

03/18/14

Ms. Robi Osborn, Principal
Mt. Tabor Middle School
5800 SE 58th Ave
Portland, OR 97215

RE: Opting Maggie Salter out of OAKS tests for the 2013 - 2014 school year

Dear Ms. Osborn:

First, we want to thank you and every PPS teacher who has taught Maggie since she was in Kindergarten at Glencoe Elementary. We have the utmost respect and appreciation for all of Maggie's teachers, and the teaching profession in general.

In the last few years, we have come to realize that the federal policies enacted by the 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which are worsened by the NCLB waiver and the Race to the Top competitive grant requirements, have led to an unethical national and state over-reliance on once a year fill in the bubble tests to define students, schools and increasingly, teachers as “failing” or “in need of improvement.”

Our research has convinced us that it is against our moral, ethical, & religious beliefs to participate in a system that favors students from middle and upper income families to the detriment of students from low income or impoverished families. Therefore, we are opting Maggie out of taking the OAKS tests for the 2013 - 2014 school year.

Here are a few of the top reasons we find the application of OAKS testing to be unethical and misused:

- ☒ OAKS tests are culturally and language biased in favor of white, American born, middle and upper income students. This is in direct conflict with the district's Equity Policy.
- ☒ The federal government and the State of Oregon uses OAKS test scores to label schools as “Focus or Priority” and puts increased scrutiny and top down demands with a narrow focus on raising OAKS test scores at these schools. While these schools might receive School Improvement Grants or other temporary funds to “turn around” their school, once the grants have run their course, administrators and staff at these schools must spend time and energy searching for replacement funds to keep their successful new programs in place. All of our schools, especially those serving a high poverty population, need stable and adequate funding to offer their students a well-rounded and engaging curriculum with reasonable class sizes and appropriate wrap around services.
- ☒ The State of Oregon is pressuring teacher evaluations be based in part on OAKS test scores. OAKS tests are not a valid measure of student academic growth nor can they be used to measure teacher “effectiveness.” Such a requirement will pressure all teachers to teach to the OAKS test in addition to teachers who work in Title I schools.
- ☒ Chalkboard is using federal Teacher Incentive Fund grants to push Teacher Merit Pay based on OAKS test scores which will also encourage teachers to teach to the test and could discourage teachers from collaborating as they find themselves competing to have the highest scoring

students. (Kudos to Oregon City School District for withdrawing from this program.)

- ☒ When school districts are faced with budget cuts, they are forced to favor those programs subject to state mandated testing (primarily reading & math), at the expense of other programs essential to providing our children with a well-rounded, engaging education that includes art, music, PE/sports, world languages, a full-time certified librarian, ...(long, long list).
- ☒ The state uses OAKS test scores to produce an Oregon School Report Card that parents unwittingly use to determine which neighborhood they will move to or whether they will send their children to their neighborhood school. Given that OAKS test scores predict the socio-economic status of students, schools with low test scores neither attract new middle and upper income families nor “capture” all the families already in the neighborhood. Low enrollment leads to low funding leads to inadequate programming leads to closing and consolidating schools in low income neighborhoods.
- ☒ When school districts are pressured to raise OAKS test scores, they spend money on strategies for raising test scores rather than making their schools and curriculum more engaging and culturally relevant. For example, Forest Grove school district forces HS students to take math and reading workshops instead of electives if they don't meet benchmarks. No thank you.
- ☒ At the Portland Student Union's press conference to launch their Opt Out Campaign, I heard students talk about the demoralizing effects of not doing well on standardized tests. Maggie has always received “exceeds expectations” on the OAKS tests, so we never gave them much thought. Some kids just don't do well on standardized tests – and such tests should not be used to define our children or put them on a track that restricts their educational opportunities. There was also very compelling public testimony presented at a hearing on HB 2664 in the House Education Committee last year: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ud3HwWjf6V8#t=12>.

While Maggie's classmates are taking the OAKS test, we would like her to do homework, read a book of her choice, class assignment reading, or work on any class projects or extra credit opportunities. We would also be fine with her drawing, journal writing, creative writing, practicing flute (in the band room), or assisting another teacher or the office staff.

While we could have simply stated our intention to opt Maggie out of the OAKS tests this school year, we wanted you to know that we put a lot of thought into this decision and take this action with great seriousness and purpose. Please let us know if you have any questions regarding our decision to opt Maggie out of the 2013 - 2014 OAKS tests. Thank you for your stellar service as our school principal – and to all the MTMS teachers and staff.

Sincerely and respectfully,

Betsy and Joel Salter

cc (via email):

Mr. Breaker
Superintendent Carole Smith
PPS School Board members

Mr. Walker
Ms. Bennett
Mr. Valenti