

# Park Cities Morning News

City Newspaper

parkcitiesmorningnews.com

## EDUCATION

# Taking testing to task

Group questioning  
assessments in Texas  
plans Austin protest

By LEIF STRICKLAND  
Staff Writer

As thousands of schoolchildren put graphite to the bubble sheet last week in a field test of Texas' newest standardized test, Dr. Deborah Diffily shuffled around her office preparing for an old-fashioned protest.

Sitting in front of a bookcase overflowing with children's books, Dr. Diffily, an assistant professor of early childhood education at Southern Methodist University, said, "What the politicians don't realize is that they're cheating the



JUAN GARCIA/Staff Photographer

Deborah Diffily and other members of Texans for Quality Assessment want to change how standardized tests are used.

kids."

Dr. Diffily is the local leader of Texans for Quality Assessment, an organization that is lobbying for the use of multiple measures — instead of a single standardized test — to determine whether students should advance to the next grade level.

On Saturday, she and about a dozen parents and college students from Dallas — as well as protesters from around the state — will travel to the state Capitol for the organization's first rally. Their aim is to change how the state's new standardized test, the Texas

Assessment of Knowledge and Skills, is used.

"To decide a student's future based on a couple days of testing is absurd," Dr. Diffily said.

Starting in spring, all Texas third-graders will be required to pass the reading section of the TAKS to advance to fourth grade. In future years, students in additional grade levels will be held to other standards.

Texas school officials have said the system would eliminate social promotion — the practice of mov-

See **GROUP** Page 7N

# Group urging changes in standardized tests

*Continued from Page 1N*

ing children to the next grade regardless of performance — and would generally improve the state's education system.

But critics such as Dr. Diffily said the system is flawed because it relies on a single standardized test to determine whether children advance. And no single exam, they contend, is a foolproof measure of a student's academic achievement.

Across the country, other grassroots organizations have protested similar high-stakes testing. In May 2001 alone, demonstrations were reported in New York, California, Massachusetts, Washington, Michigan, Arizona, Ohio, Wisconsin and Florida.

The Austin rally is believed to be the first such demonstration in Texas, organizers said. Texans for Quality Assessment members plan to picket with signs bearing messages such as "Less Testing, More Learning." Later, they will hold an organizational meeting to set goals.

The members come from different backgrounds and have different perspectives on testing. But they said they agree that the system is flawed.

"Too much focus is being placed



**Dr. Deborah Diffily, an SMU professor, calls Texas assessment tests "absurd."**

on one single test," said KayDonna Wolfcale of Memphis, Texas, a former kindergarten teacher who is leading the rally's Panhandle delegation. "It's wrong for a child to go through school and make decent grades, yet if they don't pass one single test, they may not be promoted or graduate."

The rally will come on the heels of a landmark study that has called into question whether standardized testing is an effective measure of academic progress.

Research at Arizona State University has indicated that students in states with mandatory standardized exams showed consistent improvement on those particular exams but held steady on independent measures of their academic achievement, such as SAT and Advanced Placement test scores.

Even so, many educational leaders and lawmakers in Texas have said that the TAKS and the new standards are essential tools to

improve the quality of education.

"The increases in student performance achieved over the last eight years are testimony to the ability of Texas educators to respond to past challenges," Texas Education Commissioner Jim Nelson said in 2001.

Dr. Diffily, who said she has found much support for her cause at SMU, said the Arizona State University study, as well as other research and her own experience as an elementary school teacher, have convinced her that high-stakes testing is detrimental to education.

"We have to think about the implications of this testing on young children," Dr. Diffily said.

Poor test scores can result from not enough sleep, family troubles or general anxiety about test-taking, she said. Also, test questions often deal with subject matter that is foreign to some students — particularly those from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

"They're treating schools like assembly lines and students like products, and you can't do that," she said. "They're not products. They're children."