



Testimony of
Tom Kuroski, President
Newtown Federation of Teachers, AFT Local 1727, AFL-CIO

Education Committee Hearing
March 7, 2016

SB 380 An Act Concerning the Exclusion of Student Performance Results on the Mastery Examination from Teacher Evaluations

Good afternoon Senator Slossberg, Representative Fleischmann and members of the Education Committee. My name is Tom Kuroski and I am presently serving in my sixth year as President of the Newtown Federation of Teachers, AFT Local 1727 and I have been a teacher in the Newtown Public Schools for the past 31 years. I am currently teaching Anatomy and Physiology. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in favor of SB 380, An Act Concerning the Exclusion of Student Performance Results on the Mastery Examination from Teacher Evaluations.

I think I understand why non-educators thought that it was a good idea to use student standardized test scores as a means of evaluating teachers. They didn't know any better because they are not in the classroom. They felt it would make sense that student scores on these tests would be a valid reflection of a teacher's performance in the classroom. As we have learned from this ill-advised initiative in teacher evaluation, this could not be further from the truth. What I don't understand is why the legislators didn't listen to the teachers in the first place? Before this federal mandate was enacted, the voices of educators across the country made it loud and clear why this system and the rationale used to support it would be an inaccurate and unfair way to evaluate teachers. What you are going to hear during today's testimony supporting this bill will be originating from the same voices who communicated all the reasons why this system of evaluation would never produce valid data necessary to determine a teacher's skills as an educator or a barometer of what their students are learning in their classrooms.

I could go on for hours about why this was an ill-conceived way to evaluate teachers, but I only have three minutes. So may I share with you what I consider the top three reasons why SB 380 should be supported by this committee?

1. Standardized test scores do not apply or are not available to use for the evaluation of all teachers in the system. How can these scores accurately reflect the performance of a non-academic teacher or an academic teacher working in a grade level that doesn't administer a standardized test for that given year?
2. The student ability levels and classroom dynamics within a grade level that are taking a test can be vastly different. The classrooms are not homogenous and the test scores do not take this into account. Some of the best teachers in the country take on the most difficult classes because of their unique skill set and ability to get the most out of the students they are working with. Often times these more challenging educational settings have students who

do not do well on standardized tests. Their scores are not an accurate representation of the performance of the teachers in these classrooms or how much those teachers are helping their students to become better learners.

3. Economic inequities between different communities in the same state create an unfair playing field where teacher evaluations can and will be negatively affected by this type of system. Teacher scores become more of a reflection of the lack of support needed to create learning environments where students can thrive. Teachers working in impoverished districts where resources are scarce cannot be evaluated using the same tool as teachers working in affluent communities where education is a top priority and prohibitive spending doesn't exist.

I can find examples of the second reason occurring in all grade levels in my district, but I will focus on the middle school and the 8th grade classes. There are three clusters in the middle school that have students assigned to them based on scheduling and ability levels in math. High School Algebra is taught in the 8th grade. Students recommended for this accelerated math class have to meet strict academic guidelines in 6th and 7th grade as well as take an entrance exam. Only one of the three 8th grade clusters teaches Algebra so all the qualifying students end up in the same cluster. It could be up to 50% of the total students in the cluster. The same ability level scheduling is also used for students requiring special education services. The combination of these two necessary scheduling initiatives is needed to accommodate the individual education plans for all students. This results in one cluster having high achieving math students and the other two clusters having students with IEP's or 504's. When the 8th grade mastery test is given, the cluster with the algebra students has always had higher averages than the clusters with the mainstreamed students. This has nothing to do with the ability of the math teachers in those clusters. In fact, the stronger teachers are often the ones assigned to the clusters with mainstreamed students because of the skill set and experience they bring to the classroom. These scheduling accommodations have carry over to all of the academic areas being tested, not just math.

As you can see, this type of teacher evaluation system cannot adequately assess the strengths or weaknesses of the teacher. It is ridiculous to believe that student standardized test scores are an accurate and fair way to evaluate a teacher. This type of evaluation will lead to teachers requesting to teach only the most gifted students and will make teachers feel that they have to teach to the test in order to receive a good evaluation. Most importantly, this evaluation system does not, and cannot, produce legitimate evidence of teacher performance and is not a true reflection of what that teacher brings to the classroom each and every day.

The SBAC and SAT exams are just snapshots in time and are not able to quantify student growth. In addition, these exams were designed to assess students, not evaluate teacher practice or effectiveness. It is inappropriate to have student scores linked to our teacher evaluation systems.

I urge you to support teachers in their efforts to help all students learn and reach their full potential. Please support SB 380.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I'd be happy to answer any questions you may have.