

May 5, 2015

Re: Oppose HB 2655

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Senate Education Committee,

My name is William Porter and I am the parent of two children in Portland Public Schools. I also work in education public policy, which takes me to schools and education organizations around the country. I get to work with teachers, educator leaders and policymakers and see the different ways they are tackling some of the same problems we face in Oregon schools.

My seventh-grader has been taking the Smarter Balanced test off and on for the past few weeks, and I've paid particular attention to how that experience has gone and what other parents at our school are seeing. I think I represent the sentiment of most parents when I say: Oregon doesn't need HB 2655.

At my school, only 10 students have opted out of Smarter Balanced, out of 600 students in tested grades. District-wide, the numbers in PPS vary widely by school but at most it is a few percentage points total—not a critical mass or anything approaching a majority of parents, despite what the media would have you believe.

Most parents understand that the information tests provide have value, they want to make sure their children are learning important skills, and they understand this is the first year of a transition to a new test that will expect more of students and their teachers.

Like many parents I've talked to, I'm excited to see my son step up to this challenge the past few weeks and apply himself to show what he can do and what he has learned. He says the test is hard, but not too hard and he says the math in particular reflects what he's been working on in class the past year. He may not ace the exam, but I'm convinced he—plus his teachers and we his parents—will learn more from this test about what he's learning and where he needs more support.

At the same time, I don't think a single test can capture everything our son has learned at school. Looking at the testimony from others on this bill, it also seems true that not every school in Oregon is approaching the new test with the same spirit of commitment and open-mindedness, and some districts and principals are making bad choices about what to prioritize and what to communicate. These are problems you as legislators can fix. The worries we hear about higher expectations and harder tests need to be balanced with a clear-eyed view of the realities students face when they enter the world after graduation, looking for a living-wage job or applying for college.

My children should have a meaningful assessment of what they've been learning, every year. Like every parent, I want to know how they're doing—and how their school is doing. 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 a lot more like actual classroom assignments. To me as a parent, this new test seems a better use of time than the old, fill-in-the-bubble model. And the type of in-depth, engaging teaching we all want for our kids is what will lead to success on this test, not drill-and-kill assignments.

Debating whether to have standards and tests versus everything else schools need is a false choice. We need both. It's wishful thinking to imply that a single state test is the problem and if we just turned all testing over to local school districts or didn't have any tests at all, everything would be wonderful with our schools.

Teachers *do* need greater support than most are getting, plus more time and collaboration to prepare and improve their practices. Schools also *do* need more resources and support from other agencies to address the growing numbers of students in poverty and speaking other languages coming to school each year in Oregon. But, without data, you can't make decisions as policymakers about what support educators need exactly, where the best practices are and which schools are truly struggling. Without data, I can't make decisions as a parent about how best to support my children and advocate for their success.

My objections to HB 2655 are two fold:

- I support the rights of parents to do what's best for their children, and I respect those who make an informed decision about Smarter Balanced. But this bill lowers the bar for deciding to opt out to simply completing a form that is sent home in your child's backpack. I've heard nothing about parents who tried to opt out and were denied this year, so why does the process now need to be even easier? For school immunizations, we expect those who opt out to at least meet with their doctor first or watch an in-depth educational video. Shouldn't we have the same bar for making a decision about an important annual test?
- When parents opt their students out, that robs me as a parent and you as policymakers of information about how schools in our communities are doing. Test scores aren't all that is important in gauging school success, but student learning and achievement does matter and ought to be measured. If we saw continued low test scores at a school where many students had opted out, how would we make sense of that data? Would the data mean that that a few high-performing students who opted out each year deflated the score and things are better than they look? Or would they mean the school really is struggling and there is a problem? We don't know. When we don't count everyone, we don't have accurate data on which to act.

In late February, before testing began, my kids' school hosted a terrific community meeting about the Common Core standards 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.

For this parent, HB 2655 doesn't solve any problems. It makes the situation worse. It dodges the question about whether our students are learning what the need for success in Oregon schools and how we will know about school performance. I encourage you to oppose this legislation.

Thank you,

William Porter
503-706-8318