Ohio House Education Committee
Testimony from Greg Harris, State Director, StudentsFirst Ohio
March 11, 2015

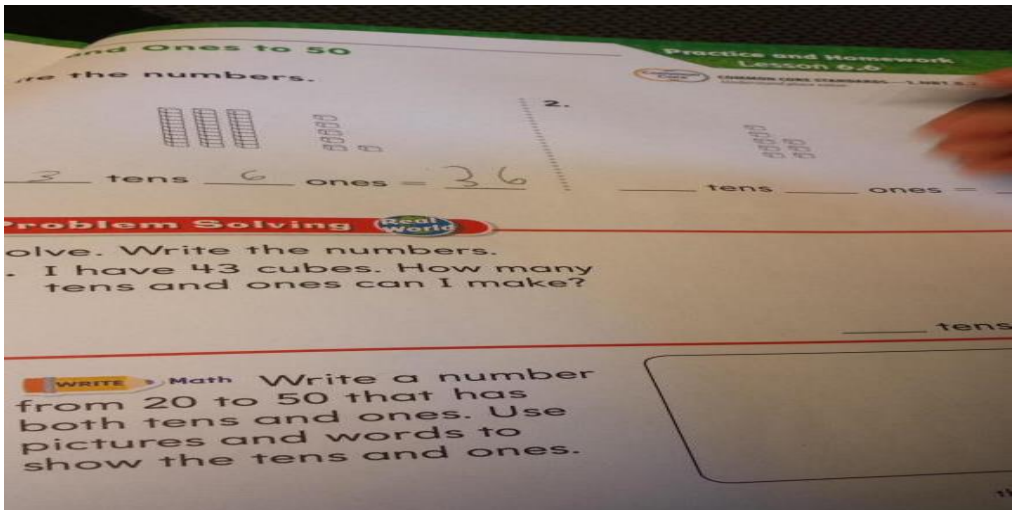
Good morning, Chairman Hayes, Vice Chair Brenner, Ranking Member Fedor, distinguished members of the House Education Committee, and guests.

I am testifying today not only as the State Director of StudentsFirst Ohio, but also as a Cincinnati Public School parent who supports Ohio's New Learning Standards and the new assessments that are aligned with Ohio standards.

StudentsFirst is not alone in the embrace of tougher standards that ensure America's children are developing genuine content knowledge, critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Indeed, the U.S. Army, leading corporations and business associations, educational groups and prominent social justice and nonprofit organizations share this viewpoint.

As someone who makes his living advocating for educational improvement for all kids regardless of zip code, I've reviewed and studied the standards. In addition, I've witnessed their implementation by working with my sons on a daily basis on their homework assignments. I embrace the concept of rigorous learning standards by grade level that benchmark what American kids should be learning against what schoolchildren across the globe are learning. I want my kids to succeed in the modern world, equipped with skills for life.

The standards are not an abstraction for me. I work with my sons on a daily basis on their homework assignments. I suspect if I were taught math this way in grade school, I would have enjoyed it more. When I work with my first grader on his homework, for example, it often includes creative activity. Here's an example from his homework from last week, where he is encouraged to solve a mathematical problem from a number of angles through numbers, words and drawings:



My seven year old is better able to absorb mathematical concepts via creating his own word problems and math exercises that had him literally drawing out his problem-solving process. Math isn't some disconnected, mechanical process for him.

Regarding reading, I offer the example from my older son's homework when he was in 5th grade that aligned with Ohio Common Core reading standards that included:

1. Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says and when drawing inferences from the text.
2. Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text.
3. Compare and contrast two or more characters, settings, or events in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., how characters interact).

These standards came alive for me when my son's class read *Caddy Woodlawn*, whose protagonist makes the transition from urban life to frontier life. He wasn't asked to memorize passages, respond to fill-in-the blank questions, or answer true or false questions—that is, the way I was taught literature. Rather, he was required to analyze what he read at a level appropriate for his age.

He regularly wrote essay responses to questions, with the expectation that he would break down chapters by their main themes and cite supporting evidence from the text to back up his main ideas. Frankly, this is how I used to teach literature when I was a college writing instructor.

Standardized tests are nothing new to education. However, Ohio is currently implementing next generation assessments aligned with new, higher standards. This transition represents a major maturation of testing with an emphasis on thoughtfulness over regurgitation of memorized facts.

As the *Columbus Dispatch* wrote in an editorial this past Sunday ("New standardized tests go deeper but chew up time," 3/6/15), these tests "go beyond filling in multiple-choice bubbles by asking students to answer open-ended questions, interpret more-difficult texts and defend their evidence."

The PARCC tests my kids are now taking will determine their absorption of this way of learning. Teachers teach to the tests far less, but rather impart skills that will help their pupils learn to write and write well, conduct analysis and solve problems. Some kids struggle initially under this shift in emphasis. But as we learned from our neighbors in Kentucky, an early adopter state, kids and their teachers quickly rise to the challenge.

While StudentsFirst supports the standards, we never took a position on what testing vendor should be selected to create a Common Core aligned assessment. The

State of Ohio chose PARCC, our State Superintendent sits on the PARCC board along with other state superintendents, Ohio taxpayer dollars were heavily invested in readying school districts to adopt these assessments, and school leaders and teachers devoted numerous hours preparing kids to take the PARCC assessment.

As noted by the *Dispatch*, "Ohio educators in the PARCC consortium helped build the test. Teachers, administrators and state officials logged at least 54,000 hours over four years."

As we proceed with the first year of implementation, now is not the time to go backwards. HB 74, if passed in its current form, would make us start all over again at a time when we have the opportunity to learn from our work this year, and make adjustments to Ohio's testing requirements accordingly.

We understand some districts have concerns with PARCC, but the best way to address these concerns would be to use Ohio's vote (and significant influence) on the PARCC governing board to make changes to the PARCC assessment. Possible changes could include shortening the length of the exam and returning results faster.

Instead of spending tens of millions of dollars on creating a new test, Ohio could use that money to help districts purchase more computers, improve broadband access, provide professional development, and hire support staff to help with administration of the assessment. The state could also, seize the opportunity to expand the use of technology in classroom instruction to allow for more personalized learning and prepare Ohio's children for the 21st century.

Please consider revising HB 74 to allow a review of PARCC's first year of implementation and its results. Such a review may lead us to *mend it, not end it*. At this point in time, however, the legislature does not have the information it needs to make an informed decision.

Such common sense revisions would better complement other positive aspects of HB 74 that StudentsFirst supports:

- HB 74 would have the ODE develop a table of assessments that may be used for multiple purposes in order to reduce the total number of assessments administered.
- HB 74 would reduce testing for vocational-technical students who have earned industry-recognized credential
- HB 74 proposes having the ODE to complete a comprehensive survey of districts' capacity and readiness for online administration of assessments and present a plan to address any issues or problems.

These proposed changes represent common sense approaches for guarding against excess testing, as well as seamless execution of the testing. HB 74's proposed

guardrails are reinforced by HB 7, which provides assurances to parents who opt out of testing.

Please, Mr. Chairman, let's not go backwards. Wholesale change is never flawless. Let's maintain the momentum in implementing Ohio's New Learning Standards and assessments that ensure our kids are learning them. In the coming weeks, the state can compile feedback from Ohio school districts on PARCC's first year of implementation and make informed decisions accordingly.