

FairTest

National Center for Fair & Open Testing

October 24, 2013

Senator John J. Flanagan, Chair
Committee on Education

RE: The Regents Reform Agenda: "Assessing" Our Progress
Oral Testimony

Dear Chairman Flanagan and Members of the Committee:

Thank you. My name is Monty Neill and I am Executive Director of FairTest, the National Center for Fair & Open Testing, headquartered in Boston. We are the nation's sole organization focused on assessment reform. We address a range of issues, including standardized test quality, responsible uses of test and assessment results, and the development of educationally beneficial assessments. I will share with you, as I have in my [written testimony](#), some of our findings and conclusions from around the nation, information we hope will contextualize and illuminate the evidence you are gathering from New York.

In rapidly growing numbers, parents are boycotting standardized testing. Just last week, we heard that 85% of the parents of children in Kindergarten through grade two at Castle Bridge elementary in Washington Heights refused to allow their children to be subjected to tests whose sole purpose is to judge teachers. One parent called the testing "inhumane." Last spring, boycotts and high-school student walkouts erupted from coast to coast, while many thousands of parents and teachers have demonstrated against the testing regime. A recent national poll by PDK/Gallup found that 41% of respondents said the additional testing of recent years made no difference in school performance and 36% said that it had hurt school performance.

Why?

First, testing has become all-consuming. One New York City school pulled 5-year-olds out of their classrooms for test prep tutoring. Children took mini-tests daily, bigger tests every two weeks, then quarterly tests, then end of year tests.

Over-testing is not just a New York phenomenon. Chicago had 14 mandated tests for kindergarteners last year, and nearly as many in grades one and two. Pittsburgh has 35 tests in grade 4, with nearly as many in some other grades.

A major cause of over-testing is the mandate to judge every teacher in every subject every year, due to New York's unfortunate decision to participate in Race to the Top. California rejected that option. With funding running out, the legislature needs to rethink New York's participation. No other economically advanced nation tests in more than a few grades.

Second, tests are used to make high-stakes decisions: students are denied graduation, or in New York City grade promotion. Extensive research shows that high-stakes exit tests increase the dropout rate and do not produce graduates who are better prepared for college or careers. They are linked to an increase in incarceration. Teachers lose their jobs and schools are closed on the basis of test scores. Those are all terrible misuses of a limited tool. They violate the standards of the measurement profession itself. No other nation uses student scores to judge teachers or schools. Again, the legislature must take action.

Third, the tests are poor quality. They are now, and will remain under PARCC, mostly multiple-choice. They do not and will not measure very much of what our children need to know and be able to do as successful adults. And when high stakes are attached, they undermine important teaching and learning because schools are pressured to narrow the curriculum and teach to the test in order to boost scores.

Last week, Commissioner King issued a statement saying the Department would help reduce the overuse and misuse of tests. The letter was misleading. It makes minor tweaks to a bad system. As an effort to defuse the uprising of parents, students and teachers, it will fail. The document blames teachers and parents for not addressing the harmful stress inflicted on children by the decisions of state officials. If the Regents and the Department are unwilling defend children from test abuse, the legislature must step in.

The reliance on high-stakes testing has not improved student learning. NCLB designates the National Assessment of Educational Progress as the primary evidence as to the success of the law. The rate of progress on NAEP has slowed or ground to a halt since NCLB took effect. This slowdown has affected both reading and math, at all grades tested, for almost every demographic group. NCLB is a failure.

The Common Core PARCC tests will not solve the problems of testing. They will remain too long and developmentally inappropriate for young children. They will not adequately assess higher order thinking and skills. The limited inclusion of performance tasks will not overcome pressure to focus on rote learning to prepare for multiple-choice and short answer questions. Because they too will be high-stakes, they will continue to cause narrowed curriculum, teaching to the test, and student disengagement and pushout. New York, like the U.S. as a whole, needs to change course.

The focus on testing is also a diversion. So-called reformers claim that testing will produce better schools and better schools, will solve the problems of poverty and racial inequality. Both are false. My written testimony provides more extensive evidence as to how high-stakes, high-volume testing undermines student learning. But by focusing on testing and schools, the reformers also avoid inconvenient truths about poverty and increasing wealth inequality.

Compared with other economically advanced nations, the U.S. has the highest rates of child poverty and very low rates of pre-natal care and provision of high-quality child-care. Much evidence shows that U.S. wealth and income gaps are at their widest since the age of the robber barons.

In fact, schools account for about a quarter of the difference in student outcomes. Schools cannot solve poverty, but they can make an important difference in children's lives. However, unlike

nations such as Finland which give more support to schools serving low-income communities, the U.S. tends to provide more resources to those who already have more, while underfunding schools attended by children in greater need.

The goal of public education should be to help all children develop their talents so that they can contribute to our nation's social well-being and progress. The main purpose of student assessment should be to help students improve their learning. This means primarily useful feedback to students, but also accurate and rich information to guide policymakers and the public toward making good decisions.

New York has the nation's best example of an assessment system that strengthens student learning, produces greatly improved outcomes, and provides solid evidence to the public. The New York Performance Standards Consortium includes 39 public schools, most of them in the City. To graduate, student must pass the Regents language arts exam, but do not need to take any other Regents tests.

Instead, they produce extended tasks in language arts, math, science and history. The tasks are judged by committees that include outside experts, and students must orally defend their projects before the committees. Consortium schools use a common scoring guide, and samples are re-scored independently to ensure consistency across schools.

The schools are demographically comparable to the New York City student body. Their graduation rates are nearly double the city average for English language learners and 50 percent higher for students with disabilities. They are higher for African American and Latino students. Their graduates enroll in college at significantly greater rates. 90 percent of them in 4-year colleges are still enrolled in year three, and that includes wealthy and middle income students. Consortium schools retain their teachers at far higher rates, while their student suspension rates are far lower.

The Consortium is a huge success, but it is not the only way to create a high-quality teaching and assessing system. Rather, it is an example and a model. The state should create systems of assessments that different schools could choose. They would all have to be based on the state's standards. The state would have to develop methods to compare outcomes from different systems – which is technically possible. And the state should monitor success and problems while helping systems learn from one another and improve.

In addition to recommending that the legislature act to replace the one-size-fits-all state testing program with a portfolio of assessment systems, let me close with a few other recommendations.:

- Follow the lead of Massachusetts, another RTTT and waiver state, which does not attach any fixed weight to state tests in teacher evaluation. That would reduce the stakes.
- Tell districts that they have substantial latitude to evaluate teachers, that no standardized or semi-standardized separate tests would need to be given in order to judge teachers and principals. This would eliminate one major test misuse and cause of proliferation.

- Build alliances with other states to challenge misguided federal policies. Secretary Duncan has said NCLB does not work. He should be pushed to grant waivers without harmful conditions such as judging teachers by student test scores.

- Pass a law like California's that will give parents the right to opt out of state tests.

- Pass bills now pending in the legislature regarding truth in testing, the costs of assessment, and the testing of children in grades K, 1 and 2.

- Use standardized tests in only a few grades and use sampling rather than test every child.

Ultimately, New York needs to scrap high-stakes testing, markedly reduce the amount of standardized testing, and build systems of high-quality performance assessments.

Thank you, and I would be pleased to answer any questions you have.

- Written testimony is available at http://www.nysenate.gov/files/pdfs/Monty%20Neill.FairTest_0.pdf