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State launches MSTAR to target algebra readiness

AUSTIN - For many students, algebra is the stumbling block to graduation. Soon Algebra I and II will weigh even more heavily into students' high school success when rigorous end-of-course exam requirements are implemented beginning in 2011-2012.

Last spring, only 58 percent of the 101,887 students who took an Algebra I End-of-Course exam passed it.

Convinced that many students need more support to fully understand pre-Algebra, the Texas Education Agency has launched a program aimed at students in grades 5-8 called Middle-school Students in Texas: Algebra Ready (MSTAR).

Part of the Algebra Readiness Initiative, the goal of MSTAR is to beef up algebra readiness skills.

This summer, thousands of teachers were trained in MSTAR math academies designed to improve overall mathematics instruction and student achievement.

This week, the agency is rolling out the next wave of assistance. It is called the MSTAR Universal Screener. This new instrument will help teachers identify which students need extra support in developing skills for algebra readiness.

The screener, which is a formative assessment, will help teachers make two important determinations:

1. Are students on track or-at risk for meeting algebra and algebra-readiness expectations?
2. What level of support is needed by students who are at-risk?

"The MSTAR Universal Screener gives teachers a first blush look at students' performance. It gives them a sense of where students are struggling. This will help teachers improve students' algebra readiness," said Norma Torres-Martinez, deputy associate commissioner for standards and alignment and a former math teacher.

Agency staff believe this is a unique tool unlike anything used elsewhere in the country.

Texas math educators from both public schools and universities created the screener under the guidance of TEA and Dr. Leanne Ketterlin Geller, an associate professor of education policy and leadership at Southern Methodist University (SMU).

Ketterlin-Geller said, "The screener was developed to target students' knowledge and skills that form the foundation of algebra readiness."

Available at grades 5-8, the screening instrument contains 25-30 multiple choice questions and can be accessed from the Texas Mathematics and Science Diagnostic System Assessment Center platform at <https://www.tmsds.org/>. The test is untimed but typically a

student takes 20-40 minutes to complete it. It can be administered on a computer using a secure login.

“We hope that teachers will see that this tool complements other district efforts to increase all students’ achievement,” said Dr. David Chard, dean of the Simmons School of Education and Human Development at SMU.

Use of the screener is voluntary and is not designed to supplant other assessments. The screener is designed to be given three times a year. The beginning of the year screener should be administered no later than Nov. 5 this year. In future years, it is recommended to be given during the first six weeks of school. A second screener is given mid-year and the final screener is given in the early spring. The second and third administration will help clarify where additional support may be needed.

Torres-Martinez said the results are to be used to inform teachers’ instruction and are not intended to be a graded assignment for students. Practicing, previewing or disseminating the MSTAR Universal Screener is not appropriate.

Background information about the screener is available on Project Share, TEA’s e-learning platform. For example, a tutorial that shows teachers how to administer the screener is available on this site.

To date, 185,000 Texas teachers have registered and received Project Share logins.