

Good afternoon Chair Cupp, Ranking Member Sykes and members of the Joint Education Oversight Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today regarding the Every Student Succeeds Act. My name is Melissa Marini Savigelj-Smith, and I am a member of several local and national social justice groups, as well as an educator and the mother of four sons.

I would like to share my perspective regarding Ohio's plans for implementing the Every Student Succeeds Act.

First, I would like to acknowledge the positive steps being taken on behalf of vulnerable students, particularly those in the juvenile justice system. As an educator at a county detention facility, I see an attempt to address some of the very challenging issues our students confront that many of us have been speaking out about. Unfortunately, our students are often part of an "invisible population" whose education is neglected and forgotten. Although I am not here today to share the stories of heartbreak and devastation that my students experience, I hope to see more attention from state leaders given to these vulnerable populations.

Regrettably, the state's continued unnecessary emphasis on a test and punish education system threatens to negate some of the positive steps taken.

My 3rd son, Angelo, is currently a junior at Berea High School in Berea, Ohio. As you are all aware, trying to figure out how he and his peers will meet Ohio's testing graduation requirements is an unnecessary nightmare created by officials and legislators in our state.

Ohio is only one of thirteen states that requires high stakes graduation exit exams, the lowest number of states since the mid-1990s. The majority of states have recognized that the emphasis on testing hasn't helped the education of our children.

In 2016, Ohio's education ranking tumbled from 5th to 23rd in the country.

When comparing students in poverty to their more affluent peers, Ohio ranks 43rd in the nation when it comes to addressing their unique needs. .

A review by the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences concluded that high school graduation tests have done nothing to lift student achievement but have raised the

dropout rate. How is it fair to a kid who played by the rules and went to school their whole life to be denied a diploma because of a test? These high stakes exit exams, I might add, none of you who are over 40, who went to a private school, or who were homeschooled were required to take in order to get your high school diploma. Are your diplomas somehow less valid?

Senate Education Chairwoman Peggy Lehner said that the most recent data on education in the state “should be a real wake-up call for us to refocus our priorities. We need to give these kids a chance, and education is key to having a chance in life.”

Continuing the test and punish climate in our state has done nothing to improve teaching or learning, or to give “these kids a chance.”. Instead, it has been used as a false proxy to label schools, children, and educators as “failing”, so that public tax-payer money can be diverted to charters and vouchers without widespread backlash from the citizenry.

Even if you decided to deny irrefutable and credible research that shows there is a lack of mathematical and statistical validity when state tests are used for accountability purposes, you cannot disregard the children of our state by silencing your common sense.

Thus, I challenge you to activate that common sense and examine the following list created by emeritus professor of graduate studies in Teacher Education at Youngstown State University, Dr. Randy Hoover. Using your common sense, check off each of the items below that you believe to be true. I will let you grade your own paper when you’re done.

(Distribute hand out below)

Assumptions Undergirding Standardized Tests and their Uses in Ohio

1. A single test can determine the knowledge, intellect, aptitude, talent, capability, and worth of the student who takes it.
2. All children are identical:

- a. The life experience of a child outside of school does not affect test performance.
 - b. All children have the same abilities.
 - c. All children have the same attitude toward school.
 - d. All children can learn at grade level regardless of developmental or ability level.
 - e. All children have the same neighborhood and home conditions.
 - f. All children have the same intellectual gifts and deficits.
 - g. All children have the same developmental readiness.
 - h. All children have the same rate of intellectual maturation.
 - i. All children have the same quality prenatal and postnatal health care.
3. All people are good test takers.
 4. Student test performance is always caused by teacher performance.
 5. There is no such thing as low-performing students, only low-performing teachers.
 6. We can test people into learning.
 7. The sole purpose of going to school is to score well on a standardized test.
 8. Good teaching is solely about test scores.

For Ohio's educational accountability system's claims to be believed, all of the above assumptions must be true.

(End of handout)

None of them are. I hope you all earned 100% because I have high expectations and standards for all of you. For homework, you'll notice that I included some sample test practice prompts for you. Please take a look at them later. I think you'll find them intimidating from an adult's perspective. Imagine confronting those questions as an anxious adolescent who doesn't know if they should hold onto the hope of graduating from high school. Then imagine yourself as a student being shuffled between foster homes, or being held in juvenile detention, or worried about where you may be sleeping tonight, and trying to focus on a test. All children are not identical. Good teaching and learning isn't about just test scores.

The continued use of standardized tests to rate those educating students, to determine graduation for students, or to move students on to the next grade, is not only a violation of mathematical and statistical principles for validity, it goes against everyone's common sense.

Instead of focusing on research-based improvements for education in our state, schools have become places to prepare for tests. The children this hurts the most, are our most vulnerable children in our most impoverished areas.

If the focus of our state's education system is truly going to prepare students for life and work in our century, then our focus needs to be on our students and what is best for them. They need to have an opportunity to learn about civil discourse, social justice, equity and fairness, and to be given a chance to think critically. They also need an environment and curriculum that is developmentally appropriate for them. They need access to art, computer, music, physical education, home economics, foreign languages, and recess. Exceeding the latest ESSA requirements for testing and tying those tests to graduation requirements, so that over half of our state's kids can't earn a high school diploma is NOT what our children or state need. For these reasons, I am pleading with this committee to recommend delaying a submission of state plans for ESSA, and to encourage those who drafted the plan to return to editing.

The first step to better schools in Ohio, is for the adults who are supposed to be protecting children in this state to critically reflect on their beliefs and actions, and to recognize that high stakes testing is an old idea that started during the eugenics movement in the early 1900s. It does not belong in this century, just as the racism and sexism of the early 1900s doesn't belong in this century. Throw off the extraordinarily costly shackles of high stakes standardized testing, and truly invest in the future of our state by listening to and collaborating with the people who know our children best, people like me, a parent and educator.

Thank you for your time and attention.

Melissa M. Svigelj-Smith

Name _____ Date _____

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