

FairTest

National Center for Fair & Open Testing

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To: Connecticut Legislature Joint Committee on Education

From: Monty Neill, Executive Director, FairTest

Re: Testing reform

My name is Monty Neill and I am Executive Director of FairTest, the National Center for Fair & Open Testing. Our mission is to promote fair, open, valid and educationally beneficial evaluations of students, teachers and schools. We also work to end the misuses and flaws of testing practices that impede those goals.

Across the nation, parents, students, educators and other members of the community are demanding major changes to student testing and assessment programs. Numerous national and state surveys, including the recent Connecticut Education poll, show that a clear majority of the public believes there is too much testing, it takes too much time away from learning, and it often harms the quality of education. In many states, rapidly growing numbers of parents are refusing to allow their children to take standardized tests.

The reasons for this rising tide of public opinion and action are clear. The tests measure only a limited slice of what is important for students to know and be able to do. However, because of the high stakes attached to these tests by federal, state and district authorities, they powerfully impact classrooms. Curriculum narrows as schools reduce or eliminate arts, second languages, history, science, physical education and even recess to devote more time to tested subjects. Reading and math increasingly resemble test preparation programs. This undermines rather than improves schooling. Under No Child Left Behind, the rate of improvement on the National Assessment of Educational Progress has been slower than under the previous version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which mandated testing in only three grades and imposed no punitive sanctions. (A FairTest report on NAEP results is available at <http://www.fairtest.org/independent-test-results-show-nclb-fails>.)

Districts, seeking to prevent the punitive sanctions imposed by No Child Left Behind, have increasingly resorted to testing more frequently in an effort to prepare for the state exams. As Connecticut has a waiver from NCLB, it now must also judge teachers by student scores, which both expands the amount of testing and pushes for more teaching to the test. I do not as yet know these details for Connecticut, but Miami-Dade, Florida, reports it will need to administer 1500 new tests in order to ensure all teachers in all subjects can be evaluated using student scores.

The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) tests are not a solution to the limits of standardized tests and certainly not to their overuse and misuse in a regime of high-stakes

P.O. Box 300204, Jamaica Plain, MA 02108
fairtest@fairtest.org 617-477-9792 <http://fairtest.org>

punitive accountability. The original proposals from SBAC and its counterpart, PARCC, indicated that most of the test would remain multiple-choice and short-answer, test formats that are very weak for evaluating the higher-order thinking and application of knowledge our children require for successful futures in college, work, as citizens and lifelong learners. Despite claims that this time the new tests will evaluate higher-order thinking, independent reviewers find this is generally not true as indicated by released items from the two consortia. The tests continue to be susceptible to coaching – and thereby will do nothing to reduce the huge amounts of time spent on test prep. Indeed, some reviewers conclude that intense test prep is necessary to understand the often confusing formats and content of items students will face. SBAC tests are also far too long, presenting a particularly unwarranted burden on younger students. Scores are likely to be lowered artificially by the length, the often-confusing computer formats, and unnecessarily complex and confusing items. That is, the test exams will be testing irrelevant factors, or as the measurement experts say, will suffer from construct irrelevant invalidity.

Famed psychologist Edmund Gordon convened an illustrious group of measurement and education experts to review the proposals the Common Core tests. The Gordon Commission concluded that they would constitute at best a modest improvement in quality and certainly would not be the assessments students need to support their learning or that signal to parents, the community, colleges and employers the knowledge and skills necessary for adult success.

The performance tasks are insufficient. There are too few of them. Further, they are not based in any particular curriculum. Inevitably, they will be more accessible to some students than to others based simply on what they happened to focus on – or not focus on – in their courses. Being based on the abstractions of standards, they are likely to end up engaging some students while disengaging others, again producing misleading results. Further, as relatively short tasks, they are inadequate indicators of the capacity for extended academic work students need to do well in college.

The first imperative for parents, educators and students is simply to end this disaster, to reduce the amount of testing and end the punitive high stakes. This will in part require federal action, so FairTest calls on this Committee to advise Senators Murphy and Blumenthal to support a reduction in federally-mandated annual statewide testing to once each in elementary, middle and high school, to end punitive sanctions, and to not require states to judge educators by student test scores. The U.S. Senate will be considering that option as early as the week of April 13, so I hope you can move a resolution quickly.

But testing is also very much a state and district issue. It is in your power to make significant changes to state policy. The legislation proposed by the Connecticut Education Association moves in the direction Connecticut should travel, though their recommendations are limited by the federal requirements. Positively, their plan includes a reduction in time spent on statewide testing by ending use of the Smarter Balanced tests, though FairTest encourages the state to challenge the federal government on the amount of mandated testing. The bill is also correct to prohibit the use of standardized tests in kindergarten through grade two and to continue the prohibition on using tests as a stand-alone bar to graduation.

The CEA proposal also includes development of a far more educationally sound approach to student assessment and school evaluation. Its use of Progress Monitoring Assessments (PMA) would be reasonable. They, too, will only measure a limited slice of what is important. The difference is that they are short and they will carry far less weight as the system incorporates

assessments of a much greater range of important attributes. And they will not pretend to do what they cannot, unlike SBAC.

The great value of the CEA approach is that it first identifies key attributes students should attain to become effective citizens, lifelong learners, and succeed in college and the economy. These include critical thinking skills, creativity, the ability to collaborate and communicate effectively, self-direction in the pursuit of continued learning and enrichment, and engagement in civic, community and global interests and issues. It also mandates that this new system address achievement gaps that may exist in each of these areas.

Equally important, the CEA proposal calls for locally-developed systems of portfolios and performance assessment – as New Hampshire’s pilots are doing and as is done by the New York Performance Standards Consortium with great success. It is simply not feasible to use standardized tests to gauge the deep learning the CEA calls for. If standardized exams remain the essential determinant of education, instruction in those vital attributes will continue to languish, particularly in schools in which many students do not perform well on standardized tests – which are inevitably schools in low-income communities, typically with many children of color and increasingly English language learners.

It is feasible to use locally-devised assessments. The New York Performance Standards Consortium is a network of public, non-charter high schools, most in New York City. To graduate, students must complete performance-based assessment tasks in language arts, math, science and history. Students design their own tasks, usually rooted in their coursework, with teacher guidance. They defend their projects before a committee that includes at least one outside expert. The products are scored using guides developed in common across the schools. Each year, samples are re-scored to ensure consistency across schools and allow faculty to adjust the scoring guides as necessary.

The Consortium’s 2012 report, *Education for the 21st Century*, demonstrates that Consortium schools significantly outperform other New York City public schools while serving a similar population. Consortium schools, which have regular admissions policies, have nearly identical proportions of blacks, Latinos, English language learners and students with disabilities as does the City. However, the Consortium dropout rate is half that of NYC public schools. Graduation rates for all categories of students are higher than for the rest of NYC, while Consortium rates for ELLs and students with disabilities are nearly double the city’s.

In 2011, 86% of African American and 90% of Latino male graduates of Consortium schools were accepted to college. National averages are only 37% and 43%, respectively. Ninety-three percent of Consortium grads remain enrolled in four-year colleges after the first two years, compared with a national average of 81%. Yet, Consortium students are far more likely to be low-income than the U.S. average.

Student suspensions at Consortium schools are 5%, while they are 11% for NYC high schools and 12% for city charter schools. Teacher turnover rates are 15% for Consortium schools, 25% for charters, and a staggering 58% for NYC high schools overall. (The report is available at http://performanceassessment.org/articles/DataReport_NY_PSC.pdf.)

In short, the Consortium is a huge success. The use of performance tasks is an indispensable part of their structure and processes. Teachers built this system – and surely Connecticut teachers can do something similar.

The Consortium is not the only relevant evidence. The Learning Record, a powerful tool teachers can use to document and evaluate progress in reading and writing, has been used in a variety of districts, including many Bureau of Indian Affairs schools, though it was largely eliminated by the focus on standardized testing under NCLB. Nebraska implemented a system of local assessments, each designed by local educators under state assessment standards. The quality was improving rapidly, but the state ran into implacable opposition from U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, and the state switched to a single standardized test. And as I noted earlier, New Hampshire has been approved to move ahead with a system that will rely heavily on local performance assessments.

A system that relies primarily on local assessments and classroom evidence can expect public support. The CEA survey shows large majorities believe classroom-based information provides far superior evidence of student attainment and progress than do standardized tests. The quality of that evidence can only increase if teachers collaborate to design, implement and refine projects and portfolios to evaluate the range of important attributes called for in the CEA proposal.

The CEA proposal is balanced. School evaluations will continue to give weight to the statewide tests, which would themselves be overhauled, while paying attention to each of the critical learning areas CEA has identified. As the bill calls for, the state would also establish delivery standards as a step toward ensuring all children can access a high-quality education. FairTest supports including an evaluation of school climate using indicators such as student engagement.

Tracking the adequacy and equity of available resources is also essential. However, in FairTest's view the availability of resources should not be used to judge schools as access to resources is not within a school's control and is in significant part a function of state funding. The legislature should commit to ensuring that every child in the state has access to schooling that fully educates the whole child, as the state Supreme Court has affirmed, and to transparent reporting on the adequacy and equity of school funding.

Utilizing teams of reviewers to evaluate schools is another important proposal, one that probably requires further elaboration to best meet the needs of Connecticut's schools. There are various options. One is the relatively informal teaming of schools who assist one another's improvement efforts. A variant in Britain known as RATLS showed significant signs of success according to researchers Hargreaves and Shirley in *The Fourth Way*. Another is formal school quality reviews, or inspectorates, as are used in various nations, including Britain, Holland and New Zealand, and which has been proposed by Richard Rothstein in *Grading Education*.

In short, The CEA has proposed a rich, flexible yet strong set of proposals that would take the state well beyond the limitations and problems caused by the near-sole reliance on standardized tests as the indicator, indeed definition, of the quality of education. The evidence is that the state's educators could build these new systems and that the result is likely to be improvement in schools, teaching and learning.

That said, allow me in concluding to return to the impact of federal law. The law is clearly harmful, and Congress may successfully address the damage. Should it reauthorize a new ESEA, there are two aspects that Connecticut should promptly address. First, if Congress allows less statewide testing, for example once each in elementary, middle and high school, as it should, Connecticut should follow suit, reducing the PMA requirement to match.

Second, if changes in the accountability actions allow, Connecticut should cease to rank its schools. Such rankings are educationally counterproductive. A new ESEA would almost certainly require states to identify its lowest-performing schools. This can be done by evaluating a rich array of evidence, such as the CEA proposal includes, to determine which schools need additional support so they can better educate all their students.

Thank you for your time and consideration. My colleagues and I would be pleased to discuss these proposals and related testing issues with you in more detail. You can reach me at monty@fairtest.org or call me at 617-477-9792. You can also find materials about testing and alternatives on our website at <http://fairtest.org>.