

Texas District Exploits Testing Package To Administer Uniform Math Exams

In Texas, as in many other states, all students must pass a standardized exam in order to graduate from high school. The exams are also important for the schools themselves, since government funding can go up or down based on their students' performance.

At the Garland Independent School District, administrators had noticed that students' scores on the math portion of the exam, though ranked near the top in the state, were lower than reading and writing scores.

Last summer, officials there decided to purchase some new software in an effort to raise those math scores. Initial assessments were conducted on about 8,000 students in grades 6-8.

The program they selected for the case study was Question Mark, a test-authoring package from Presence Corp. (formerly LHA Software) of Stamford, Conn.

With the software, instructors can create tests, tutorials and questionnaires on any subject. Question Mark marks and analyzes answers in various test formats, including multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, word answers and free format.

In Garland, a team of math teachers chose original test items submitted by instructors throughout the district. They then created tests that cover the 13 math objectives outlined by the state.

Butch Sloan, the district's math coordinator, helped develop and distribute the exams. Question Mark and the uniform test bank were installed on all the computer networks in 17 secondary schools.

Students worked on the objectives during three six-week periods. At the end of each period, computer-based tests were admin-

istered, and results were given to teachers and principals.

According to Sloan, a highlight of Question Mark that especially suits math testing is its ability to incorporate graphic files such as graphs, charts and figures.

He notes that, with some other testing packages, those visuals had to be placed on paper; thus, "It was always difficult to make sure students had what they needed."

Besides individual scores and classroom averages, teachers can find out exactly how much time is spent taking an exam.

While it's too early to tell what impact the software will have on state exam scores, Sloan reports that students seem to be advancing in several key areas, including basic math concepts, operations and problem solving.

■ Immediate Feedback

He is convinced that students benefit from the immediate feedback provided by Question Mark. And teachers can accurately assess what has been learned and what needs to be reinforced.

In addition, says Sloan, administrators are provided with an objective tool to measure progress against mandated goals. Marlene Carter, principal of Lyles Middle School, agrees.

At Lyles, students complete three-hour tutorials in the school's computer lab on Saturdays. Carter says teachers have praised the software's reporting features.

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classroom averages, teachers can find out exactly how much time is spent taking an exam. Carter looks at the reports herself to see what areas, if any, might require remediation.

She adds that instructors at Lyles have started using Question Mark for other subjects on the state exam, including English. Math coordinator Sloan expects the software will play a larger role throughout the entire district in coming months.

■ No Limitations

"There are certainly no limitations on its use" he says, noting that the district recently upgraded to version 3.0 for DOS.

Among other enhancements, the new version boasts an "auto save" function and a "rich text" component for mixing different fonts and graphics, including superscripts and subscripts.

Plus, the user manual and online help have been expanded to cover more features, such as interfacing with sound, video, animation and other multimedia. The software uses the same format for question-and-answer files as the Windows and Mac versions, so tests can be created or delivered across platforms.

Sloan adds that the computer-based testing has advantages beyond preparing students for the state exam. For example, he says, the math test bank focuses heavily on problem solving, a skill that carries over into many disciplines.

"It's not just a basic skills test. It's helping those kids in other ways as well."