

## House Education Committee Hearing

July 29, 2015

### Testimony by Dr. Jim Scanlon, Superintendent, West Chester Area School District.

Chairpersons Saylor and Roebuck, and members of the House Education Committee, thank you for taking time to hear from practitioners in our public schools about the amount of testing taking place in our classrooms.

My name is Jim Scanlon and I am in my seventh year as superintendent of the West Chester Area School District, a district of about 11,600 students. I was a superintendent in Wilmington, Delaware for three years and in Quakertown in Bucks County for 7 years. I attended public schools in Pennsylvania and most of my educational career has been spent working in public schools in Pennsylvania.

I have seen new initiatives take place each time a new governor is elected.

I have watched mandate after mandate come down from the PA Department of Education, Pa Board of Education, or our state and federal legislators.

Schools have had to adjust to these new rules on annual basis.

There are so many aspects to educating children today – aside from the basics of teaching and what happens in the classroom. Schools must grapple with funding and politics, they have to deal with the social development of our children in an age where Social Media has changed everything. We must continually analyze our use of technology – for educational purposes and for communicating. We have to do our very best to educate the increasing number of special needs children in our districts. We have to provide adequate professional development for our staff. We have to fulfill our contractual obligations with unions. We also have to deal with our aging facilities. And, we have to answer to our taxpayers who fund it all.

And then, there's assessment. We are asking our students to do something that's entirely unfair: To spend weeks and weeks filling in bubbles, taking standardized tests and having their entire educational ambition directed toward passing them. This is not what public education was intended to do, nor should do.

***I understand that the intent is accountability, but this is just not a good way to measure student progress. Educators around the nation are starting to speak out – and more and more states are re-examining the way they do this.***

I believe in accountability. I believe in very high standards for our students. I do believe that tests can be a good thing. But not the way we are being forced, by the state and federal government, to give them.

We officially began the PSSA testing window on April 13 and we ended on May 27 when we finished with the high school Keystone Exams, a new graduation requirement. That's a month and a half out of our 9 and a half month school year! There is very little learning that takes place in this time, but there is a tremendous amount of anguish. And this year was the worst ever. I saw it in the faces of our students, staff, and parents. ***It is killing our public education system.***

Beginning with the class of 2017, even a straight 'A' student who doesn't do well on Keystones won't receive a diploma, under state law. This past school year approximately 86% of our students passed the Algebra and English Literature exams and about 78% passed biology. This is much higher than the state average. As we sit here today, our high schools are instructing 60 students in a remedial course on Keystone exams. Another 100 students will be scheduled in remedial courses in the fall, which means they will have to pull out of an elective in which they have already registered. Many of these students will be applying to college, and I know that some will be accepted by January of their senior year but if they don't pass all three Keystone Exams, or an online Project Based Assessment, they will have their acceptance letters rescinded. It will happen.

Every superintendent in the commonwealth can provide you with an example of a student who was accepted to major university but didn't pass one of the Keystone Exams with each of the past two graduating classes. We had one student pass the AP Biology exam with the highest score of 5, acceptance to Johns Hopkins but did not pass the Biology Keystone exam. We had another student fail the Algebra and Biology Keystone Exam but received a scholarship to a culinary arts school because of the program he attended at the Technical School. If that student was a junior today, he would be removed from his electives, the technical school, and be placed in remedial courses in order to pass the Keystone Exams or a Project Based Assessment. Because he will miss out on the technical school courses, he most likely won't get involved with culinary arts and won't be eligible for a college scholarship. ***Decisions about assessments have a huge impact on the future of many students!***

We recently received data from the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA). The interpretation of this data is extremely confusing and frustrating because of the regulations attached to it. As you may know the test changed last year to better match the new Pa Common Core Standards. PSSA is now a test to determine if a student is college and career ready. Typically scores drop for the first year or few years when a test is changed, and this year the scores are extremely low, particularly in math. State-wide only 30% of 8<sup>th</sup> grade students are proficient in math compared to 74% last year. Perhaps the scores are lower because many 8<sup>th</sup> grade students not only had to take the PSSA but were required to take the Algebra Keystone Exam also. ***Or perhaps the whole thing is a mistake? Do you really believe that in one year, our students' ability to do well in math dropped by 44%? The tests are simply not an accurate reflection of reality.***

As of last year, Act 82 (Educator Effectiveness) was passed. School districts are using this data to measure evaluation scores for teachers and administrators. We use a score called Valued Added also known as PVAAS, which is an expected gain in student scores from one year to another. As scores go down, so will teacher evaluation scores. How can we remotely think any

of this data is reliable to be used as an evaluation tool when the test has changed in the middle of implementing another mandate?

However, just as we have adjusted to rule changes in the past, we will figure out the new rules to this game and adjust accordingly. What we won't be able to figure is the fact that 86% of our 8<sup>th</sup> grade students passed the Algebra Keystone Exam but only 54% of our 8<sup>th</sup> grade students passed the 8<sup>th</sup> grade math PSSA. So does that mean that 42% of our students will be eligible to graduate but they will not be considered college or career ready?

State and federally mandated testing has been around for a long time --- But it's become a massive burden that is stifling creativity and love of teaching and learning and having a negative impact on the learning environment.

**While our district has embraced high standards and accountability, we now spend the first seven months of the school year preparing to take standardized tests, then we spend approximately six weeks giving tests to students. Unlike private and parochial schools, public schools are mandated to use these tests to determine graduation for students, and for teacher and administrator evaluations. It is positively stressing us – and our system – to the max.**

**Our teachers, students, and parents all say the extreme amount of time focused on testing is causing ridiculous amounts of stress in the classroom, faculty room, and at home. The angst is palpable as you walk through our hallways. There is no time for creativity, exploration and collaboration.**

Over Memorial Day weekend, I sent an email to our parents and school community telling them how I feel about the increase in testing, and asking them to contact their legislators if they felt similarly. That email went viral, as they say, in days. It had been shared around the state and soon around the country. I received emails from New Jersey, New York, Georgia, and across Pennsylvania. People were so happy to see someone standing up for public education – and speaking out against this ridiculous amount of testing.

Teachers and parents have literally sent me hundreds of examples of how students are worried, anxious, and depressed. The rules for taking these exams are crazy, as well. Every bulletin board has to be covered so kids can't make a reference to anything for help. Springtime in a school should be full of excitement and learning. It shouldn't look like a place that's closed up for the summer. The rules allow students to take as much time as they need but once they close the booklet, the session is over and they can't return to it. *There is no research to support that any of these test environments are helpful, supportive, or represent good pedagogy.*

That negativity is already beginning to drive down our test scores. Learning should be challenging, but also enjoyable and exciting. Teaching should be dynamic and creative. We're missing so much of that because of these tests.

Our own son is a first grader this year, and already my wife and I are discussing the possibility of opting him out of PSSA testing when the time comes for him to take them. I want to be proud of

the system in which my sons are educated. I'm not sure how much longer I will be able to continue to do that.

Time and again I hear stories of kids who are so stressed out and fed up with the extreme amount of testing and the pressure associated with it that they are enrolling in private schools, instead. Just this past weekend I spoke with a parent who told me her son's anxiety about school began in third grade when he first had to take the PSSA's. We had one high school student who was actually pulling her hair out because she was so stressed about having to pass her Keystone. And we're starting to see some of our best teachers retire early or leave to teach in private systems – citing the ridiculous focus on standardized testing – as the reason.

We can do better. **We have to do better.**

It's time to step back and look at what we've done. The solution needs to be found with educators and business people at the table. Some people say we need to run schools like a business. Any good business would conduct a cost-benefit analysis when so much money is being spent on something that creates so much customer dissatisfaction. I don't believe we are reaping any benefits from the costs spent on standardized testing in this state. I also believe we need to empower local school districts – with oversight and guidelines - to make decisions about graduation requirements and how to measure student progress toward the Pa State Standards.

I would be happy to work with anyone on developing a better accountability plan that maintains high standards, meets the needs of students and prepares students for college and career readiness. We should partner with businesses to make graduation requirements more meaningful and connected to the world of work.

For example, I attended the Pa Free Enterprise Week session last week at Lycoming College. 2,400 students spent a week working with business people from across the state operating a business, preparing cash flow charts, balance sheets, stock holder reports and marketing plans. Each graduate of that week automatically qualifies for a \$20,000 scholarship to Lycoming College or an \$8,000 scholarship to Penn Technical College. I'd rather pay for students to attend one of these camps as a graduation requirement rather than \$600,000 we are spending to remediate students on a Keystone Exam.

I look forward to future discussions. Let's get back to teaching and learning, and do what's right for our kids and our state.