



February 22, 2015

Dear Mr. Donovan,

I write to express my concerns about House Bill 2655, regarding exemptions or “opting out” from state testing. This bill contains a number of provisions that would be burdensome for school districts and would negatively impact Oregon education. Most importantly, HB 2655 would remove all restrictions on exemptions from statewide assessment.

Statewide assessments have a triple purpose: They provide information about individual students' learning progress. They allow comparisons of learning progress between groups of students, enabling us to identify and work to address achievement gaps. Finally, they allow comparisons of learning progress between schools and districts, and, where there are common assessments such as the Smarter Balanced assessments or National Assessment of Educational Progress, between different states. This gives schools, districts and states significant data to improve educational programs and design interventions to ensure students make steady progress toward being college and career ready.

To serve the latter purposes, statewide assessments must be administered consistently. They are mandatory for all students, with some limited exceptions, in order to provide valid, comparable, credible data about student learning among all schools and all groups of students. Currently exemptions are rare and are allowed only on the basis of a student's religious beliefs or disability. HB 2655 would allow any parent to opt out of state testing for any reason.

A carte blanche on testing opt-outs would undermine the credibility of the student achievement and school accountability data gathered, reduce the value of information gained from these assessments, and reduce educators' and the public's ability to know how our students' learning compares with other districts and states. If exercised widely, it would in effect invalidate a significant part of the purpose of conducting such assessments at all.

Of particular concern is the inequities this could introduce: In order to address achievement gaps, we must first know what they are. One potential outcome of this proposed legislation is that students in higher-risk groups, who have the greatest need to have their individual and group achievement assessed and addressed, could be sidelined from the assessment system by those seeking to improve a school's scores. If assessments are not administered consistently to all students, the real and persistent achievement and opportunity gaps our students experience could be artificially masked, thus reducing the impetus and the ability to address these gaps and impacting equity for all of our students.

Our statewide assessment system is not perfect. While the new Smarter Balanced assessments are expected to significantly improve on the old OAKS tests of reading, writing and mathematics, they still will not be perfect. Yet if we are to conduct statewide assessments at all, in order to provide actionable information about how individual students and groups of students are learning what they need to know and be able to do in order to succeed in college, careers and life, those assessments must be administered fairly, thoroughly, consistently and equitably.

I ask you to oppose HB 2655 and affirm your support for full participation in state assessments so that diagnostic data on student learning is collected consistently. At the same time, I urge you to support efforts to delay consequences for teachers, schools and districts based on results of the new Smarter Balanced assessments. This will allow educators and students time to adjust to the more rigorous exams, and allow test developers time to do any needed fine-tuning.

Thank you for your leadership. I appreciate your continuing support for education and your commitment to children. It is my hope that the legislature will continue to support educational initiatives that support achieving educational goals, and wisely turn aside from initiatives that would have the opposite effect. If I can assist in providing information or input during your legislative deliberations, please don't hesitate to contact me. Thank you, again, for all that you do.

Dr. Sheldon Berman, Superintendent
Eugene School District 4J