

The Efficacy, Validity, and Practicality of Statewide Standardized Testing & High School Exit Exams

Joint Committee on the Public Schools

Testimony Provided by Marie Blistan and Dr. Christine Miles

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Good morning, my name is Dr. Christine Miles and I am an Associate Director of Professional Development and Instructional Issues with the New Jersey Education Association. In addition, my past experiences include serving as a high school English Teacher, building-based administrator, and the Director of Consulting for Grant Wiggins' organization, Authentic Education, where my primary focus was on curriculum, design, and assessment.

Supporters of our current high-stakes testing system claim it furthers equity for our students. However, these individuals ignore the evidence, data, and research surrounding the inequitable reality the system presents for our students. Equality assumes that everyone benefits from the same supports. All are on a level playing field.

Equity provides everyone with the support that they need in order to succeed. However, reality remains that the current system is designed in a way where those who "have" continue to have -- the system was designed for them -- while those in historically marginalized communities must continue to fight against an unjust system. As policy-makers, you must continually ask yourselves what value there is in prematurely categorizing students as "worthy" or "unworthy" of opportunity while they are still children. This is what our current system of exit testing does to NJ's students.

Federal testing requirements include annual testing in math and English/Language Arts during grades 3 through 8 and once during high school. In addition, students are required to test in science once during grades 3-5, once in grades 6-8, and once in grades 9-12. There is NO federal requirement for exit testing.

Current NJ statute states that all students must successfully pass an 11th grade assessment, during their 11th grade year. The Classes of 2019 and 2020 have access to alternate pathways for graduation, but our current 9th and 10th graders may not have this opportunity.

In light of the Superior Court's ruling, the NJDOE removed the 11th grade requirement for the Spring of 2019 only. However, in order to be in alignment with the existing statute, the state will need to re-institute an 11th grade assessment for the Class of 2021, during the 2019-2020 school year. So, what does all of this testing look like?

As Assemblywoman Egan-Jones noted earlier this morning, her two grand-daughter expressed that their time was "wasted" during the PARCC. Let's look at the actual amount of time that is wasted. In the 2017-2018 school year, students across grades 3-11 spent a minimum of 73.5

hours taking the PARCC / NJ Student Learning Assessment. This equates to 98 forty-five minute class periods of **lost** learning opportunities over a student's academic career or 3 years' worth of a once per week elective period where students could be cultivating their knowledge, skills, understanding, and competency in a vocation, trade, or area of passion. Imagine the value and power of dedicating this time to developing the skills needed for your current career.

As Dr. Aderholdt mentioned, there is additional time wasted during testing windows when schools dismiss early or aim to reduce the mental load students carry during testing blocks.

At the high school level, a student who sits for the ELA and Math PARCC/NJSLA are currently engaging in a minimum of 6 hours of statewide testing. When asked whether 6 hours is an appropriate amount of testing time to capture the quality of curriculum and the quality of our districts, Dr. VanderVeen, CEO of New Meridian, the company who licenses the assessment content to the state of NJ, stated provided this response to SBOE President Arcelio Aponte. "At 3 hours, this would still be the longest assessment available in the country."

NJ puts their students through more testing than ANY other state in the country, including Massachusetts (ranked #1 in K-12 education) and New Hampshire (ranked #2 in K-12 education).

When urged to share his thinking on the proposed shifts in testing requirements and timeframes, Dr. VanderVeen shared the following. - "The more important indicator of post-secondary readiness is the curriculum and not the assessment. States should be focusing on ensuring a rigorous sequence of courses instead of focusing on an assessment."

Dr. VanderVeen's company stands to lose a great deal of money if testing is reduced, and yet, he urges the state of NJ to focus on curriculum and instruction.

Yet, NJ doubles down on assessment.

In the Spring of 2018, NJEA worked with the NJDOE on the Statewide Assessment Outreach, gathering student, parent, and educator input on the lived experiences with PARCC. Throughout this work, we found that the statewide testing system has profoundly negative implications for curriculum and instruction and is severely impacting student mental health.

Copies of the NJEA Stakeholder Perspectives on PARCC Report and Student/Parent/Educator PARCC Journey Maps in addition to a comprehensive annotated bibliography of the available research on the mental health implications of standardized testing may be found in sections 1 and 2 of the binders you have been provided.

In response to Ms. Skinner's argument that assessment is a great "diagnostic tool" – there is a misconception about the purpose and structure of testing here. In education, we have various types of testing. The best way to demonstrate this is thinking about the following:

- Diagnostic Assessment is similar to blood-work. We go to the doctor, get blood-work done, and see what is happening. We might have elevated cholesterol levels. This doesn't capture our ultimate performance. It's merely a snapshot in time.

- Formative assessment is similar to a check-up after the initial bloodwork. We go to the doctor, and check-in to see if our interventions are working. We monitor the evidence and adjust our actions accordingly.

- Summative Assessment is similar to an autopsy. It captures what occurred. Feedback doesn't result in changes for the individual. The PARCC is a summative assessment, it captures what occurred in a given school year and the results come far too late – nearly 6-9 months later – to inform any action. Most notably in this connection, PARCC is killing our kids.

Now, let's look at what the process is like for our children.

The image presented shows the current pathway to graduation for the Classes of 2019 and 2020. These rules, as of today, do not apply to our current 9th and 10th graders. NJEA is in great support of the extension of the consent decree for not only current 9th and 10th graders, but also current 8th graders.

There was an argument earlier that the portfolio is a great option for some kids. However, we are currently forcing kids to sit through and fail the assessment first before gaining access to this alternative.

This image demonstrates the State BOE's proposed pathways to graduation --unnecessarily complicated, requiring students to sit for and fail multiple assessments prior to being given access to alternate pathways, and is an immense waste of valuable teaching and learning time and the state's resources.

Assemblywoman Egan-Jones questioned regarding Assemblywoman Lampitt's bill. This bill would make the graphic pictured possible. Not only would it green light this option, but it would also NOT put a limit on the number of tests required for students to pass to graduate. But, honestly, how many students use the alternate pathways, anyway?

The slide on the screen represents the percentage of students in Senator Rice's legislative district, who have used the PARCC assessment, an alternate pathway assessment, portfolio appeal, or otherwise to fulfill their graduation requirement. Each legislator on the committee will find their customized data, by the counties represented within your legislative district, in section 3 of your binders.

When greater than HALF of our students are using alternate pathways -- some of which put extra financial burden upon the family -- we know our statewide assessment system is in dire need of a change.

11 states currently require exit exams, down from a one time high of 27. Research shows that high school exit exams have done nothing to lift student achievement, but have raised the drop out rate. Special Education, English Language Learners, African American, Latino, American Indian, and low-income students are far more likely to be denied a diploma for not passing a test. Exit exams have been linked to increased incarceration; tougher graduation tests are associated with a 12% increase in incarceration rates.

How will we know our students are career/college ready? State regulations (NJAC 6A:8) provides an overview of the requirements for students to graduate. Students are required to successfully pass 120 credits worth of coursework, demonstrate performance on locally designed and administered assessments, and meet attendance standards. Many districts require additional aspects as well.

When pro-testing parties argue that standardized testing indicates whether or not students are ready for college and career, those steeped in the research and practice know that this is an ignorant misconception with significant consequences for our students.

There is **no research** basis in the claim that PARCC/NJSLA will help reduce the common concern that too many students are NOT college ready and require remedial course work. **Nor is there research** that PARCC/NJSLA performance is a predictor of future success.

There IS, however, research that confirms that a student's transcript (high school grades) is what makes a high school diploma truly meaningful and gives the most accurate picture of a student's readiness for college and career. (FairTest, 2009; Hiss, 2014)

When pro-testing parties use the argument that the high number of students in remedial college courses demonstrates the need for high-stakes standardized testing, those steeped in the research and practice know that this is a false narrative. We can look to the practices of two NJ-based Higher Education institutions for solutions -

Rowan University - Dr. Eric Milou has shared

- To address the problem of first year college students requiring remediation, Universities must create various mathematics pathways, as Rowan has done, and NOT require all students take the same algebraic-centered math classes. Instead, courses may focus on quantitative literacy and statistics.
- "The mathematics you need to go into a career, vocational, carpenter, plumber – which are great careers – is completely different than the math you need to go to college. Which is completely different than the math you need to go into a STEM career in college. We have to have that discussion rather than saying college and career ready," - Dr. Eric Milou, Rowan University

Warren County Community College

- To increase the graduation rate, WCCC abolished remedial courses and immediately saw the graduation rate double. Remedial courses often become a trap for students – few actually complete the courses and those that don't are gated from the credit-bearing courses they need for their degree.

If we truly want to ensure that our students are career and college ready, we must create a system that cultivates the knowledge, skills, and understanding students need to be successful

in life beyond high school. Passing a standardized assessment does not indicate whether or not one will be successful in any given career.

If we look to the most notable in any given field, we see authentic performance. In her opening, Marie mentioned Captain Sully - the commercial airline pilot who effectively made an emergency landing in the Hudson River, trusting his experiences and expertise when receiving conflicting guidance from ground control, and while under extreme pressure. Captain Sully's story reflects for us that there is an extreme difference between simply possessing KNOWLEDGE and truly UNDERSTANDING the nuances of complex areas.

Under the Every Student Succeeds Act, NJ has the opportunity to apply for a federally approved pilot -- the Innovative Assessment Pilot -- where we can institute classroom-based, curriculum-embedded performance assessments that fulfill the Federal requirements and allow our students to develop the competency needed for success, whether college or career bound. For research on the merits and benefits of Performance-based assessment, a comprehensive transition plan including timelines, approximate costs, and policy implications, please see section 4 of the binders provided to you.

We continually hear that the state is in transition to a stronger and fairer system. In order to truly be stronger, fairer, *and just* -- the system needs to remove the unnecessary barriers that categorize our children as "successful" or "unsuccessful."

All of our children are **worthy of opportunity** and as educators it is our role to support, encourage, and prepare our students for whatever post-secondary path -- college or career - that they wish to take.

By eliminating the unnecessary and burdensome exit testing graduation requirement and transitioning to an authentic, performance-based model, we tear down the fences standing between our students and their futures. We look forward to furthering this discussion with you and are happy to provide any additional research-based information or clarification that you might need on these issues.