Commissioner Morath waives grade 5 and 8 student retesting, retention requirements for Harvey students

AUSTIN – Commissioner of Education Mike Morath today announced that he is removing the requirement to conduct grade placement committees and any related June 2018 State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) retests in fifth and eighth-grade for districts within the Presidential Disaster Declaration for Hurricane Harvey.

In a letter to school districts, Commissioner Morath stressed that his decision was based on TEA’s commitment to our districts and students, with the priority of ensuring that those affected by the storm can make instructional decisions that are in the best interest of students.

The announcement comes following a letter from Governor Greg Abbott asking the Commissioner to consider ways to help relieve some of the pressures on students in areas most affected by Hurricane Harvey. In addition, Commissioner Morath took into consideration input provided by members of the House Public Education Committee and Senate Education Committee at recent hearings regarding the hurricane’s impact on school districts.

“It is my objective that all children graduate from our public schools equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to be college or career ready,” said Governor Abbott. “However, in times of crisis, it is important to re-examine some regulations related to accountability placed on those living in devastated areas. That is why I support Commissioner Morath's decision to ease STAAR retest requirements in fifth and eighth-grade within the area devastated by Harvey.”

Fifth and eighth-grade students must pass STAAR reading and math assessments to be promoted to the next grade level. If a student does not pass the tests after three tries, the student must be retained unless a Grade Placement Committee, composed of a principal, teacher, and the student’s parents, unanimously agrees to promote the child to the next grade level. State law gives the commissioner the ability to waive this law, when necessary.

Under the Commissioner’s waiver, if a student in a district or charter within the Presidential Disaster Declaration fails the second test administration, districts will not be required to administer a third test and will have local discretion on whether that student should advance to the next grade. However, districts will be able to continue to administer the third test in June 2018 if they believe it to be in the best interest of the students.

In his notification to school systems, Commissioner Morath also advised superintendents that there would be no schedule changes for this school year’s STAAR test administrations. That decision comes following an Oct. 2 Texas Education Agency (TEA) survey to gauge the interest of districts in delaying the STAAR May testing window in the impacted regions by two weeks.

Of the 309 districts surveyed, there was a 59 percent response rate. Of the districts responding, 69 percent (representing almost one million students) requested that TEA maintain the current testing windows published on Sept. 11, 2017. A summary of that information (PDF) can be found [here](http://tea.texas.gov/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=51539619337).

Districts should continue to plan for administration of end-of-course exams on May 7-11 and for grades 3-8 math and reading, grade 5 science, grade 8 science and social studies, Algebra II, and English III on May 14-18.

Finally, Commissioner Morath advised that no decisions have been made related to district and campus accountability ratings for Harvey-affected districts, campuses and charter schools.

“I have taken steps to collect information on the number of students impacted by the storm as well as information on facility damages,” said Commissioner Morath in his letter. “We will soon ask for information about staff who have been impacted by the storm. We will use all of this data to inform decisions as we adopt accountability rules in the spring.”

Commissioner Morath did note that TEA will be requesting a waiver from certain federal accountability/school improvement requirements to ensure the state has maximum flexibility as any decisions are made. He continues to explore all options. More information will be shared once it is made available.

To read Commissioner Morath’s letter to school systems, visit the TEA website at [http://tea.texas.gov/taa_letters.aspx](http://tea.texas.gov/taa_letters.aspx).

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