

**D.C. State Board of Education (SBOE) Hearing  
on the Proposed "School Accountability" Formula  
in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)  
Testimony by Retired DCPS High School Teacher Erich Martel**

The "School Accountability" Trap: Holding Teachers "Accountable" for the Low Test Scores, Behavior and Attendance of "Socially Promoted" Students

**ESSA "School Accountability" uses semantically ambiguous terminology to collectively hold teachers "accountable" for the low test scores and behavior of socially promoted students. It should be rejected with a letter of explanation to the Secretary of Education.**

State Superintendent Kang, SBOE President Williams and SBOE Members,

The entire "accountability" process is invalid. The public needs you, the SBOE members, whether formally or informally, to make this case to the US Department of Education and the Congress.

The USED ESSA "School Accountability" framework imposes an unacceptable burden on teachers and school staff. It establishes "accountability" in name only. Its real purpose is to hold teachers and school staff "accountable" for student performance measures for which they are not responsible. Teachers do not control student attendance or student behavior or student performance on standardized tests or their completion of graduation requirements.

Teachers encourage students, tutor them, act as role models, call parents/guardians, coach them and sponsor activities, but they do not have anywhere close to the 100% responsibility that the ESSA "school accountability" formula mandates.

It does nothing to address continuing obstacles to student improvement in schools with the greatest student need. Instead, it allows Local Education Agencies (LEA's) like DCPS and many charters to socially promote students that have not mastered the standards required for a passing grade, thus passing failure to the next higher grade. In 2016, 9,258 students or 27.4% of the tested in DCPS and the charters scored in Level 1 (lowest of 5 levels, defined as "Did not meet expectations," i.e. Failed) on the English (ELA) exam, while 7,736 or 22.4% of those tested in math scored in Level 1 (table, below). For that reason, I am recommending the following amendment to the "School Accountability" proposal:

**In each publicly funded D.C. school, students who receive a **Level 1** score on both the PARCC ELA/reading and mathematics tests will be retained in grade.**

Retention prevents failure from expanding with each higher grade level. When students know that the tests matter for promotion, it's likely that many will make a greater effort. And, tests with no consequences for students are invalid as high stakes tests for holding teachers accountable.

The ESSA calls for "school accountability." **How can a "school" be held accountable?** It can't. The term "**school accountability**" is intentionally ambiguous. It is dishonest

1. It uses student performance data (tests, attendance, etc.) to hold teachers, but not students, "accountable";

2. It makes all teachers and school staff collectively responsible for student performance;  
 How NCLB and ESSA make teachers responsible for student test results, student behavior, etc.:  
 Teachers can be held "accountable" as long as student "expectations [are set] high enough."

This innocuous phrase (NCLB H.S. Accountability, 2002), with which teachers have been endlessly exhorted, often by motivational speakers on professional development day, is the conceptual bridge over which student responsibility, especially that of low achieving students, is transferred to the responsibility of teachers and school staff. It infantilizes students, while setting up teachers as scapegoats for poor student performance. Unlike clearly defined goals in a teacher's syllabus, these "expectations" are indeterminate and vague, the product of pop psychology, available to seal the fate of teachers in any "low achieving" school.

<b>D.C. State: 2016 PARCC Exams: Level 1 Tests</b>				
	<b>ELA</b>	<b>ELA</b>	<b>Math</b>	<b>Math</b>
	<b># Lvl 1</b>	<b>% Lvl 1</b>	<b># Lvl 1</b>	<b>% Lvl 1</b>
Gr3	1940	31.6%	1182	19.3%
Gr4	1176	21.7%	1074	19.9%
Gr5	935	18.8%	794	16.0%
Gr6	942	21.4%	1036	23.5%
Gr7	1168	27.0%	913	22.3%
Gr8	1034	25.1%	1339	41.6%
H.S.	2063	44.3%	1389	22.0%
<b>Totals*</b>	<b>9258</b>	<b>27.4%</b>	<b>7736</b>	<b>22.4%</b>

(\*Due to decimal rounding & suppression of n<25 data, listed totals may differ slightly from column totals)

(Source: D.C. OSSE 2016 PARCC results)

**School management policies and practices** that impact a school's atmosphere, but are not included in the ESSA "school accountability" formula:

- Are student discipline policies enforced?
- Are principals required to comply with the DCPS-WTU contract?
- Are teachers pressured to pass failing students?

Last school year (2015-16):

3,482 students, over 50% of student enrollment in Anacostia, Ballou, Cardozo, Eastern, Luke Moore, Washington Metro and Woodson High Schools had 21 or more unexcused absences.

Approximately 860 DCPS Students with 21 or more Unexcused Absences Graduated in 2016. The DCMR requires a grade of FA (*failure due to absences*) for 10 or more absences in any subject. Appeals can be filed. Has the state superintendent provided SBOE with data on the number of appeals of FA grades?

DCMR Title 5; 2103.7 reads: "DCPS secondary students with five (5) or more unexcused absences in any class during a single advisory shall receive a grade reduction in that subject."

2103.8 reads: "DCPS secondary students with ten (10) or more unexcused absences in any class during single advisory shall receive a grade of 'FA' (*failure due to absences*) in that subject."

2103.13 reads: "*A written appeal may be filed by a parent or student on behalf of any student receiving a reduced or failing grade(s) due to unexcused absences.*" (2103.14 thru 25 describe the appeals process)