for high school graduation. - Dallas parent