My name is James Mulholland. I am the father of a school-age child in Glastonbury and I have been a teacher in Connecticut for 24 years. I am very concerned about the direction of Connecticut’s education policies. Connecticut has one of the nation’s best educational systems, however we are in danger of losing it if we continue to follow the orthodoxy of school reformers and their blueprint for education, the Common Core. Specifically, I am testifying against the excessive testing associated with the Common Core and the use of standardized test scores in teacher evaluations.

The school reform movement, with its fixation on the use of standardized test scores in teacher evaluations, sees the specter of incompetent teachers around every corner. Standardized test scores are seen as a reliable, valid, and objective assessment of teacher effectiveness. However, when offering an explanation for the statewide drop in scores on the 2013 CMT and CAPT, Connecticut’s State Department of Education claimed that the drop in scores was due to the focus on Common Core implementation. The state’s own explanation undermines the claim that the scores are a reliable measure of teacher effectiveness. Its explanation shows that there are circumstances affecting the scores that have nothing to do with teacher effectiveness. I recently had a meeting at the State Department of Education to review my daughter’s 2013 CMT responses. I was concerned about one of her math scores. At the meeting, I was told that I could not discuss the examples on my daughter’s test with anyone, not even her teacher. I had to sign a document to that effect. What kind of a testing process is it when a parent is not allowed to discuss an educational concern with his 9-year-old child’s teacher? It is certainly not for the benefit of the child, who is simply ranked a “3” or “4” without any explanation for the score. I was also told that since the year 2000, five parents have
requested to see their child’s responses. Five parents in thirteen years? It doesn’t seem as if Connecticut’s parents care much about standardized test scores, and rightly so. Why are we wasting so much of our time and tax dollars on a testing system that parents have little interest in? The money would be better spent on quality educational materials, lowering class sizes, and other strategies that research has shown, time and again, help to improve student outcomes. There is no research to show that using standardized test scores in teacher evaluations improves student outcomes.

The tests, themselves, are cause for concern; their quality should be considered a consumer protection issue. In a year-long study of standardized tests administered around the country, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution concluded that there is “a cascade of problems that flawed questions cause when they slip past layers of review and appear on standardized tests. Quality-control breakdowns have become near commonplace on the state tests taken in public schools across the country.” (The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, “Errors Plague Testing in Public Schools; Consequences for Students Can Be Dire,” Sept. 14, 2013.) Pearson, the education company that creates many of the standardized tests has been plagued with errors in the scoring and reporting of assessments. According to a 2013 Washington Post article, virtually every year since 1998, Pearson has had quality control problems. For example, in 2000, Pearson misgraded 45,739 graduation tests, which lead to a lawsuit with an $11 million settlement. In 2012, Pearson computer failures blocked thousand of students from taking state-mandated exams by displaying error messages at log in. (The Washington Post, “A Brief History of Pearson’s Problems With Testing,” April 24, 2013.)

Connecticut is mistakenly falling in the line with school reform orthodoxy and its
unsubstantiated claims that student success results when its policies are instituted. However, there is little evidence to support the policies endorsed by the school reform movement. In 2011, *The New York Times* reported on a University of Chicago study of Chicago’s public schools. *The New York Times* reported that “In 20 years of near-constant reform efforts, Chicago’s elementary school students have made few gains… and the achievement gap between poor and rich areas has widened, a major University of Chicago study found, contradicting impressions created by years of Chicago Public Schools testing data.” The years include the tenure of the present Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan. (*New York Times*, “Assessment of Schools Are Flawed, Report Says,” Sept. 20, 2011.) Washington, D.C. has implemented many of the reform movement’s key initiatives, including the use of standardized test scores in teacher evaluations. In a report in *Education Week*, the paper reported that, “Between 2003 and 2013, the combined achievement gap for 4th grade reading and 8th grade math on the National Assessment of Educational Progress increased in nearly two-thirds of the states, where gains for poor students fell short of their more affluent peers. In the most extreme case, the combined poverty gap for the District of Columbia expanded by 44 scale-score points, indicating that its poor students are now much further behind their more affluent peers than they were a decade ago.” (*Education Week*, “Gap-Closing Remains a Challenge.” Jan 3, 2014.)

The reforms of the past thirty-five years have done little to change the fortunes of our poorest students, the population that the reform movement claims is in most need of its initiatives. The reforms aren’t working. According to another *Education Week* report, “A child born into the poorest 20 percent of families has a little less than 1-in-10 chance
of making it to the top 20 percent of earners by age 26, and that rate of social mobility has remained practically unchanged since the 1970’s.” (Education Week, “Education, Opportunity, and a 1-in-10 Chance to Move from Poverty to Wealth.” January 22, 2014.)

I would encourage the Education Committee to review the testimony of Daniel Long, a sociology education professor from Western University who has studied the causes of the achievement gap and value-added growth models for the last 15 years. His testimony regarding Senate Bill 24 echoes the beliefs of virtually every other researcher who studies standardized tests. Mr. Long testified before the committee on March 21, 2012. His testimony can be found in the transcripts of the hearings and starts on page 138. He said in his testimony, “I've reviewed the best research on the achievement gap and teacher evaluation models, and I can say with certainty that the proposed education reforms will do very little to narrow the achievement gap and will probably lower the average achievement in Connecticut for all students. Using standardized tests to evaluate teachers is ineffective, unfair and counterproductive. First, the use of tests is inaccurate and ineffective. I've studied the performance of more than 200,000 students in school systems in 64 countries. I found that using test scores to evaluate teachers tends to lower overall student learning outcomes.” (Transcript of legislative testimony, March 21, 2012, p. 138.)

One of the most serious consequences of the school reform movement’s push for national standards and a national testing regiment as prescribed by the Common Core is that we are losing control of our communities at the most basic level: decisions regarding the education of our children. The Common Core ushers in an era in which educational decisions are turned over to small numbers of powerful people at the national level whose opinions go unquestioned and whose policies allow no parental input. The only way
parents’ voices can be heard is at the local level. The common core standards and its
standardized test regiment is part of a marketing campaign to radically and recklessly
alter the education of our children and turn local schools into nothing more than big box
stores.