

**TEKS and the Texas A-F Accountability System:
Alignment with the Learner Centered Ideology**

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Learner Centered Ideology
Aims: The main goal is for children to grow into who they naturally are. Education should support that growth, not push students toward some future goal. If a child is happy and engaged right now, that is enough.
Child: Learners are naturally curious and good. They want to explore and make sense of the world on their own. Each child is unique and grows at their own pace.
Learning: Students learn by doing, not by sitting and listening. When a child is genuinely interested in something and gets to explore it hands-on, real learning happens. It comes from experience, not from being told.
Teaching: The teacher is not there to lecture. Their job is to watch students closely, set up engaging learning spaces, and help individual students as needed. The teacher guides from the side, not the front.
Knowledge: Knowledge is something each learner builds for themselves through experience, not memorized from a textbook. It is personal and different for everyone. There is no single body of facts that all students must know.
Evaluation: Grades and standardized tests are not the focus. Teachers observe students over time and collect their work in portfolios. The point of assessment is to help students grow, not to rank or compare them.

Learner Centered Ideology

The TEKS and the A-F Accountability System are not well aligned with the Learner Centered ideology. The Learner Centered ideology places the child at the center of all educational decisions. Schiro (2013) explains that in this approach, "the needs and interests of learners, rather than those of teachers, principals, school subjects, parents, or politicians, play a major role in determining the school program" (Schiro, 2013, p. 105). The TEKS do the opposite. They are a predetermined set of skills that every student in Texas is expected to learn at specific grade levels, regardless of their individual interests or developmental readiness. For example, all Kindergarten students are required to "collect, sort, and organize data into two or three categories" and "use data to create real-object and picture graphs" (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2012, § 111.2). A Learner Centered teacher would not assign those tasks to a

five-year-old because the state said to. Instead, that teacher would observe the child, respond to what the child is curious about, and let learning grow from there. In PLCs across my district, planning conversations almost always start with the standard, not the child. The question is typically what the TEKS says students must do, not what students are interested in exploring. That is the opposite of what Schiro (2013) describes when he says curriculum should "organize itself around individuals' intentions to learn" (Schiro, 2013, p. 115).

The TEKS are also built around academic subjects separated by strand and grade level, which Schiro (2013) calls "school subjects." He describes a school subject as "a relatively narrow and logically arranged body of predetermined knowledge associated with established conventions" (Schiro, 2013, p. 126), and contrasts it with a "unit of work," which gives students the freedom to explore broadly and make their own meaning. Looking at kindergarten alone, students are expected to master specific skills across number and operations, algebraic reasoning, geometry and measurement, data analysis, and personal financial literacy (TEA, 2012, § 111.2), with each strand telling teachers exactly what to teach and when. The Learner Centered curriculum looks nothing like this. Schiro (2013) describes a Pond Water unit where children chose what to investigate, formed groups around shared curiosity, and followed their interests across multiple days without being sorted into subject areas (Schiro, 2013, pp. 101-106). The TEKS do not allow for that kind of flexibility. Every skill is already decided before the school year begins.

There is one small area where the TEKS come a little closer to Learner Centered thinking. The mathematical process standards, which appear at every grade level from kindergarten through high school, ask students to "apply mathematics to problems arising in everyday life, society, and the workplace" and to "use a problem-solving model" that includes

analyzing, planning, solving, and evaluating (TEA, 2012, § 111.2). That language has some connection to the Learner Centered belief that learning should feel real and meaningful to the learner. Schiro (2013) does describe the ideal Learner Centered classroom as one where children think through genuine problems rather than passively receiving facts (Schiro, 2013, p. 120). However, the process standards still require students to engage with content the state has already selected for them. In a true Learner Centered classroom, the student chooses the problem. In Texas, the standard chooses it.

The A-F Accountability System goes even further from the Learner Centered ideology. The 2026 Accountability Manual describes a system built around three domains: Student Achievement, School Progress, and Closing the Gaps (TEA, 2026, p. 3). Student Achievement is primarily based on STAAR performance, with scores assigned based on the percentage of students who reach Approaches, Meets, and Masters grade level (TEA, 2026, p. 14). Schools then receive an A through F letter grade based on those results. Schiro (2013) is direct about how Learner Centered educators feel about this kind of system. He writes that they are opposed to the "psychometric philosophy of education, which posits that the learner possesses measurable abilities" and that such tests "fail to describe children's growth, development, and progress" and "measure a restricted view of intelligence" (Schiro, 2013, p. 145). The A-F Accountability System is built entirely on that psychometric philosophy. A child's worth as a learner gets reduced to a score on a standardized test, and their school gets labeled based on how many students passed.

In practice, I have watched the accountability system reshape what happens in classrooms, especially on campuses with low ratings. When a school is at risk of receiving a D or F, instruction tends to shift away from deep content teaching and toward test-taking strategies

and test preparation. Campus leaders and teachers have told me directly that the focus becomes less about what students need to know and be able to do and more about getting students ready to perform on test day. That is an unintended consequence of the pressure the A-F rating system places on schools. Schiro (2013) would describe this as the kind of environment that forces students into "tedious work" rather than allowing them to engage in meaningful, self-directed learning (Schiro, 2013, p. 111). The accountability system also attaches real consequences to low ratings, including interventions, sanctions, and potential restructuring (TEA, 2026, pp. 98-99). This reward-and-consequence logic runs directly against the Learner Centered belief that learning should have intrinsic value. As Schiro (2013) notes, attacks by back-to-the-basics movements and legislation like No Child Left Behind did much to reduce Learner Centered influence in public schools (Schiro, 2013, p. 149), and the Texas A-F Accountability System continues in that same tradition.

References

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