

Testimony of Wendy Lecker in Support of S.B. 380

Members of the Education Committee:

My name is Wendy Lecker. I am a public school parent in Stamford. I have also worked in the field of educational equity, as an attorney and education columnist, for the past 13 years. As such, I have read the wealth of research on the proper use of standardized tests.

I am writing to urge you to support S.B. 380. The bill, which calls for decoupling state standardized tests from teacher evaluations, is a much needed step toward sound education policy.

The weight of evidence demonstrates that the use of standardized tests in teacher evaluations is junk science. As the American Statistical Association maintains, teachers account for only 1-14 percent of the variance in student standardized test scores. Joining the ASA and others, the American Educational Research Association recently declared that it is almost impossible to disentangle this tiny teacher effect on student test scores from other in-school and out-of-school factors. A New Mexico court recently blocked that state's test-based teacher evaluation system because there is no scientific evidence proving that such a system is valid.

Standardized achievement tests were not designed to be instructionally sensitive, i.e. show what or how well a teacher teaches. They cannot be jury-rigged after the fact to be.

With the passage of the new federal law replacing the No Child Left Behind Law (NCLB), Connecticut now has a unique opportunity to rethink its flawed teacher evaluation system. In response first to the federal Race to the Top grant and then the NCLB waiver mandates, Connecticut developed a teacher and principal evaluation system calling for student standardized test scores to be a part of a teacher and principal's effectiveness rating. Under the federal law replacing NCLB, the Every Student Succeeds Act ("ESSA"), the federal government no longer requires states to link student standardized test scores to teacher evaluations.

There are some organizations, such as CAPSS and CABE, who maintain that standardized test scores must still be included because they show "student achievement growth."

What does that mean?

Learning is a complex process. Even if one focuses only on cognitive skills, different grades teach different content and different skills. Each standardized test measures skills that supposedly correspond to that grade level. Comparing one grade level test to another is comparing apples to oranges.

In constructing “growth scales” for standardized tests, statisticians make a fictional assumption that learning in math and reading is linear and can actually be compared from year to year. To make this work, they can only focus on a limited universe of skills that might be subject to such a rough comparison.

Measuring growth through standardized tests is, at best, looking at a tiny fraction of cognitive skills.

When we construct an evaluation system based on that tiny universe of disjointed skills, all the components in that system will be equally narrow. Any observations of and conclusions about teachers will center only on how those teachers are teaching those particular skills. Why do we want to know so little about a teacher?

I want much more for my son. I want my son’s teachers to help him learn skills, but I also want them to help him apply those skills to other subjects and in life. I want them to help him make sense of the world. I want them to help him ask better questions, so he can become a more critical thinker. I want them to help him be a better member of his school community so he can learn to become a good citizen. I want teachers who can assess my child with tools they developed based on their teaching.

None of these teaching skills can be measured with a test.

Test scores are simple, readily available measures, but they are completely inappropriate for use in teacher evaluations. As the renowned testing expert, W. James Popham, noted, using standardized tests to evaluate teachers is like measuring temperature with a tablespoon.

Rather than construct an evaluation process based on what is easiest to measure, shouldn’t we start with an examination of the type of skills we want in teachers?

Determining whether a teacher has those skills will require us to rely on the professional judgment of administrators and other teachers who observe a teacher’s practices, the work she assigns, and her students’ work.

The state can provide guidelines but it is time start trusting professional educators again. Teaching and learning are complex human endeavors that will never be properly reduced to numbers.

Connecticut now has the opportunity and moral duty to right the wrong being done to our teachers and students. S.B. 380 is a welcome step in the right direction. I urge you to pass the bill.

Respectfully submitted,

Wendy Lecker
Stamford