

Re: HB 2713 (OPPOSE AS CURRENTLY WRITTEN)

Members of the House Education Committee,

I was pleased to see the committee last week pass HB 2680 (putting in place a one-year hiatus on using results from Oregon's new Smarter Balanced state assessment) to the House floor with a positive recommendation. Recognizing this is the first year all students will take the test and students and teachers are still adjusting to its new expectations, a year to learn more makes good sense.

However, as many committee members noted, **an annual state test for Oregon schools is still important**. It is required by federal law, and it is an important (and reasonable) expectation of most parents, community members and other education stakeholders. Done well, state testing can help teachers improve teaching too.

You may recall from my testimony in mid-February that I come to these issues with a dual perspective:

- One perspective is as a policy expert and advisor who has worked with state policymakers, community leaders and educators for 25 years to research and put in place education policies that can make a difference for student learning; from that work, I've had the chance to talk to educators all over the country about Common Core standards and Smarter Balanced.
- But my other perspective is as a parent of two students in Portland Public Schools—one of whom started taking the Smarter Balanced exam last week; neither he nor his teachers have declared it a waste of time.

There are important questions state leaders should be asking about Smarter Balanced during its first years of use, including whether it measures all that we think is important, whether the time it takes is reasonable, how well it is working and how it could work better. But I don't believe HB 2713 (calling for a narrowly prescribed study) as currently written will provide the information policymakers need. **Nowhere does the bill direct the study to consider what really matters: Is Smarter Balanced a high-quality assessment, is teaching changing for the better and are students learning more?**

Here is why I oppose the bill and urge the committee to either amend the bill significantly (see my suggestions on the last page) or reject it.

1. SMARTER BALANCED IS A 21st CENTURY TEST—WORTH A CHANCE, EVEN AS YOU WORK TO IMPROVE IT

- ⇒ Oregon Department of Education reports **500 Oregon educators and teachers helped create Smarter Balanced**, including helping to write test questions and figuring out the appropriate achievement levels (what level of performance is good enough for students to meet the standards). This sort of involvement is unprecedented and impressive, and underscores how the test is not disconnected from teaching.
- ⇒ **Higher education is paying attention and thinks Smarter Balanced has value**. Washington state's public colleges have already said they'll **use it for course-placement decisions**. Other states are planning the same.
- ⇒ **Oregon collaborated with state leaders and educators in 20 other states**, to create a next-generation test better designed than what any state had done (or was able to afford) on its own.
- ⇒ Smarter Balanced has **state-of-the-art supports for at-risk students**. It includes **on-line glossaries for 10 different languages** and 600,000 audio files, which students can access during the test if they don't understand a word. And the assessments have been **fully translated into Spanish**.
- ⇒ While Oregon worked with other states to create Smarter Balanced test questions, **ODE still controls important elements** like how the test is scored, how the scores are reported (what the report card to parents looks like), etc.—and these too can continue to be improved.
- ⇒ Unlike state tests of the past that simply hired a private company to write a test, **all of Smarter Balanced's key elements have been made public and aren't top secret**. They're all on the website.

2. WHILE IT'S EASY TO BLAME STATE TESTS, LOCAL TESTS ARE THE REAL CULPRIT

- ⇒ Legislators in Colorado, New Jersey and Ohio have recently studied schools' use of assessments and the time students spend taking tests. A handful of national organizations—including a national teachers union—have done the same. **There is a surprising degree of agreement across the studies. These efforts also posed more useful questions than the narrow focus of HB 2713—they would be models for Oregon to emulate.**
- ⇒ The two recent studies that examined the issue concluded **the exact amount of time students spend taking standardized test averages about 1.7% percent of total instructional time.** By the way, students spend more time each year transitioning from class to class and waiting in the lunch line—activities during the school year that, unlike testing, have nothing to do with student learning.
- ⇒ **Locally mandated or administered standardized tests take up more time during the school year than state tests.** One study found district and school standardized tests likely comprise about **80 percent of total student testing time in elementary schools and about 60 percent at the high school grades** on average. Schools use tests for 23 different purposes, according to another estimate.
- ⇒ Case in point: My organization is currently working with teachers in a large urban school district in upstate New York. **Teachers identified 63 different assessments the district (not the state) was using, many for the same purposes and with varying quality!** We're now working with teachers and district leaders to prune the tests **That's the sort of study in districts that Oregon leaders should be endorsing and encouraging.**

3. THE GRASS IS ALWAYS GREENER: DOING YOUR OWN THING IS EASIER SAID THAN DONE

- ⇒ For years, parents and teachers have complained that OAKS—the state's test until last year—was too simplistic, too easy and forced teachers to focus on meaningless skills like choosing the right multiple choice answer. Its replacement, **Smarter Balanced, emphasizes open-ended questions, short essays and multi-step problems that look at lot more like actual classroom assignments.**
- ⇒ Oregon has a choice to make: It certainly can go back to a simpler, more meaningless test, or it can try to examine how well students are learning the skills and knowledge employers and colleges say they'll need for success after high school, like writing and problem-solving. **If we stick to the path of valuing skills that matter, we're going to have a test much like Smarter Balanced even if we don't use Smarter Balanced.**
- ⇒ In the last year, **several states have gone off on their own, thinking they can create a better test, and now have buyers' remorse:** Tests that cost more, are rushed to development with little oversight and have teachers up in arms. Look at news recent reports from Florida, Indiana and Oklahoma. In contrast, **Smarter Balanced is being rolled out after four years of research, development, refinement and pilot testing.**

A few weeks ago, my kids' school hosted a terrific community meeting about the Common Core and what to expect from Smarter Balanced. Teachers awed and inspired us. They talked with enthusiasm about how their teaching is changing to match the standards, what they're doing differently and why, and how they're working together to improve their practices. Teachers shared their optimism for what students were learning and how they'll be able to show what they know. "We've got this" was their message.

Taking tests and showing what you can do should—and always will—have a role in education, just as they do throughout life. Instead of fighting over the test, let's focus on the getting the resources and supports so more schools can say "we've got it" for their students.

I am sorry I am not able to attend the hearing to testify in person today. I hope these written observations are helpful to the deliberations, and I am happy to answer questions or make myself available to help.

— William Porter (bill.porter@earthlink.net / 503-706-8318)

WHAT WOULD MAKE HB 2713 A BETTER BILL?

Oregon policymakers should be examining Smarter Balanced and confirming it is the right choice for our state.

But the critics complaining loudest about Smarter Balanced are, by their own admission, opponents of any state testing. They aren't after a constructive solution; they're after no state test at all. The criticisms they level at Smarter Balanced (it takes time away from the classroom, it takes time to communicate about a new test, etc.) generally apply to any state test and ought to be understood in that context. And there is irony that some complain about OAKS being too simple and meaningless—and now complain about Smarter Balanced being too hard and meaningful.

Many of the questions and allegations being posed about Smarter Balanced have ready and rationale answers if policymakers choose to listen. I found many of the answers myself simply surfing the Smarter Balanced website.

Just as important, if policymakers really want to examine the impact of Smarter Balanced in Oregon classroom, here are the issues worth examining:

- ⇒ **Genuinely involve lots of classroom teachers—and ask them to look at old test questions from OAKS and compare them to Smarter Balanced test questions.** Ask them which questions are of higher quality and better reflect their instruction and what they want students to be learning.
- ⇒ **Consider how exactly instruction is changing in classrooms because of Smarter Balanced.** Is there still test prep? If so, what does it look like? Are teachers focused on helping students choose among multiple choice answers, or on becoming better writers and math problem-solvers?
- ⇒ **Genuinely involve parents, employers and college officials**—all of whom are saying Oregon needs to focus more on ensuring students are learning 21st century skills like problem solving, writing and critical thinking, and all of whom were adamant OAKS was not meeting this bar.
- ⇒ **Study whether and how local tests contribute to the perception of “too much testing.”** Do we know the tests that districts use are any better than Smarter Balanced or more useful to teachers? Could testing time be reduced if districts were clearer about the quality and purposes of the multiple tests they are using? Do all districts in Oregon have the capacity to choose or develop their own high-quality assessments?
- ⇒ **Look at whether the technology to run Smarter Balanced in schools is an obstacle.** And, if it is, ask whether that the fault of Smarter Balanced—or is it an indictment of how little Oregon has invested over the years in functional technology and computer access for all students?
- ⇒ **Examine whether Smarter Balanced is a “high-quality assessment” as promised.** Does it measure Oregon's standards for schools? Does it require a range of cognitive demand? Is it free of bias? Does it allow for comparability across states? Has it been reviewed by external assessment experts?
- ⇒ **Explore whether Smarter Balanced's accommodations for different learners are appropriate.** Is there anything else a state test could do to ensure English-language learners are able to show what they know?
- ⇒ **Survey the different approaches school districts have taken to using Smarter Balanced.** What problems with the tests could be addressed by better (and more consistent) local implementation by district leaders and school principals across the state? What lessons learned from individual districts about successful implementation, communications with parents and support for teachers could be identified and shared statewide?
- ⇒ **Remember: Smarter Balanced measures Oregon's new standards for student learning.** Which of these standards, if any, shouldn't be measured after all? Are any of these standards not valuable skills that students will need for success after high school?
- ⇒ **Ask: Are Oregon students beginning to learn new things, and learn them better?**