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February 25, 2013
Testimony for House Bill 2664

The standardized testing movement is all about data. In my last ten years as a teacher, data has been billed as the great equalizer of education. Despite overwhelming evidence that standardized tests do a better job measuring students' socio-economic status than the quality teaching and learning, this data has remained the centerpiece of the education reform movement. As the stakes have gotten higher for schools, teachers and administrators have been under enormous pressure to raise test scores, and have put ever more resources into test prep materials, testing technology, teacher training tied to test, and tests to predict how students will do on the tests. With all this frenzy for data, it is ironic that it is so hard to come by data about the testing itself. How much does all this cost? In time, in joy, in learning? Are standardized tests improving the quality of education as proponents said they would, or are they sucking the life out of it?

To get a sense of the cost of standardized testing in one school, here are some of my recent experiences from the school where I teach: Vernon K-8 in North East Portland.

Earlier this month, I tried to reserve time in one of my school's two computer labs, so that my 6th and 7th graders could complete a community service project they designed themselves. A few days before we were to go to the lab, our teaching staff was told that all previously scheduled times in computer labs would be cancelled. The times that were not already scheduled for state-testing, and state-testing screening, would now be reserved for more test-prep programs. In the future, my middle-school students, most of whom do not have a computer in their home, would have to hand-write their reports, and will likely go on to high school with lots of practicing clicking on multiple choice answers on a screen, but without the word-processing, research, and presentation skills that they will need to be successful. This is part of the cost of standardized tests.

At a recent staff meeting at my K-8 schools, kindergarten teachers spoke of their frustration with giving 5 year olds multiple choice tests on the computer in order to assess their likely readiness to take OAKS in 3rd grade. The kindergarten teachers don't feel like this test accurately assesses students learning or readiness. But what is worse, it causes anxiety and feelings of failure in these young children who are made to repeatedly engage in this task which is neither helpful nor developmentally appropriate. Further, for several years the parents of young children at my school have been lobbying the principal to allow afternoon recess. They have been told repeatedly that because our school has low standardized test scores, kindergarteners can't afford recess time. This is a cost of standardized testing.

In my neighborhood, I commonly hear parents tell me they chose or plan to choose charter schools, and schools in higher income parts of town, based on their belief that these schools do not devote so much time to testing. To them, our school's label as a "focus" school reads as a focus on standardized testing. They vote with their feet by pulling their children out of our diverse neighborhood school to send their children to a school removed from the testing mania. Schools like mine, which serve a high percentage of impoverished children, foster children, and children with special needs, are in constant danger of closure due to our testing data and the way it is perceived by the public. This is a cost of standardized testing.

Title I schools are affected by standardized testing in a way that wealthier schools are not. As a teacher, I have chosen to teach at Title I schools for the last nine years, because I believe that if we can get education right for our students who face the most challenges everyday, then we have succeeded. However, the standardized testing craze has made this life choice of mine ever more difficult. In our Title I schools, teachers are expected to constantly prep our students for standardized tests, because these tests are our lifeline under current law.

This presents teachers with a moral dilemma: we must choose between teaching the way that we know is right—an education rich in problem solving, creativity, and inquiry-- and teaching kids to be better standardized test takers. At Title I schools, our test-scores are all that keeps us alive—the wrong test data results in sanction and possibly closure. That puts a lot of pressure on administrators and teachers to focus dogmatically on the kind of skills that are easily measurable. In my school, as we approach the OAKS testing season, I have heard several teachers say that they will spend the next 3-4 weeks preparing the students for the OAKS test, putting aside authentic learning experiences to maximize test-score potential. This is a cost of standardized testing.

As a teacher, I can tell you that teacher morale and professional autonomy have been casualties of the testing craze, which is blind to realities of our underfunded schools and struggling communities. If teacher pay becomes tied to student test score, I fear there will be an even greater exodus from schools like mine, where no matter how excellent the teacher, our scores will always be likely to reflect the enormous challenges that our many of our students face: poverty, malnutrition, neglect, homelessness. Standardized tests are literally incentivizing our best teachers to leave the schools that need them most. This is a cost of our over-reliance on standardized testing.

While these costs might be difficult to quantify, many of the costs really do come down to numbers and dollars. I am encouraged that Oregon is getting ready to take this first step in rethinking the standardized-testing frenzy that has overshadowed real education nation-wide. I fully support House Bill 2664.