



TESTIMONY

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

DATE:
NOVEMBER 13, 2013
ALBANY

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**TESTIMONY OF
KATHLEEN FERGUSON
2012 NEW YORK STATE TEACHER OF THE YEAR
SCHENECTADY CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT
TO THE
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Senator Flanagan and Members of the Senate Education Committee, good afternoon and thank you for inviting me to provide testimony.

My name is Katie Ferguson and I am honored to represent the more than 800 professionals teaching in the Schenectady City School District - a district with about 10,000 students and 80 percent free and reduced lunch. I am also a proud graduate of the last class of Mont Pleasant High School in Schenectady.

But today, I speak on behalf of the thousands of teachers throughout our state who are dedicated to our children.

Teaching is a noble profession, which has unfortunately been under attack in recent years. So today, I speak on behalf of teachers who know that assessment and testing are an important, but not the most important part, of guiding children through their learning journey. I speak on behalf of teachers who, as the educators of our most precious members of society, value accountability. I speak on behalf of teachers in our state who are professionally trained and dedicated leaders, who know how to assess a student's success and progress, second only to their parents. I speak on behalf of teachers who are frustrated, concerned, and disappointed in what's happening now in education, and what's happening to our children.

But perhaps most importantly, I speak for Juliana, my second-grade student, who immediately raised her hand following my announcement that we would be taking our ELA & Math tests and said, "Why do we have to take so many tests?"

TESTING

The first few years of a child's school career set the tone for academic success. It is our job to foster a love of learning within each one of our precious students. Testing in every subject area almost every day of September makes that very difficult, if not impossible, for teachers. Worse yet, it's not just testing. It's testing children on material they do not know.

We begin the year by setting students up to fail. We give them tests on material they are not required to know until the end of the year, and smile and encourage and say, “Do your best” when all the while we all know even that may not be enough. What does this teach them? When my little 7-year-old student looks up at me before music and asks, “Are we taking another test?” and I say yes, and her shoulders droop, what does that say about the lessons we are teaching them about school?

As an educator, my colleagues and I are fully supportive of a deeper and richer curriculum, but we cannot support any of the State Education Department’s Common Core modules that are developmentally inappropriate for our students. The rush to implement the Common Core, alongside the push to begin testing before curriculum was fully developed, has had a serious negative effect on our children.

Children should not have to take an exam educators know they will fail, and kids — especially in our young grades — should not be put under the pressure of high-stakes testing. Children should not be the subject of increased testing that is age and developmentally inappropriate.

What does it say about the state of education when a professional development day in our district is used by a grade level to learn about creating more bubble sheets so that they can do more tests?

Even more troubling, teachers do not have time or complete access to testing materials or outcomes for students — educators and parents cannot wait for months to receive partial and incomplete data from the State Education Department.

And we must recognize that testing is only one component of a total system of teaching and learning.

As a New York State teacher, I completely support student accountability and quality assessment. I completely agree that we should set real and measureable goals and learning objectives, and then regularly assess our students’ progress to determine needs and future teaching. Authentic assessments and other multiple measures throughout a child’s elementary career could be incredibly useful for administrators, teachers, parents, and students. However, testing every subject every year is excessive, and it changes the very nature of what schools are supposed to be - places of learning, growth, inspiration, and perseverance, as well as communities that embrace the many stages and styles of success.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Teachers expect accountability. But we must ensure that educators are being judged on a curriculum that is in place, and with an assessment process that is fair. Teachers are being “graded” on tests that students cannot perform well on — a system that is set up for student and teacher failure. This is patently unfair to students and educators. The state needs to give teachers the tools and resources to help students succeed.

To illustrate, let me tell you about a Capital District colleague. “Sam” is a much loved, highly respected and admired special education teacher. Sadly, I have seen a serious change in Sam this year. In all the years past, I have known Sam to stay late after school working diligently to prepare materials and analyze student data for instruction. I have known Sam to attend school functions, connect with students on a personal level, and make teachers laugh during faculty meetings.

But now he is demoralized. Why? Well, after many years of teaching, Sam is now labeled as “ineffective.” He is ineffective due to his test scores. He now has to have a “Teacher Improvement Plan” and, as part of that plan, he has to observe other special education teachers in action. He was so embarrassed by his rating he asked to observe a teacher in our building so that no one would know. How is that going to help him? How is observing another teacher going to help raise the test scores of his students — students in a broken system that were forced to fail for several years and grow to hate school before they could get the help they deserve? How is Sam supposed to now fill that gap and help them pass a test that is absurdly beyond their level?

And what about me? I am the 2012 New York State Teacher of the Year. I have received numerous awards and distinctions, including The Red Apple Quality of Life award within two years of becoming a teacher, my district’s Teacher of the Year, The California Casualty Award for Teaching Excellence, and a Global Learning Fellowship through the NEA and, yet, my APPR scores say I am NOT highly effective. Again, it is because of my test scores. So, I said to my husband, I’ll try harder. But how? According to my observations, I am already highly effective, with a perfect score. So if I am already the best I can be in my Teaching Standards, how do I improve to raise my test scores? This system doesn’t make sense.

RESOURCES

We do not have the appropriate state support or resources to implement common core, especially in these fiscally challenging times, and especially in our high-needs districts.

Just the other day, another teacher walked into to my room to tell me how she had to write out all 24 of her spelling lists by hand because our school once again had no copy paper. How could our building once again have no paper? How can our state expect me to deliver a rich curriculum and close the achievement gap when my school has so few resources? I have had to cut out some of my social studies and science time to teach an extra reading group because we cannot afford another reading teacher in our building. I spent over \$250 on just paper, pencils, and staples and other supplies for my classroom this year alone.

Teachers need to be given the tools that will allow our children to succeed. Education funding is still at 2008-2009 levels for more than 70 percent of our schools. This cannot continue.

MY ASK

I want what every parent wants. What every teacher wants. What every educator wants:
For each and every child to succeed.

Which is way I ask you to support prohibiting standardized testing for our young children,
in grades K-2.

And why I ask you to see that testing is done for diagnostic purposes, and not solely for
high-stakes accountability.

Which is why I ask you to hit pause, and allow for proper implementation of a deeper and
richer curriculum, before educators are held accountable for outcomes they cannot control.
And why I ask that, before we move to Regents Common Core testing, we hit pause to allow
for actual development of curriculum.

U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan, in a letter dated June 18, 2013, conceded that states
may wish to delay tying student test scores to accountability — a delay in use of student
growth data consistent with our request for a three-year moratorium on the use of high-
stakes testing for accountability purposes:

“To be specific, states that request and are given this flexibility may delay
any personnel consequences, tied in part to the use of student growth data,
until no later than 2016–2017 ... Our country continues to face challenges as
we work together toward achieving educational excellence for all children,
and the timing of these actions has real consequences for students in the real
world.” Arne Duncan, June 18, 2013,

<http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/secletter/130618.html>.

All parents and teachers must protect and encourage our youngest students. We cannot
subject 5-year-olds to standardized testing and bubble tests. Again, please support a
prohibition on standardized testing for our young children, in grades K-2, and a three-year
moratorium on the high-stakes consequences of the tests.

I am a believer in our children. I am a believer in education. Believe with me.

Believe we can give every child the tools necessary to excel in our global economy. Believe
that all children can fulfill their dreams.

Collectively, we are charged with supporting our children on this journey. We cannot fail
them.