

TESTIMONY FOR LEGISLATIVE HEARINGS ON FEB. 26, 2014

[Revised Feb. 18]

My name is Ron Wolk. I am a resident of Warwick. my testimony reflects what I have learned over the past 35 years while I was totally immersed in the effort to improve our public schools. In 1976, I left Brown University, where I had been vice president for 10 years, and moved to Washington, DC to become president of the nonprofit Editorial Projects in Education. In 1981, I founded *Education Week*, the newspaper of record in American education. The mission of the newspaper, was to provide comprehensive and objective information to those who make decisions in education: political and business leaders, philanthropists, educational administrators, and teachers.

First, I want to commend the legislators who introduced the bills being considered in this hearing. They are making an earnest effort to help avert a potential disaster and correct the course of Rhode Island's public schools.

The five bills deal mainly with three basic and very important issues.

1. The need for further study of the Common Core standards and assessments (H 2035);

2. The elimination or delay of high-stakes standardized tests that determine whether students graduate (S 2135, S 2185, H 7256, S 2059).

3. Provisions to identify, intervene, and support students who are lagging behind and on track to fail the state assessments. (S 2185)

Before addressing each of these issues briefly, I would like to provide a bit of historical context that you may find useful as you consider these bills.

The strategy to improve schools by establishing high content standards and statewide tests was hatched in the late 1980's. Those who first proposed it had a clear vision of how it should work:

- * Decide what every student should know and be able to do by the 4th grade, 8th grade, and 12th grades;
- * Develop a curriculum based on those expectations;
- * Assess student performance at the end of the 4th, 8th, and 12th grades to monitor overall progress;
- * Use the results of those assessments to make the necessary corrections in the system.

The architects of the standards and testing strategy also advocated some basic principles to guide its implementation. They urged that:

- * The standards be parsimonious and focus on the major, organizing concepts of each discipline, and they should not be highly specific grade-level standards;
- * Students who needed more time to meet the standards should have it, and those who learned more quickly should advance at their own pace, thereby (for the first time since the one-room country school) making learning the constant and time the variable;
- * Standardized test scores be used to provide a snapshot of educational performance but not to evaluate individual students.

* “Opportunity-to-learn” standards be established to ensure that all students would have an equal chance to learn what they would be assessed on and, toward that end, should have the same access to high quality schools and teachers.

You need only look at the present situation in this nation and this state to know that every one of those principles was jettisoned at the outset.

Comprehensive academic standards are now set for each grade in most states and spell out in detail what every student should know by the end of each grade. That gives schedules and time a higher priority than individual learning.

Tests are now being administered at most grade levels and are being used to determine promotion and graduation.

And the inequities in the system continue, virtually ensuring that the quality of students’ education will be determined mainly by the color of their skin, their facility with the English language, the affluence of their parents, and where they live.

Badly distorted in its implementation, the standards movement has failed to live up to its promises. That is why the bills before you are so important.

There is certainly a need for further study of the Common Core standards and assessments.

There is no evidence that standards improve learning yet those who promote them demand ever higher standards and ever more difficult tests. The price of their zeal is paid by students and their families—and ultimately by the larger society.

Despite hundreds of millions of dollars and countless hours spent on standards and testing over the past 25 years, student achievement has not significantly improved, and the gap that separates needy and minority students from more affluent white students persists. Nationally, more than a quarter of students drop out of school, and more than half of those who graduate are ill prepared either for college or work. More than half of those who enroll in college drop out without getting a degree within six years. Rhode Island's data are much the same.

The Department of Education recently released a report of student progress on the NECAP between 2009 and 2013. A Providence Journal article reported that Commissioner Gist was encouraged by some of the results, and she is quoted as saying, "We are on the right track."

Indeed, the needle seems to be pointed in the right direction, but to understand fully the implications of the report, the data need further study and analysis.

For example, the report reveals that over the past five years, reading and math scores in the 4th, 6th, and 8th grades have increased by about 4 percent—about 0.8 percent a year. Eleventh grade scores in both reading and math increased by an impressive 8 percent over the past five years.

Since more than 25 percent of all Rhode Island students score below proficient in reading, however, and about 40 percent score below proficient in math. It could take roughly 25 more years to get all students to proficiency in reading at the current rate of progress, and as many as 40 years to get all students to proficiency in math.

Rising scores of 11th graders bring 81 percent of them to proficiency in reading and 36 percent to proficiency in math.

Again, that is progress. But most of the reading gain occurred among students who are already at partially proficient or above. The percentage of juniors who were substantially below proficient decreased only by 2 percent over five years. In math the number of students below proficient decreased by about 9 percent from 2009 to 2013. That is encouraging, but it still leaves 64 percent of the juniors in danger of not graduating.

Most importantly, it is a serious mistake to equate test scores with learning. Studies have shown that intense test preparation can raise scores, but the "learning" is often transitory and temporary. Indeed, the only justification for standardized testing (if there is any) is to provide a periodic snapshot of how well the system is performing. And there is no justification for high-stakes standardized tests for students.

Nonetheless, 45 states, including Rhode Island, are poised to put in place Common Core standards that are arguably the most demanding ever designed. And they are to be accompanied by new computer-based assessments that most schools, teachers, and students have had no experience with and that promise to be "rigorous."

Because, for the first time, the new standards focus on developing reasoning skills, they are better than previous iterations, in my opinion. But because there is increasing emphasis on content and "canned" curricula as they move forward, they may well squander whatever potential they have. They clearly deserve more thought.

Schools, teachers, and students have had insufficient time to prepare for this new regimen of standards and tests. Schools of education have never prepared teachers for the kind of teaching that the Common Core will require, which is more Socratic than instructional. Surveys show that a majority of teachers have

serious doubts about their ability to teach to the new standards, especially with special needs students and English language learners (those who fare the worst in the recent NECAP report).

This suggests that teacher preparation for the Common Core is an issue a new commission should include in its investigation.

Finally, although the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers in formulating the standards consulted with some education leaders and experts, consultation with teachers, principals, and parents was quite limited. As a result, a number of states, including this one, are seeing a backlash as parents, students, and teachers protest the hasty implementation of the Common Core standards and the accompanying new high-stakes tests.

The February 17 edition of the New York Times carried a story on growing resistance to the Common Core, particularly among the more liberal observers, some of whom have been supporters.

Elimination of high-stakes testing would be a major step forward, but, at the very least, Rhode Island should delay the use of standardized tests to determine whether students graduate;

Rhode Island students now in grades 7-11 have not been prepared to meet the expectations of the new Common Core standards or score well on the new tests. Schools and teachers are not prepared to teach to them effectively. With so many students failing to score partially proficient on the NECAP, how reasonable it is to expect them suddenly to do better on more challenging standards and tests under such circumstances?

If high-stakes tests are put into effect next year as scheduled, thousands of students will likely be denied diplomas.

Is the cost worth the rush? What would be lost by delaying the consequences of the testing?

The legislature should mandate a transitional period of at least five years during which time standardized test scores will not determine whether a student graduates or gets promoted. That will also provide more time to study and evaluate the standards.

But delay in itself is not sufficient. Unless major changes are made in elementary and middle school education in the meantime, 8th and 9th graders five years from now will still be in danger of failing.

The legislature should mandate that the Department of Education identify as early as possible students who are lagging behind, and should provide special support to them.

Instead of rushing to establish new standards and tests, we should be asking why so many Rhode Island students reach their senior year without acquiring the knowledge and skills that existing standards expect and existing tests are purported to measure.

The prevailing assumption seems to be that too many students are either too lazy or too stupid to learn or that too many teachers are incompetent to teach. Do we really believe that? Is it not more likely that there is something wrong with an educational system that loses or fails so many young people?

Instead of simply doing what schools have always done only doing it harder, we should be seeking better ways to educate young people. The evidence is abundant that students learn when

they want to learn and they usually don't learn when they aren't interested—even if they are told they must.

There are an increasing number of examples of successful teaching and learning both nationally and in Rhode Island—often with the most disadvantaged youth. Unfortunately, they seldom “go to scale” because the system fiercely resists significant change.

In committing resources and effort to educational improvement, our primary and intensive focus should be on the child's early years—from age 4 to 12. If we fail in those years, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to succeed in middle and high school. If we succeed in those early years, we can avoid many of the formidable problems that now confront us.

Higher standards and tougher tests will not increase student learning. We've been pursuing that strategy 25 years without success. Both standards and assessments are an essential part of education, but only if they recognize and adapt to the fact that all children are different—that they learn in different ways at different speeds, come from different cultures and socioeconomic circumstances, have different talents and aspirations.

That reality is totally incompatible with the increasing standardization of public education. And, in a rapidly changing world where knowledge is doubling at least every year, standardization is synonymous with stagnation.

Thank you for your time and consideration.