

Choosing the Right Assessment for Texas

Why Norm-Referenced Assessments Fall Short and What We Risk if We Make the Switch

TX 2036

As Texas policymakers consider the future of the state's assessment system, it's essential to understand the difference between **norm-referenced assessments** and **criterion-referenced assessments**. Both norm-referenced and criterion-referenced assessments aim to evaluate student learning, but they do so in fundamentally different—and incompatible—ways. Norm-referenced tests compare students to one another, while criterion-referenced tests measure whether students have mastered specific academic standards. **If the goal is to understand what Texas students are learning in Texas classrooms, a criterion-referenced test aligned to the TEKS is the only option.**

What's the Difference?

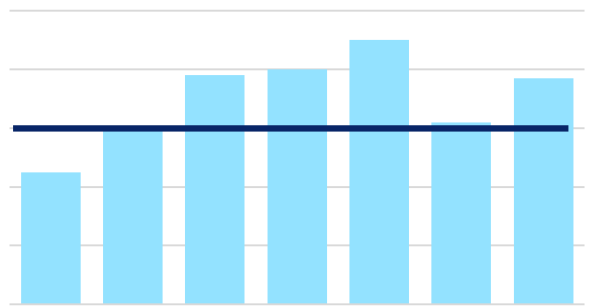
Two Assessment Models, Two Very Different Purposes

	Norm-Referenced (NRA)	Criterion-Referenced (CRA)
Purpose	Compare students to each other	Measure knowledge against fixed standards
Score Meaning	Ranks students by percentile	Indicates mastery of grade-level content
Test Design	Built to create a normal distribution	Built to evaluate state-aligned standards
Student Impact	Success is relative to peers, meaning a certain number of students will always fail.	Every student can meet expectations
Example Tests	SAT, ACT, Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS), NWEA MAP Growth	STAAR, End-of-Course Exams, NAEP

Norm-referenced assessments measure students on a curve, so some will always be labeled low-performing—even if all meet learning standards—**because the goal is ranking, not measuring readiness.**



Criterion-referenced assessments measure whether each student has mastered the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS)—**so every student can succeed based on what's taught, not how others perform.**



Criterion-Referenced Assessments Give Every Student a Chance to Succeed

Criterion-referenced assessments are built to serve students, educators, and the public by providing clear, meaningful information about learning. Because they measure whether students have mastered Texas standards, they measure what students are actually learning in the classroom. Unlike norm-referenced tests, criterion reference tests allow every student the opportunity to demonstrate success—not by outperforming others, but **by meeting a set standard readiness**.

Nationally Normed Tests Don't Reflect Texas Classrooms

These assessments were developed for broad national comparisons and may not align closely with Texas's educational priorities and standards. They measure how students perform relative to others, which means a certain number of students must fail and no student can be at the masters level. As a result, a student can seem like they received a high score but not actually be on grade level.

Norm-referenced assessments are not built for Texas classrooms:

- National tests are not aligned with TEKS.
- Lower overall achievement post-COVID means even students in the middle of the curve may not be on grade level - creating confusion for parents.
- Percentile ranks obscure whether students meet grade-level expectations.
- Norm-referenced tests set a moving target—proficiency depends on how students compare to one another, not on whether they've met defined learning goals.

Assessments should give every school clear goals and every student a chance to succeed.

Texas should maintain a state-specific, criterion-referenced system that:

- ✓ Aligns with TEKS
- ✓ Provides clear, actionable results for educators and families
- ✓ Ensures transparency and fairness in student growth
- ✓ Supports Texas' goal of ensuring every student demonstrates mastery of reading, math, history and science.

For additional information,
please contact:



Mary Lynn Pruneda
Director of Education and
Workforce Policy

✉ Maryllyn.pruneda@texas2036.org