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Testimony Presented to Oregon House Education Committee
Public Hearings on HB 2655 / HB 2680 / HB 2713 / HB 2714 / HB 2715
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Madame chairwoman and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify. I'd like to address in some fashion several of the bills on the docket this afternoon. In particular, I oppose HB 2655 and HB 2714, which both promote parents refusing to have their children take state tests.

My day job is at an organization that specializes in helping state governments, school districts and nonprofits with education research and strategies. That work has given me a unique opportunity to work with education leaders, teachers and researchers around the country, and to spend a lot of time learning about education issues and how different states have implemented different policies. It also has given me an opportunity to learn more about the Common Core standards and how states are implementing them, and I've taken a particular interest in the Smarter Balanced test because of Oregon leadership role in creating it and using it.

You see, my main job is trying to be the best parent I can of two children who attend Portland Public Schools, including a 7th grader who will take the Smarter Balanced exam this spring and a 2nd grader who will take it next year for the first time as a 3rd grader. We live in Northeast Portland (almost but not quite inside Rep Frederick's district).

While my testimony is informed by my work in education around the country, I'm here today testifying as a parent. What I want to say:

- (1) I think Smarter Balanced will be an improvement and I think it's really important for me as a parent to have an objective report of how my child and my child's school is doing *every year*. At the same time, I don't believe that Smarter Balanced is perfect or that a better test is the only solution to helping Oregon's schools improve.
 - I think we'll find problems and areas that can be improved.
 - I think some teachers need extra help and support adjusting their teaching to help students succeed with the standards (and I worry too many school districts aren't providing this support).
 - I think we need a school accountability system that measures other important things besides what tests can measure (but that's not the same thing as saying tests aren't unimportant).
 - I think this spring will be bumpy as every school and student takes the test for the first time.

- (2) I do NOT intend to opt my children out of the Smarter Balanced exam this fall. I'm excited about this test—and excited to see my children take it. I think the Common Core standards that it measures are terrific—I've read them, and they really clarify what's important for students to learn at each grade to be on a trajectory for success after high school. They emphasize problem-solving, reasoning, inquiry and writing. In schools that piloted the test last year, many students self-reported the field test was more difficult than their state's previous test (from about 14% in the elementary grades to 46% in high school.) One 10th grader said the test was "hard" because "if you didn't know it [the answer] you couldn't guess" like you could on multiple-choice tests. I'm really curious to know whether my children's writing and mathematical reasoning is as good as it should be at their ages.

- (3) I think it is bad public policy to encourage parents to be refuseniks and have their children take state tests. Tests aren't fun. But that doesn't mean they are unimportant. I want to know if my children are hitting an objective standard for success, and I want to know how well my child's school is doing overall. That requires everyone to participate.

I also believe some schools probably use too many tests or test too frequently throughout the school year. However, recent national research is finding that the vast majority of time students take on tests is for tests that their school has decided on, or their school district—and not for an annual state test. I suspect some schools also have made a mistake in focusing on test prep in the past to try and boost student scores. That was a lot easier to do when you were preparing students for a low-level multiple choice test. Luckily, with Smarter Balanced, the best way to prepare students is simply to offer excellent teaching and a well-rounded curriculum in math, language arts, science and history; that's the point.

It's too soon to declare Smarter Balanced a failure before it's even gotten off the ground and to start legislating fixes. Just as important, it's unreasonable to suggest that tests aren't important in our education system and that they don't have an important role to play for students, parents, educators and community members. And, finally, it's wishful thinking to imply that state tests are the problem and if we just turned all testing over to local school districts, everything would be wonderful. Instead, quality would be all over the place. I haven't found a school district in Oregon that regularly uses essay questions and open-ended math problems to assess their students, and I don't know why we'd ask every district to spend the money to reinvent their own wheel in any event.

Testing helps us understand which schools are on track and which are falling behind—and not just for kids overall, but especially for disadvantaged groups that have too often been overlooked in the past. As a country, we are making progress closing achievement gaps because those gaps are now visible. We don't want them to be invisible again, to sweep our problems under the rug.

The Smarter Balanced test is the product of four years of work by state leaders and educators across the country. Working together, the educators in these 20-plus states created a better test than any state could design (or afford) on its own and one that better leverages the emerging power of technology. Educators have been involved in creating the test, including reviewing every single question on the test.

Smarter Balanced responds to many of the concerns people have raised about testing in schools—including about Oregon's old OAKS test. It's designed to do a better job of measuring what students have really learned, to focus on the problem-solving and writing skills we all want students to be learning. The questions will look a lot more like classroom assignments.

Smarter Balanced also is designed to turn-around the results much quicker—schools in some states will have data as early as June, I understand—so the results can be used for planning over the summer and preparing for the next school year. Really unprecedented in education, Smarter Balanced was “pilot-tested” in states across the country last year to work out as many kinks as possible, to refine the questions (and toss out those that didn't) and to make sure the technology worked well, even in schools with limited computer access and bandwidth.

California is so enthusiastic about this new test that it eliminated its old state test a year early last year and had every student, rather than just a sample, take the pilot test. Because it was a pilot year, students didn't get test scores back—so essentially California went an entire year with no data about how schools were doing, and that was controversial to many. But the governor and education leaders made the choice because they believe Smarter Balanced is a much better test, they wanted to start

getting everyone ready for this year and they wanted to make sure the test could be used in every corner of the state, even small rural districts, before it counted.

Although I've focused—and we all focus—on the year-end test that is part of Smarter Balanced, Smarter Balanced's goals as I understand them are really about creating a more seamless, helpful assessment system that gives teachers and parents a better picture throughout the year of where students are succeeding and where they need help. Smarter Balanced includes flexible interim assessments that schools and districts can implement to gauge student progress during the year and inform instruction, as well as a Digital Library of teacher-selected resources on classroom-based formative assessments (although the Oregon Legislature two years ago prohibited the state of Oregon from buying the Digital Library to help educators here, instead sending those funds to local districts to decide how to use).

To close, as a public school parent, what speaks to me is the issue of rights and responsibilities. It is my children's right to have a free, equitable public education, but that right has responsibilities —my children need to go to school, do their assignments and put in effort. Another of those responsibilities is to take tests to show how they are doing and whether they've learned the material. And I want them to take these tests periodically; I want to know how they're doing; I want to know how their school is doing. It's also my right as a parent to know and my responsibility to have my children participate in some form of annual assessment so everyone can know how the school is doing.

By testing annually, I as a parent can see—and we can all see—whether children are making progress from one year to the next. That's the only way to fairly judge schools: not to see where their students are at one moment in time or every couple of years, but whether they are making progress. That information goes away in the absence of annual testing.

Even as there was news yesterday that this Legislature may get rid of the option for parents to opt of vaccinations, it's interesting to see this Committee consider creating a new opt-out option for parents when it comes to their responsibilities to public schools. It is bad public policy and I hope these bills can be withdrawn.

I think there could be promise in a version of a bill like HB2713 that takes a fresh look at the role of local and state testing in Oregon. Colorado and Ohio are two states that just completed reviews like this, although both states have many more state tests than Oregon has. More promising would be helping school districts do audits of all the different tests they use and for what goals, so they could prune. In addition, there may be promise in a bill like HB2680 to use next year as more of a transition for using Smarter Balanced results in school report cards, although that sort of move would need to be approved by the federal government. I think there also could be promise in a bill to encourage parents to opt their students out of useless test prep drills, or to opt their students out of low quality district tests.

If we say we really want kids to be developing problem-solving skills, analysis and writing, then we need a test that asks kids to problem solve, analyze and write. And that's what Smarter Balanced offers. Change is hard, and the change to new standards and a different isn't easy—nobody thought it would be. But I encourage the Committee to focus constructively on how to best to create an accountability system that provides the right information, and not throw out the baby—or all state testing—in the process.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my views with you today. I'd be happy to answer questions or otherwise be of service to the committee in its deliberations.