

## **Rattling the Foundations: A High Stakes Quandary**

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### ***Abstract***

*The past four years have seen major changes, and dramatic improvement in the passing rate in the Preparation Process for State Certification Exam of Education Students enrolled in a South Texas University. An explanation and description of the changes resulting in the improvement, and the steps the University has taken to maintain higher passing scores on the first attempt are the bases of this report.*

**Keywords:** University; Testing; Interventions; Challenges.

### ***Introduction***

Universities, like all educational entities, are critical in the backbone of excellence in preparation of students inspired by great teachers. The wave of high stakes assessment that has swept the nation for decades continues to rattle the foundation of such establishments (Di Paola & Hoy 2014).

### ***Overview of Testing Culture***

In 2011-12, the Texas Education Agency placed sanctions on the South Texas University for failing to meet, two years in a row, the required minimum passing standards of all educator preparation programs (Texas Education Agency, 2015). Prior to this audit, students were granted permission to take the exams without any preparation/review. The university designed several interventions to help raise the passing level. The audit, without a doubt, left a lasting effect on test preparation for both, undergraduate students and faculty. As teacher preparation and improvement have been at the core of school reform in Texas since 1982, with accountability being the battle-cry of the politicians, there has been a scramble to steadily and consistently raise students' scores in our public schools, from third grade through high school, continuing on to improved teacher preparation in order to obtain better test scores, a repetitive cycle continuing for the past 30 years in Texas (Flores & Clark, 2003). Much discussion continues as to the validity and the predictive value of such an emphatic focus on standardized exams, which, aim to, qualify students, rate schools, or assess a teacher's worth (Baker, 2014). Yet, politicians continue to reign, and testing continues in Texas.

High stakes testing may not be making a strong, positive impact on educational levels, from elementary school through collegial level (Wright, 2015). While passing an exam may indicate that one knows the subject matter, it is not a guarantee (Marzano, Frontier, & Livingston, 2011). Some may just be considered lucky guessers. Even if one masters a teacher certification exam, it does not indicate that a quality teacher has been credentialed. The corollary to this is that some great teachers in the classroom cannot pass the exams (Frey, 2014). Their brains do not focus nor recognize multiple choice formats. Given this as a preamble to the report, we can see why there has been so much ambivalence to the required testing and to the admission of students to the education program. At the same time we are trying to attract qualified, intelligent candidates to the teaching profession, we are excluding many, who might have developed into a great teacher, by the ones of standardized exams. Some highly qualified people simply walk away. Today, prior to recommending employees for a Professional Teaching contract, all public school districts require educators to be certified in the Content Area of Specialization and the Professional Pedagogical Responsibilities (Texas Education Agency, 2015).

### ***The Collision Course***

This study identifies the effects of yearly test preparation interventions on Texas Educator Certification Exams passing rates over a four year time frame for undergraduate students enrolled in a South Texas University's College of Education. Currently, students must master the Texas Examination of Educator Standards (TEXES) prior to enrolling in the field experience/Student Teaching course (Texas Education Agency, 2015). The exam is designed to assess a candidate's knowledge and skills in a content area as well as pedagogical professional responsibilities. The content area exam includes core subjects. Although this study focused on 4 academic years: 11/12, 12/13, 13/14 and 14/15, the intent is to provide insight into test readiness and the process it entailed. For the 2011-2012 academic year, a decline in the university's percentage passing scores occurred. The Texas Education Agency's required score for passing was set at 80%. 200 students tested, 140 students passed, representing 70% of university's students passing the exam. In the subsequent academic year, 2012-13, the TEA passing rate remained at 80% , and the South Texas University's passing rate went up to 96%, 84 tested, and 81 passed. In 2013-14, again the Texas Education Agency base required to pass was still at 80%. The South Texas University's passing rate went up to 98%, 165 tested, and 162 passed. The 2014-2015 academic year reflected the same results as in 2013-2014. Again, the Texas Education Agency rate required to pass was still at 80%. The South Texas University's passing rate held steady at 98%, 172 tested and 169 passed.

### ***Riding the High-Tide***

Guidelines were implemented for students on how to better prepare for the exams, urging for students to be ready for the exam. Flyers were distributed detailing specific information. Concrete advice and direction was stipulated. It is important to note that a collaborative effort was delineated with the College of Arts and Sciences and College of Education to promote university's goal to have students sit for the TExES exam once and pass the exam on a first attempt. True to form, candidates were able to pass their exams more often on the first attempt and with higher scores than needed. For those students who had received Admission to the College of Education, a three-step plan was presented. Upon initial admission, students enrolled in the Block I, a field experience portion of the degree plan, were required to complete an order form for Content Exam- Certify Teacher preparation guide (Certify Teacher, 2015).

Secondly, for those students who had progressed towards Block II, the second field placement portion of the degree plan, the preparatory process continued. Having mastered the Content Exam during Block I, they were asked to complete Certify Teacher Pretest B. Once this exam had been mastered, completion of Certify Teacher Randomized Test at 90% passing score was expected. Data Sheets logging readiness scores were kept on file for review and authorization for practice test delivered at a Testing Center on campus. If successful completion of Practice Test was secured, approval to take the TEXES exam was granted. At this point, students were expected to pass the TEXES Content Exam. The last phase of the Field Placement requirement, Block III, required students to submit Order form for PPR Exam- Certify Teacher. Data Sheets logging readiness scores were kept on file for review and authorization for practice test delivered at a Testing Center on campus.

The Administrative Team of the College of Education assigned students to a faculty adviser, based on their areas of specialization, for regular monitoring of progress in the preparation process. Faculty members were to support, encourage, and guide students throughout the process of readiness for test taking. It became obvious that the university staff worked diligently to strengthen the core of students who would decide to take the exam. Once the three-step plan was modeled and supplied to undergraduates, and faculty advisors or supporters were assigned, it appeared fewer students chose to pursue the teacher exam, and fewer students decided to take the exam until they were really ready, prepared to pass on the first attempt.

### ***An Unresolved Reality***

At first glance the passing rates appear to be impressive, but realistically the number of students actually testing has dropped significantly. This appears to be the trend across the country. Based on the data, it becomes essential that we look at what the numbers tell. Obviously, this South Texas University, through its Guidelines for Test Taking, to the faculty advisor in place with each student to support and guide him/her through the testing readiness process, many fewer students have taken the exam the past three years. While this has raised dramatically the passing rate, it also means we are dealing with a much lower number of students who are in the teaching pool.

## **Conclusions**

What may this signify for education in the long run?

It may mean that students are prolonging their test-taking until they are fully ready, which could be a good thing, keeping an institution's passing percentage high to satisfy the state's norms. It may also mean that fewer students are entering the field of teaching. Or, those who want to teach, but encounter issues with exams, may choose to work in private schools, where certification is not required. It could mean that students, must now rise to the occasion because of the tougher standards and requirements, and because the university is monitoring who takes the exam, and who is not yet ready to take the test. This could be positive, too, because students really determined to enter teaching profession, will naturally, and gradually pass the exam, thus raising the academic level of people in the pool of students who are true teacher-material.

In the large scheme of things, teacher quality is the backbone of excellent students, stimulated, challenged, and inspired by great teachers. A combination of generalist exams, content-material tests, educational practices and knowledge exams, student practicum, and on-the-job- supervised teaching will raise the level of educators in Texas. This university has shown the past two years, that by providing testing guidelines for exam readiness, and monitoring and screening who is allowed to take the Generalist Exam, the passing percentage rises dramatically. This is what the university strives for, and with strategic interventions, it has made great gains in the actual percentages of students passing the exam on the first attempt. The goal for this university is to continue with the higher percentages of students passing, at the same time numbers of students opting to take the exam are also rising. With the three-step guidelines and faculty advisors in place, the students taking the Generalist Exam and those passing it on first attempt will continue to show a high success rate, well above the Texas Education Agency standard requirement for passing. It is the authors' perspective that the decrease in number of students testing may eventually become cause for concern.

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