



TESTIMONY

TO THE
SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION
ON
THE REGENTS REFORM AGENDA:
"ASSESSING" OUR PROGRESS

DATE:
OCTOBER 16, 2013

BUFFALO

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TESTIMONY OF
TODD HATHAWAY
TEACHER, EAST AURORA HIGH SCHOOL
TO THE
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My name is Todd Hathaway. I am a teacher at East Aurora High School, a volunteer Political Action Coordinator for NYSUT and the parent of three great children. I thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding the Regents Reform Agenda.

I am speaking today on behalf of my fellow teachers across Western New York as well as on behalf of my fellow parents. As an educator and a parent, I am here to testify that the high-stakes testing regime currently in place in New York State is educationally and developmentally inappropriate and has resulted in meaningless data for student and teacher evaluation.

First, let me speak from the heart as the proud parent of a son who is in kindergarten at Windom Elementary School in Orchard Park. Jonah entered Windom Elementary in Orchard Park in the fall of 2012 as an energetic four-year old boy. As the school began adopting the new curriculum tied to Common Core Learning Standards, it became quite apparent that Jonah was having difficulty. It was not an academic difficulty. Jonah is intelligent and, like so many young children, he is also is high energy — full of the love of life and willing to be brave, charging forward into the world. These qualities — the very ones that contribute to a love of learning — do not mesh well with a climate hyper-focused on high stakes standardized tests.

In talking with his teacher and principal, they, and we, were concerned. In the next few years, Jonah would be advancing into an environment increasingly focused by the state on high stakes tests. They, and we, came to the conclusion that, although there was no academic need, Jonah would be best served by retaining him in kindergarten for another year.

That really made me pause. Is the state’s new system penalizing children for being children? Why are we labeling those who cannot sit for the 300 minutes of testing in the 3rd grade as deficient when they are exhibiting typical childhood behaviors?

I firmly believe that the system is broken.

When I look at my son, I see a firefighter, an astronaut, a cowboy, or a Jedi Knight (depending on the day). I do not see a number. I do not see a test score.

As a high school teacher, I am shocked at what I see happening in the elementary school. Students, and their teachers, are being placed in an untenable position due to the pressure and consequences of standardized testing.

Having high standards is a good thing in education. But these new standardized tests tied to much higher standards were imposed in haste, without the implementation time teachers and students deserved ... and in a one-size-fits-all approach that is debilitating to children who do not achieve the state's pre-determined satisfactory score. Even worse is attaching high stakes consequences to this single standardized test for students, teachers, and schools. That is educationally and developmentally unsound.

The research is clear: It would be wrong to impose high-stakes consequences — such as student placement or measures of teacher effectiveness — based on a single standardized test.

On October 2nd, I, along with over 2,500 parents, teachers, principals, superintendents, school board members, and members of both the State Assembly and Senate from across Western New York met at Kleinhans Music Hall here in Buffalo to emphasize this exact point. The Regents Reform Agenda loses sight of what our children need in its over-emphasis on high-stakes standardized testing.

Parents, educators, administrators, superintendents, and school boards from across New York, through the aegis of the New York State Educational Conference Board, recently released a five point action plan to get it right. We need to heed those words and the words of parents and teachers in Western New York, and listen to what people on the frontlines of education are saying. We need to fix it.

Simply put, as parents and teachers are saying, we need Smart Reform. We need to Get Testing Right.

At East Aurora High School, I teach Global History and Geography, which culminates with a Regents Exam, and I teach Advanced Placement World History and Advanced Placement European History, which ends with a College Board exam. All of these are high-stakes exams. As a relevant exercise, I think it is important to compare these two exam systems to the current high stakes exam systems in place in grades three through eight.

The comparison is not positive.

For the Global Regents exam, it is administered and scored within two weeks — an extremely timely system of score reporting that makes it relevant. Once the exams are scored, teachers can analyze their students test booklets to diagnose their students' strengths and weakness. As a result of that analysis, feedback provided is to the teacher for areas they need to adjust in their instruction. They are able to do this because the tests are fully transparent.

Teachers have access to every Global Regents exam administered since 2003 on the State Education Department website. Teachers can prepare students for the test format by providing their students with past questions from which to practice, and the teachers can score the test questions as the Regents scores those questions, to provide both the teacher and the student feedback on both the content and skills required for success on the Regents exam. There are no surprises to either the teacher or the student to the content of the test or its format.

For the College Board exams, the exams are given in early May, scored in June, and reported to students and teachers in early July, a timely turnaround of score reporting and analysis to students and teachers. Here too, teachers have access to complete exams, and are provided an Instructional Planning Report that breaks down their students' performance, therefore allowing the teacher to examine their instruction for improvement.

Both of these tests are given to high school students. Both of these tests are high-stakes. The Global Regents exam is a graduation requirement, and the College Board exam is challenging a student for college credit. Both of these exams are timely. Both of these exams are transparent. Both of these exams are diagnostic.

By making the tests transparent, it allows the tests to be a diagnostic tool. How else do teachers improve their instruction unless they can understand where their students struggled? How else can teachers facilitate student growth unless they know the skills and content their students need help with?

Unfortunately, the current high stakes grade three through eight tests are neither diagnostic nor transparent. Teachers are sworn to secrecy upon the penalty of revoking their license if they discuss the tests with anyone. Teachers can neither diagnose their students nor their teaching practice if the tool used to evaluate them is secret. The State Education Department does not provide feedback to either the teacher or the student on their individual strengths and weaknesses. Instead, you are given a number: 1, 2, 3, or 4.

When is a teacher or a student provided that number? The next school year, rendering it meaningless and useless to all.

How can that number help a teacher or student? Sadly, it cannot. It provides no diagnostic feedback to the parent, teacher, or a student. Just a label.

The teacher is not given feedback by the state as to the areas in which their students struggled. The student is not given feedback on areas of strengths or weakness. If these tests are so important to gauge the college and career readiness, should they not be diagnostic in nature? Should they not be timely? Should they not be transparent?

If the tests are not transparent, diagnostic, nor timely, the tests have no meaning.

What is at question here, then, is this: what is the utility of the tests? How do they gauge a student's College and Career readiness? Especially for 9-year-olds? How do they serve to improve student learning and instruction? If the tests are not transparent, diagnostic, nor timely, these tests cannot be a gauge of student learning and teacher effectiveness.

We need to get testing right.

The first step in getting testing right is to adopt a three-year moratorium on the high-stakes consequences of standardized testing for students and teachers. We need time to fix the issues with these high-stakes tests. We need to listen to parents and teachers. We need to redesign these tests to meet the needs of our students and communities.

We need to address the length of these tests. Asking students in grades three through eight to sit through a whopping 3,200 minutes of tests is ridiculous. We need to get back to teaching a curriculum, not teaching test-taking strategies.

We need to make these tests transparent. Students, teachers, and parents must know what is on the test. They must be able to discuss the questions. Teachers should not be afraid of losing their jobs if they discuss these tests. Fear has no place in education. We must make these tests available for all to see, not for a select few. We must allow our educational community to discuss these tests, their appropriateness, and their use.

We need to make these tests diagnostic. We need to move beyond a simple numerical score. We need to allow teachers to examine these tests, understand the tasks required, provide samples to students, and allow educators to focus their instruction on areas of weakness. Simply rendering a score that somehow indicates the college and career readiness of a 10 year is foolish. We need to make the data meaningful.

We need to create a system that allows for timely feedback to parents, teachers, and districts. Waiting almost six months for feedback is useless feedback. In the classroom, teachers are encouraged to provide feedback quickly students to allow for learning to maximized. I personally try to get assignments back to my students will 2 days. Returning scores to students six months later is a waste of paste of paper, time, and money.

Finally, we must fully fund our system. Today, New York State spends less on an education that it did in 2008. In fact, according to the Center on Budget Policy and Priorities, New York State spends \$405 dollars per student less than in 2008, an overall 5 percent decrease. As each year turns, that gap grows. Each year too many students are denied access to support structures, remediation, and individualized instruction as classrooms grow larger, as teachers are laid off and programs are cut.

Yet, the state has asked more from our schools, teachers, and students without the proper funding. Teachers are being asked to adapt to a new much more rigorous curriculum in which they too often are not trained due to this lack of funding, and being held accountable for that new curriculum in the new APPR system. Students are being tested on curriculum in which they have had time to learn, using tests that are kept secret. We have created system that is chaotic, unclear, and punitive. That is no way to educate our state.

We need to make testing transparent, diagnostic, timely, and most importantly, useful.

We need to get testing right.

Thank you.