

March 10, 2014

Dear Members of the Education Committee,

My name is Don Johnson, and I am writing out of concern over the impact education reforms, including the rollout of both the new teacher evaluation program and the Common Core State Standards are having on Public Education in CT. I attended of the North Haven Public Schools K-12 and now have been a teacher in that same system for 23 years. In 2010 I was selected as North Haven's Teacher of the Year. I have taught in both an elementary and Middle School setting during my career. I have seen "pendulum swings" and new ideas come and go, but the wave of reform of the past couple of years is unlike any other I have experienced. Unfortunately, the negative effects of these reforms are palpable within my building, and I am not alone.

I have always believed that high standards of accountability are welcomed, and necessary to earn and keep the public's trust. I expect to be held to a very high standard. After all, I am a public servant, charged with a sacred duty to nurture and educate children. We've had a variety of different evaluation programs in my district throughout the years, and the ones that have been most enriching to me, and therefore my students, incorporated professional dialogue between administrators and teachers based on classroom observations. That is where SEED gets it right, and that is where SEED could have, and should have stopped. Unfortunately, by then requiring teacher's evaluations to be linked to student test scores, the wheels fall off what could have been a very good model for evaluation. Sounds good to a executive whose company produces widgets, but children are flesh and blood, with hearts and minds, and teaching and reaching them is an art. These kids are more than just data points, and to treat them as such is very disingenuous and wrong-headed. I would like to see a return in our State to reasonable and prudent use of standardized testing to guide instruction, and the focus on teacher evaluation to be one of collaboration and professional dialogue.

Over ten years ago, in CT, CMT testing expanded to grades 3-8 due to the federal NCLB mandate. Time spent preparing and teaching to the test increased, which meant less time for authentic teaching and learning. It had to be this way, our schools were judged by our test scores published in the newspaper. Now, we are being told that our public schools are in crisis and we are falling behind in international benchmarks. I do not believe this, at least not in such broad terms, but let's suppose it is true, since it is one of the rationales for the current wave of reform. Why is no one pointing to the policies of the past decade including NCLB and Race to The Top, and the increased over-reliance on standardized testing as the culprit? No, instead, we are told by non-educators with great political and financial influence, that we are not testing enough, and the stakes need to be raised even higher for the students and their teachers. Nothing in my training, in my years of experience, and in my gut tells me this is good practice. The dots just didn't connect. That is, until I recently began to realize how the Common Core fits in, and then came the moment of clarity. It began to make sense. I'm going to use another school analogy here, please bear with me. As a child, I remember each year being called down to the gym for "Picture Day". One year, I remember thinking to myself, if I was the guy who sold all those little combs they gave out that day, I'd probably be rich. But really, imagine if you were one of two vendors who had an exclusive deal to supply a little plastic comb to EACH CHILD in a public school in America? You have access to a huge market, and a yearly flow of income. Well, let's connect the dots and see what has happened here in CT: 1. Like several other states, we now have legislation that requires teachers to be evaluated by standardized test scores. 2. We have a federal mandate that requires standardized tests in grade 3-8. 3. We

now have a set of National Standards: the Common Core State Standards, that require standardized tests to measure student progress toward attaining the goals set forth in these standards 4. Using hundreds of millions of dollars in grants from the USDOE, two testing consortiums (SBAC and PARCC) have developed standardized tests that will be used in EVERY PUBLIC SCHOOL that adopts these national standards. So there you go, the new CT Teacher Evaluation system, the adoption of the Common Core, Race to the Top, and the SBAC and PARCC Consortiums, are all inter-related and dependent on each other. The education reform policies affecting the day to day workings of my classroom and my students, and that have left me shaking my head, now make sense when put into this corporate and profit-driven context.

In a time of scarce resources being devoted to our public schools, where is the money going to come from for implementation of all these education reform policies? Will any of this actually trickle down to the classroom, or will we instead lose teachers, lose programming, and increase class size, just to pay for the implementation? Most importantly, have these policies been shown to improve teaching and learning elsewhere? Are they policies that will close the achievement gap in CT? Are they policies that will help all children learn to their potential, foster creativity, and become productive citizens? As a whole, I'm not optimistic they will, and the fact that they have the potential to negatively impact a generation of students across our State and nation is more than troubling, it is downright frightening. Officials continually say "This is the right thing to do for our kids". They need to go further than that and show me the research that proves this. I am having a hard time finding it. I am losing faith in the SDE, and any elected or appointed official who "rubber stamps" these reforms. As an independent voter, I am paying close attention.

A change of this magnitude needs to be properly vetted by professionals in the field. When a draft of the CCSS was made public in January 2010, a group of over 500 early childhood experts published a letter stating: "WE HAVE GRAVE CONCERNS about the core standards for young children now being written by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers. The draft standards...conflict with compelling new research in cognitive science, neuroscience, child development, and early childhood education about how young children learn, what they need to learn, and how best to teach them in kindergarten and the early grades." It should also be noted that Bill Gates, whose foundation has privately funded Common Core, and many of the other current educational reforms to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars, has stated publicly and I quote. "It would be great if our education stuff worked, but that we won't know for probably a decade." Aside from my concern for the students I teach, as a father my concern is far more personal. My son Shane is currently in first grade in the Bethany public school system. Well, ten years from now, Shane will be a Junior in high school. In other words, he and his classmates, unbeknownst to them, will be part of a generation known as the "Beta version of the Common Core kids 1.0". So the biggest financial advocate and supporter of the CCSS admits it is just a grand experiment, 500 early childhood professionals warn us they have grave concerns, other states are pulling back from the testing requirements, enacting moratoriums on implementation, and yet in CT it was full steam ahead until elected officials in the legislature recently became involved.

Some lament the fact that this debate has become politicized, because they feel that a slowdown, or "course correction" initiated by politicians will only muddle the process, and that will not benefit kids. I believe the opposite to be true, especially because the major players involved in pushing these reforms have used their political influence to their advantage for

several years. Education reform in CT and across the country is being done to educators, to parents, and to the students, not with them. Any systemic change needs buy-in from those being affected, and if the political arena allows for a mechanism with which to increase teacher, parent, and student input, then so be it. My students trust me to always act in their best interest. Thus far, they have not had a voice in the changes affecting their education. But last year, at the conclusion of the CMT tests that I administered to them over the course of two weeks, one of my 6th grade students did speak up. He politely handed me a note he had written on scrap paper. It was titled "No More CMT's" and on it, he presented a reasoned argument for why he thought the tests should go away. Among his reasons:

1. We have two whole weeks of nothing. We are missing time we could be learning... I can learn a lot more in class than I can doing the CMT's.
2. What is the point? I don't see one, and we have to wait two months until we get the scores.
3. It (CMT season) makes all of our classes shorter... I want to learn, but I can't because I am sitting at a desk doing nothing
4. When you were a kid, I don't even think they had them and you guys turned out fine. I hate them...why is it such a big deal anyways?...It's not fair.

I wonder how many kids share these same sentiments, but have never verbalized them?

...And how many teachers?

Just as my students and their parents trust me to do right by them, so too am I trusting that my elected officials will do what is right for the future of public education in CT. I ask that you work together to find a legislative solution that not only slows down the pace of reform, but also eliminates the most onerous aspects of the current policies; a solution that allows for educator, parent, and student input, and one that ends the over-reliance and misuse of high-stakes standardized testing in Connecticut's public schools.

Respectfully submitted,

Donald P Johnson
Bethany, CT