

Testimony to the U.S. Senate Committee
Hearing on the Impact of NCLB's Testing and Accountability
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Thank you Chairman Alexander and Senator Murray for this opportunity to offer my remarks regarding the impact of No Child Left Behind's testing and accountability provisions on our public school children. I thank you for your vision and for this opportunity. I have an eleven-year-old son in sixth grade, so I speak to you as both a public school parent and a teacher.

Business practices are informing education policy, so I would like to start there. The use of competitive, performance based practices have long been assumed to motivate workers. Microsoft, Expedia and Adobe Systems are just some of the companies who adopted stack ranking, the now infamous practice of applying rewards, consequences and rankings based on performance. These same business advisors informed many of our nation's biggest school districts, including mine. In the past few years, businesses have abandoned this practice because they have proven to have disastrous affects on collaboration, problem solving, and innovation. The high exodus of workers seen in these businesses are attributed to stack ranking (Oremus, 2013). Studies, including those sponsored by the Federal Reserve Bank , find that incentive-based practices only work for the most menial tasks that do not require critical thinking (Ariely, et. al., 2005). What was bad for business has been disastrous for public education, a field already plagued with recruitment and retention challenges. Educators with valuable experience are leaving the profession in droves and enrollment in teacher preparation programs is abysmal.

Furthermore, multiple choice, high-stakes tests have reliably padded the profits of education corporations, draining public tax dollars but have been unreliable in measuring the diversity of students' capabilities and learning. The use of those same tests in evaluating teachers is, simply put, statistically invalid. The American Statistical Association has warned "The VAM scores themselves have large standard errors, even when calculated using several years of data. These large standard errors make rankings unstable, even under the best scenarios for modeling." In New York State, the tests change every year, and the cut scores shift. The results are norm-referenced, ensuring a stack ranking of students with approximately 50% below the curve. We are playing a dangerous game with our children's futures and public education, cornerstones of our democracy. As a special and general education teacher, I have seen these tests incite anxiety and can provide numerous examples of times when students stated that all they accomplished throughout the year meant nothing.

When parents and educators voice concerns, they have been accused of coddling. I want to challenge that assumption. The great crime is that the focus on testing has taken valuable resources and time away from programming in social studies, the arts and physical education. At my school, we no longer have a librarian and our parent association works full time to fund needed arts programs that are not provided for in our budget. We are one of the lucky schools. What about schools where parents must work just to survive? I know schools that no longer have money for basics such as soap for the bathrooms. There is nothing more painful to watch or forced to be complicit to than the minimalizing that is happening in our schools. Teachers, students and parents find themselves in a position of

whether or not to push back or leave. Who is left to receive these tests and accompanying sanctions? Who are the children receiving scripted curricula while losing recess, physical education, music and civics lessons? It is our students from the most marginalized communities. A current study by the Southern Education Foundation finds that more than 50% of our public school children are living in poverty, an all time high in fifty years (Layton, 2015). Black and Latino students live disproportionately at or below the poverty line, and it is no accident that we are faced with the most segregated school system in history, with a disproportionate number of school closures happening in the poorest communities- all at the hands of using invalid metrics. It is what pushes me past my comfort zone and to speak out.

I have worked in different schools, some of which, through no fault of their own, have become increasingly data driven as opposed to student driven. I am fortunate to currently work in a public school that was founded on the principles of whole child education, where we, the teachers, collaborate to develop curriculum and create relevant assessments. It is the antithesis of stack ranking.

This year, our 4th and 5th graders are immersed in a study we call Rights and Responsibilities. Students develop questions around the origins of the United States, the Constitution, and discuss the complex struggles and progress we have made as a nation. My class decided to divide themselves into groups to study three different perspectives from the colonial era - the Native people, European colonists and the African slaves. They are the researchers, using primary and secondary sources to learn about key events, figures, and cultural and political ideas. My integrated co-teaching class consists of students with disabilities, or I should say, all abilities, and they work in heterogeneous groups to present their understandings through a variety of mediums: creating art pieces, choreographing original dance pieces, presenting timelines, developing maps, conducting process dramas, and giving oral reports. They are learning “how” to learn, developing lifelong skills: researching, analyzing information from multiple sources, collaborating with others and sharing what they've learned in creative and thought-provoking ways. They are the stewards of their own learning, guided by their interests and passions. I share this not as a best practice but to emphasize the importance of fostering learning environments that value a culture of trust, diversity, and teacher autonomy not a focus on test preparation. Teachers' working conditions are inextricably linked to students' learning conditions.

Last year, over 50% of the parents at our school refused to allow their children to take the NYS Common Core aligned ELA and Math tests and we were not alone. The Latin root of assessment is to “sit alongside.” Until we have teachers and policymakers “sitting alongside” and getting to know our students and our classrooms in deep and meaningful ways, we cannot fully understand the state of public education. No corporate made multiple-choice test will give you that data. Last year, I decided that I am obligated and accountable to my students and families, and that is why, as a conscientious objector, I will not administer tests that reduce my students to a single metric and will continue to take this position until the role of standardized assessments are put in their proper place. Along with two other teachers at my school, we formed Teachers of Conscience, a position paper and call to action at local levels.

We just celebrated the life of Martin Luther King Jr. In his Letter From a Birmingham Jail, King affirms that “one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws.” He quotes St.

Augustine who said "an unjust law is no law at all." So long as education policy continues to be shaped by the interests of corporate profiteering and not the interests of our public school children, we will resist these unjust testing laws. It is time to abandon faulty business assumptions in public education. We are experiencing a historic resistance to high stakes testing. Chicago Public Schools just voted to back away from PARCC assessments and another state joins the nine who have already withdrawn from the assessment consortium. Let us abandon stack ranking of our children and schools. We need future generations to explore problems that have far more complex solutions than a multiple choice test. Let us do the work of teaching and help us hold our state officials accountable for delivering on funding, as promised through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

I am hopeful that we can sit alongside each other and do the hard work of answering the questions most central to our democracy: What is the purpose of public education in a democratic society? How can we ensure that all children receive an enriching and equitable education? How do we support teachers and schools in carrying out their missions to educate all? Thank you.

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