

State Board of Education
March 15, 2017
Public Hearing
Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)
School Accountability Measures
Testimony of Erin Thesing
Fifth Grade Teacher at Maury Elementary School
Ward 1 Community Member

Thank you for the opportunity to speak this evening. I have taught in a range of elementary schools—a no-excuses turnaround charter school, a project-based learning charter school that was in Focus status, and now, a traditional public school. These experiences have proven to me that school accountability plans have a profound impact on teaching in all schools, and especially those that serve our most vulnerable students. And when high-stakes standardized tests are the primary metric, they permeate teaching and learning in harmful ways. The PARCC is an unreliable measure of our students and should not have the lion's share of the weight in how we assess them and our schools. This is why I ask you to vote NO on OSSE's state accountability plan.

When PARCC scores are the primary metric of school success, less time is reserved for useful assessments and meaningful learning experiences. Instead, test prep occupies classroom and planning time. Where once we gathered to study student writing and math problem solving to craft teaching points, teachers now dedicate meetings perseverating over how we can move students a few percentage points on the PARCC and reviewing the most recent predictive standardized test data.

Our students feel it acutely. This year, during predictive assessments, computers shut down mid-test. Essays that were painstakingly typed finger by finger suddenly deleted. Last year, in my second grade class, trackpads on laptops proved difficult to use by the seven-year-old fingers that tried to drag and drop a ruler to measure an apple on the screen. And then our children cried. Some even banged their head against desks saying hurtful things about themselves.

All of this for a test that provides only a small snapshot of what our children can do. Teachers know that good teaching requires useful assessments that show us what our children can do and what we need to teach next.

When I taught second grade, I created an assessment in which I observed my second graders use actual rulers and meter sticks (not one they had to drag on a computer screen) to measure the distance of a rolled toy car and then discussed their mathematical process and thinking. This revealed their process, not just their answer. I could see when they left a gap between the ruler when iterating it, or looked at the wrong side and reported centimeters instead of inches. I knew exactly what to teach next.

This year, my fifth graders read research studies and newspaper and journal articles to research the benefits and consequences of serving chocolate milk in school cafeterias. They formed arguments, developed thesis statements, found evidence to support their reasons, and acknowledged and rebutted counterarguments. They then organized this information to present panel presentations to school administrators, the PTA, cafeteria staff, and the central office nutrition team, buttoning up their uniform shirts to the top of the collar and confidently making their case. The same students who cried during our standardized testing the week before beamed as they walked away from this assessment, patting each other on the back and saying, “I had no idea we could do that! We sounded so smart!” And they did. Using a rubric, I evaluated their work against the Common Core Standards and knew exactly what to do next to strengthen their argument writing.

Creating rigorous, useful assessments that ask students to synthesize skills is the first step in the planning process. When we backwards plan we ask, “How will we know if our students can do this?” and then, “What skills do we need to teach so they they can do it?” When a computer-based test is the final assessment, we are in turn asked to teach the skills for the test. School accountability measures need to make room for assessments that provide useful information for parents and teachers to know how to best support their children. A PARCC score alone does not do this.

Relying on PARCC as our primary measure of school success is the convenient choice. Creating useful and comprehensive assessments that truly measure a student’s growth and achievement is challenging work, but they are essential to good teaching and good schools. I urge you vote NO on the proposed plan because it places too much weight on standardized testing and it will leave little room for teachers to create useful assessments that will actually guide student learning.