



# COLUMN: THE SHIFTING LITERACY LANDSCAPE

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## COLUMN INTRODUCTION

*Literacy things are changing in the State of Texas. Whether it is HB 3, the Science of Teaching Reading, the new ELA TEKS, or the yet-to-be-designed ELA STAAR test, the pathways beneath our feet are uncharted. But one of the best ways to wayfind is to work together, each person seeing a small piece of the whole landscape, sharing what we know with one another, and making informed, thoughtful decisions based on what we know and learn. Things will keep changing, even as we strive to implement the change ahead of us, but together we will find our way.*

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## UNCERTAINTY REIGNS: PANDEMICS AND UPRISINGS, TESTING AND STANDARDS

**W**e (Ann and Anna) both grew up in the north with snow days. It seemed like principals and superintendents could never get it right. They called the day, but the snow stopped by 10am and the sun came out. They didn't call the day and busses got stuck in snow drifts trying to get kids home. It was hard to be a superintendent. Unfortunately, COVID-19 is like the worst snow day ever because it is going to last for months or years and cost a lot more. *No one* knows what the fall holds for schools.

We are not epidemiologists, virologists, or medical doctors, so we're not going to pretend to offer any advice about what schools could do to reopen.

We are also turning in this column on day 10 of nationwide marches, vigils, protests, and uprisings centered on racial injustice. Our country went from near total lockdown to hundreds of thousands in the streets expressing growing grief and rage. As teachers and teacher educators, we acknowledge that Black Lives Matter and that education must play a role in the work of unwinding centuries of racism.



We do have PhDs in curriculum and instruction with a focus on literacy, so we can offer an opinion about how schools and teachers can think differently about the place of testing and standards during this pandemic. That different thinking has the potential to do that second piece of work, which is to begin honoring students' lived, literate experiences and frame their funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) as valuable and worthy. With this asset-based stance toward student knowledge and experience, teachers can invite students into expanding their literacy skills, including those that they will need to navigate discourse communities in colleges and the work world that use different languages and literacy practices (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

## VALIDITY MATTERS

Validity is a key assessment concept that seeks to ensure that an assessment is actually measuring what it purports to measure. For example, if a test is said to measure reading comprehension but only measures how quickly a child reads, the test is an invalid measure of comprehension.

The evidence to confirm an education test's ability to provide accurate interpretations and to support a test's intended use is typically presented in the form of a "validity argument." If this argument fails to supply convincing evidence regarding both interpretation accuracy *and* usage support, then employing the test will probably lead to unsound educational decisions and, consequently, miseducated children (Popham, 2020, p. 126 emphasis in the original).

There have been challenges to the validity of the STAAR test (Johnson, Wilson, & Williams-Rossi, 2013; Lopez, 2012), and research repeatedly shows that standardized tests fail to accurately measure the knowledge and skills of culturally and linguistically diverse children (Contreras, 2005; Fleming, 2000; [Stevenson, Heiser, & Resing](#), 2016; Walpole, McDonough, Bauer, Gibson, Kanyi, & Toliver, 2005). In spite of these issues the state, districts, and principals have continued to rely on STAAR data to make instructional decisions. Administrators, coaches, specialists, and teachers spend a lot of planning time looking at STAAR data, or benchmark data that ostensibly predicts students' STAAR scores or point to where more instruction is needed.

Given the chaotic end to the 2019-2020 school year, though, a key premise of the STAAR assessment is now invalid. At its core, STAAR assumes students experienced nine months of uninterrupted instruction the year prior to taking the STAAR, and approximately seven months of instruction the year of the test. No student in the State of Texas fits this requirement. And, while we did say above that we do not know what will happen in the fall, the odds that students will receive seven months of classroom-based instruction in 2020-2021 is very, very low.



## THE CRUX OF THE ISSUE: WHAT ARE THE TESTS MEASURING?

Instead of measuring—however inadequately—student progress, a STAAR test given in the spring of 2021 will measure whether or not a child had an internet-connected device, an adult to spend time helping them navigate remote learning, and a space to engage in remote learning for the end of the 2019-2020 school year and at various points across the 2020-2021 school year. Going back to Popham above, if the STAAR test is given in 2021—and we do not think it should be—the data will not be valid and instructional decisions based on that data will lead to “unsound educational decisions and... miseducated children.”

## TEACHER EXPECTATIONS BEFORE AND AFTER COVID-19

Teacher’s professional knowledge (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996) includes a deep understanding of what children’s literacy learning is at particular ages and grade-levels. This knowledge is hard won from years of professional learning and experience with students. This knowledge-in-action (Schon, 1984) walks alongside standards and quantitative data in supporting students to grow as readers and writers.

And, teachers must integrate into their professional knowledge the disrupted experience that every student experienced this past spring, and likely through the summer and into fall. Our usual internal metrics of what skills students should have or how much students should grow across a month or semester are not going to be as accurate as they were. That said, teacher professional knowledge adapts and adjusts to the daily life of a classroom far faster than any quantitative data set or standards. Teachers, your deep understanding of children is what will support them and their literacy learning through the continued uncertainty.

## WE WROTE THE STANDARDS, WE INTERPRET THE STANDARDS

Taking a step back from the STAAR test, and holding teacher professional knowledge central, we also need to examine the standards on which the test is based and that shape teacher thinking. Teachers everywhere are already hearing that next school year needs to be about catching students up. We’ll hear how students will be assessed to identify gaps and various RTI programs will be designed. All of that effort and work is because teachers and principals want what is best for children. They want children to learn and succeed.

But, and this is a big one, those standards by which we’re measuring those students are standards we made up. That doesn’t make them invalid or unreliable, or that we lower our expectations, but it does mean that we can change the standards, or change how we interpret the standards, or how we use the standards to guide instruction. Adaptation to the circumstances is key, here because every student is behind. All of them.



The students who were the strongest after spring break and had all the supports necessary to engage deeply with remote learning are behind. Some of them spent that remote learning time watching YouTube videos of Nerf wars while half-heartedly doing online worksheets. Some of them had parents who were frontline medical workers and worried constantly for their health. And some of them got sick, or had a family member who got sick, or had a family member who died. And the students who went into spring break needing tons more interventions to be ready for the STAAR, are also behind. They may have had super-supportive parents and internet-connected devices, but didn't have their amazing special education teacher trained to support their learning. They may have been the only person at home who spoke English and had to navigate remote learning all by themselves, and help younger brothers and sisters navigate their online classrooms.

So if all of the students are behind because they were not in classrooms with skilled educational professionals for the final months of the school year, then our expectations for where they should be relative to the standards need to change. When talking to my preservice teachers I (Ann) always remind them that you can't hurt the standards' feelings. They are socially constructed tools that were created to serve as a learning map; they are inert. You cannot make the standards hate school, or think they are stupid, or any of that. Children, on the other hand, are worthy of our attention and concern. If you foreground standards over students, you can make a child hate school or think they are stupid, by misusing or overfocusing on data and standards at time when children need to be engaged and valued and seen.

## IN CONCLUSION

This moment of deep uncertainty offers us the opportunity to really embrace student-centered learning. Not fake student-centered learning with the aim of making students more likely to succeed on the test. But real student learning that centers that child and their life, knowledge, and experience. Two practical actions you can take in professional conversations about planning for the new school year include:

1. When the STAAR comes up in meetings, talk about validity.
2. When meetings begin focusing on how behind students are, talk instead about how we designed the standards and our interpretation of them can change.

And when you are in your classroom, with your students, put them at the center. Use the test data as necessary, but don't assume that it is the full picture, or that the instructional decisions you make based on it are what is best for each child in this moment. Meet them as fellow humans, in this deeply uncertain time, and be a caring adult in their lives.



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