

Rethinking STAAR: An Accountability Shift in Texas

I. A Test Under Fire: *Problem Stream*

The State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) has long been a source of public concern, though it did not become a highly contentious issue until recent years. Early dissatisfaction can be traced back to 2014, when parents began opting their children out of the exam as a form of silent protest (KXAN, 2014). By 2016, some parents had escalated their concerns legally by filing a lawsuit against the Texas Education Agency (Collier, 2016). The lawsuit argued that STAAR tests took longer than legally required. With it, they hoped to prevent the scores from being used to rate students in deciding their academic readiness. The lawsuit demonstrated a growing realization regarding the test's fairness and reliability (Kingdon, 2014, p. 140).

Public dissatisfaction continued to mount in the years that followed. By 2024, parents, students, and teachers were openly discussing to toll that STAAR testing took on student mental health and well-being and opt-outs from the exam became increasingly common (Dishon, 2024). Despite the exam being a legal requirement under Texas statute, there have been no notable repercussions for students who did not participate (TEA, n.d.). Social mobilization further amplified these concerns, with Facebook groups as “Texans Take Action Against the STAAR” and “Texans for Public Education” amassing over 86,000 and 48,000 members respectively, largely calling for reform and debating exam's implications for students (Texans Take Action Against STAAR, n.d.; Texans for Public Education, n.d.).

Another focusing event came in 2024, when the state rolled out an automated grading system for the STAAR exam (Dey & Edison, 2024). This raised serious questions about the accuracy and fairness of the resulting accountability scores, prompting several school districts to file suit against their release. While this event drew significant attention, Kingdon's framework reminds us that indicators alone do not always drive issues onto the legislative agenda (Kingdon, 2014, p. 94). In the case of the STAAR, it was less the data itself and more the lived experiences of students, parents, and teachers that sustained public concern. Although STAAR scores functioned as performance indicators for schools, the state did not interpret low scores as evidence of a flawed exam; rather, poor performance was seen as reflection of school effectiveness. In this way, the state viewed STAAR as successfully identifying problem areas

rather than being the problem itself. This tension continued to fuel public debate and keep the issue alive in the problem stream.

II. Pressure, Power, and Partisan Dynamics: *Political Stream*

The political environment in Texas became increasingly favorable to reforming STAAR mainly due to a combination of public pressure, legislative dynamics, and executive priorities (Kingdon, 2014, p. 145). Since 2014, there was growing parental dissatisfaction combined with concerns about the reliability of the test in assessing school performance. This pressure was compounded by the state's increasing intervention in local districts: over ten districts were taken over this period, often based primarily on STAAR performance (Lee, 2025). STAAR scores remain the dominant factor in elementary and middle school accountability ratings and continue to play a meaningful, though smaller, role in high schools. Due to this, teachers and administrators expressed frustration with the system, viewing it as an inaccurate measure of school and student performance. Thus, the test is also vital in conversations of school accountability systems and designated performance ratings. Taken together, these factors reflected a shift in the state's mood and signaled their readiness for reform by creating the political conditions necessary for action (Kingdon, 2014, p. 146).

Legislative disagreements further highlighted the political complexities surrounding the STAAR (Dey, 2025). The Senate sought to expand the authority of the TEA commissioner, including the ability to appoint conservators to districts that challenged the accountability ratings, to prevent future litigation. On the other hand, the House emphasized legislative oversight of major challenges and preserved the ability of districts to challenge TEA through a fast-track court process that would not delay rating releases. These conflicting priorities contributed to legislative delays and allowed for executive leadership to set the agenda.

Although there was no government turnover during this period, the prospect of reelection created its own political pressure (Kingdon, 2014, p. 153). Governor Greg Abbott, facing reelection in 2026, initially had no formal position on standardized testing. By mid-2025, however, Abbott had elevated the elimination of the STAAR as a top priority, eventually listing its elimination as a legislative accomplishment on his official platform (Abbott, n.d.). This executive priority created the political conditions necessary for reform. Negotiations between Rep. Brad Buckley and Sen. Paul Bettencourt also contributed to progress, as the two chambers

previously failed to agree on how to modify testing requirements and accountability measures (Dey, 2025). These dynamics mirror questions of jurisdiction, mostly whose priorities would ultimately shape the final legislation (Kingdon, 2014, p. 155). In the second special, they even filed identical bills HB 8 and SB 8 (Bettencourt, 2025). However, Buckley's concessions, such as TEA creating and grading the assessments, reduced support from House Democrats but helped secure Senate backing.

The state's Republican dominance in the House, Senate, and Governor's Office enabled consensus building within the party through political bandwagon and facilitated legislative momentum, though Democratic opposition increased dramatically during the special sessions (Kingdon, 2014, p. 159). In the House, the initial vote on STAAR-related legislation (HB 4) showed overwhelming support at 143-1, but this narrowed to 79-47 in the enrolled version of the bill (Texas House, 2025a, p. 4251; Texas House, 2025b, p. 413). Despite this shift, the Republican majority ensured that the legislation could advance and ultimately pass, illustrating how partisan control shaped the political feasibility of STAAR reform.

III. From Softening to Solutions: *Policy Stream*

The development of feasible alternatives was critical to the removal of the STAAR, a process that had been softening up long before meaningful legislative action occurred (Kingdon, 2014, p. 129). As early as 2019, bills such as HB 4402 (88R), SB 142 (87R), and SB 2297 (86R) challenged the efficacy of the STAAR assessment and pushed for reform, though non-advanced significantly. This pattern of repeated, but unsuccessful attempts, ultimately paved the way for the legislation we see today.

During the 89th Regular Session (2025), House Bill 4 (HB 4), authored by Rep. Brad Buckley, represented the initial legislative attempt during this period to address concerns about the STAAR exam and the state accountability system. Buckley himself served as both a visible participant and a policy entrepreneur, being widely seen as the driving force behind reform efforts (KCEN News, 2025; Kingdon, 2014, p. 123). Although HB 4 had support from education stakeholders, disagreements between the House and Senate over testing requirements and the A-F accountability system prevented the bill from passing. HB 4 laid the groundwork by identifying key reform goals, such as reducing high-stakes consequences for students and

adjusting school performance metrics, but it ultimately was not the vehicle used for implementing change (Kingdon, 2014, p. 125).

The actual policy vehicle emerged during the special sessions later that year. Senate Bill 8 (SB 8), authored by Sen. Paul Bettencourt, built upon the objectives outlined in HB 4 and provided a concrete legislative mechanism to remove the STAAR and redesign the state's assessment framework. Although the first special session saw limited progress due to a walkout by House Democrats, it paved the way for HB 8 to pass smoothly through both chambers. HB 8 was authored by Rep. Buckley and sponsored by Sen. Bettencourt, showing the collaborative efforts of combining both policy alternatives into the final legislative proposal (p.131).

HB 8 officially replaced the STAAR with three assessments administered at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year. (Texas Legislature, 2025) Its aim is to provide continuous feedback to educators and parents while reducing the reliance on a single high-stakes test. This iterative process highlights how policy alternatives evolve over time, with initial proposals serving as the foundation that inform the eventual legislative vehicle.

The least popular alternative among Republicans, but favored by House Democrats, was offered by Rep. Hinojosa (D), who suggested restoring trust in standardized testing by having an external vendor produce the exams rather than TEA (Norton, 2025). Hinojosa served as a visible participant from the opposing party, vocal both in her opposition to HB 8 and her longstanding concerns about the STAAR, reflecting conflicting priorities between the two parties over how reform should be achieved (Hinojosa, 2025). Like Abbott, Rep. Hinojosa is currently running for Governor of Texas, which may have incentivized her engagement on this issue as a participant seeking to raise her political profile (Kingdon, 2014, p. 38). Ultimately, her alternative did not prevail, though some of her amendments were added to the bill.

IV. When the Streams Converge: *Policy Window*

A policy window emerged when the problem, politics, and policy streams converged (Kingdon, 2014, p. 20). The 89th Regular Legislative Session concluded on June 2, 2025. HB 4 failing to advance despite Rep Buckley's sponsorship, bipartisan support, and backing from education stakeholders. At that time, Governor Abbott had not publicly prioritized the issue. Although STAAR reform had visibility among parents, teachers, and education leaders, it

remained confined to those who followed specific news outlets or state newspapers, limiting broader public awareness and constituent engagement.

The policy window opened on July 9, 2025, when Governor Abbott convened a special session and explicitly included the elimination of the STAAR on the agenda (Office of the Governor of Texas, 2025). As a visible participant, declaring a stance on the matter made the most difference. By elevating the issue as a priority, the governor aligned executive authority with growing public concern and the available policy alternatives. This created the opportunity for legislative action. Previous disagreements between the House and the Senate had stalled progress, but the governor's authority provided the necessary political push to move the issue forward.

Without the special session, the window of opportunity may have closed until 2027, the next regular legislative cycle. By convening a special session and placing STAAR elimination explicitly on the agenda, Governor Abbott created a predictable and time-limited opening where the most viable policy options could advance (Kingdon, 2014, p. 166). In this case, the most viable option was one that had been softened up during the regular session – the groundwork laid by Buckley though HB 4 provided the foundation that made HB 8 ready when the political moment arrived.

The convergence of the three streams were: recognized public dissatisfaction with the STAAR, a legislative vehicle in HB 8, and making it a priority on the agenda. Stakeholders who had advocated for reform and policy entrepreneurs like Rep. Buckley and Sen. Bettencourt, leveraged this opportunity to push the legislation through the second special session.

V. Unfinished Business and the Road Ahead: *Policy Entrepreneurs*

Although the removal of the STAAR exam through HB 8 has garnered mixed support, uncertainties remain that limit the policy's perceived effectiveness and could undermine its long-term impact. One critical gap is how the state will define and measure student growth under the new assessment system, which has long been contested among educators and policymakers alike. Questions of feasibility also persist: will the three new exams provide a more accurate measure of student outcomes, or will they replicate the same pressures as the STAAR (Kingdon, 2014, p. 132)? Critics, including Texas AFT, argue that the replacement assessments may not relieve

student stress or meaningfully reduce high stakes testing (Texas AFT, 2025). HB 8 also calls for TEA to study how to reduce the weight testing carries on the state's annual school accountability ratings and how to integrate the new assessments. Previously, this was known to be one of the reasons why the STAAR was so stressful.

Though the overall policy is focused on the removal of the STAAR, the broader unresolved item is school accountability and the meaningful measurement of student success. This issue is not currently a political priority for Governor Abbott, whose reelection campaign has centered largely on school choice and education freedom accounts rather than accountability reform. As a result, question surrounding how student success should be defined and measured have not been placed on the agenda and leave an opportunity for policy entrepreneurs to shape long term effectiveness.

To address these challenges, policy entrepreneurs should pursue two key strategies. First, by presenting evidence-based frameworks as indicators for student growth and accountability, they can reduce uncertainty thus making the policy viable for effective implementation. Second, leveraging social media and public platforms to shape perception and maintain pressure on TEA to produce actionable results is essential. Prominent voices in the Texas education space, such as Rep. James Talarico, a former teacher running for Congress, illustrate how political officials (and potential entrepreneurs) can use their platforms to elevate awareness among stakeholders who do not closely follow state policy. Podcast appearances, short-form video content on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, and targeted social media campaigns have become increasingly powerful tools for sustaining momentum on policy issues.

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