

Testimony of Blaise Messinger, 2013 Connecticut Teacher of the Year

Re: HB 5078 An Act Imposing a Moratorium on the Implementation of the Common Core State Standards

HB 5331 An Act Concerning the Implementation of the Revisions to the PEAC Guidelines

Education Committee

March 12, 2014

My name is Blaise Messinger. I am the 2013 Connecticut Teacher of the Year. I am currently in my tenth year teaching fifth grade at Woodside Intermediate School in Cromwell. Prior to that, I taught for six years in inner city Los Angeles. I also have a son with autism, so I have experienced the educational system from several different perspectives.

I really like the Common Core. I like the critical thinking, the synthesis, and the analysis that it promotes. I like the way that it moves us into 21st century skills. But I got to tell you, it's getting harder and harder to stay in this relationship.

The problem is that the Common Core has become inextricably linked with the new teacher evaluation system and the Smarter Balanced assessments. It is no longer a pathway to improved learning and knowledge but, instead, a morass of data collection and management, an actual impediment to the advancement of students.

When you boil it down, the intent of all these reform efforts, it seems to me, is to make me a better teacher; to improve my teacher practice, and therefore improve the outcomes for the students in my class. And I want that. I think most teachers do. I want to have meaningful collaborations and conversations that make me a better teacher. And I'm sorry to say, under this system, I'm not having them. The conversations I'm having are "Here's what you need to show me." And "You need more evidence for this domain." Nowhere in there is "What worked? What didn't? What can I do better to ensure that every student 'gets' it?"

And I can't tell you how many times the purpose of a lesson has been explained to me as "That's the way it looks on the SBAC."

Teaching is a second career for me. I got into it after seeing the effect that good teachers had on my son after he was diagnosed with autism at the age of three. Teachers changed his life. I saw what they did for him and I said, "I gotta get me some of that." I learned from him that teaching is the most powerful profession. It is the profession that effects real change in individual lives, moment to moment, day to day, that can completely alter the trajectory of a child. And the best evidence of good teaching is not found in the data. It's found in the hearts and minds of the children you've taught.

So I ask you to slow down the implementation of Common Core. Let's get it right, because there may not be another chance. I would particularly encourage you to support the changes to the PEAC that allow for a subcommittee of teachers to collaborate on the evaluation program. We are the experts in education. We live it, we breathe it, every day because, once that classroom door closes, it's us and those kids. Nobody ever said, "Man, remember that great standardized assessment we took back in fifth grade!" Or "I'm so glad I had a teacher that was evaluated as a 3!" They say what my student, Gabi, said, "He's the best teacher that ever happened to me."

So I would ask you to let good teachers happen for every kid. Think back to that teacher that you still hear in your head, that made an impact on you. Think of the teacher you want your children to have. Let us be that teacher.

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