

Testimony Regarding Senate Bill 216

Ohio Senate Education Committee

Senator Peggy Lehner, Chair



Elizabeth Weddle, Kindergarten Teacher

Mason City Schools

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Chairman Lehner, Vice Chair Huffman, and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony regarding Senate Bill 216 - an important bill intended to restore some control back to local school districts.

My name is Elizabeth Weddle. I have taught half-day Kindergarten in the Mason City School District for 15 years. In Mason, we have 550 Kindergartners in one school with a half day program. Yes, that's right, 550 five-year olds coming to us with wide, excited (and sometimes scared) eyes in August. In our short day, we get about 100 minutes of classroom instructional time. In that 100 minutes, I must teach and assess reading, writing, language-speaking-and-listening, math, science, social studies, and work habits to 25 students. Don't forgot that I also need to help these five-year olds learn how school works, help them learn the daily routines, help them when they have an accident or get their feelings hurt, help them learn how to control themselves with 25 other five-year olds in the room, help them zip their coats - and most importantly- help them learn to love to learn.

At the beginning of the year, kindergartners are at their least independent point, and then we ask 25 of them to keep "busy" while we do the one-on-one KRA assessments with their peers which takes about 35 minutes EACH! One or two students is hard enough to get through in a week, but then multiply this time for 25 students. There is so much lost teaching time for weeks at a time when completing the KRA assessments! This is also an example of another unfunded regulatory mandate. Our district pays for substitute teachers to help with our classes while teachers are assessing. I am grateful for the subs (in fact, it would be impossible to get the KRA done without them) but it is very difficult to not be personally engaging with my class as we build our classroom community together in these critical first weeks of school.

The KRA is Duplicative & Diminishes Teachers' Ability to Build Relationships & Assess Students' Learning Needs

I know that the State Department has heard many of these concerns since the KRA was unveiled in 2014. That is why they have worked so hard to message that the KRA is not a test, but instead is "a combination of teacher observations of everyday activities and

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students' answers to questions." However, in practice, this is simply not true. Almost all of the non-observation assessment has to be given one-on-one and is totally separate from our kindergartners' everyday learning.

I have done both the KRA-L and the KRA. While I actually feel the original KRA-L gave us more useful data about every child than the new, much longer KRA, we really just need to be able to do what we know our local students need. We have our own local assessments that meet students where they are at and help us to know where to go from there. We have systems set in place to get to know our students and their families. The KRA takes time away from our systems that we *know* work for our students. Our local assessments go deeper than the KRA, and are much more valuable. The purpose of an assessment is to see what you need to teach your students, not just give them a score. The KRA is giving them a score and then my local assessments tell me what I need to teach. For example, the KRA asks students to name 5 letters and produce 3 sounds. I need to know if my students know 52 letters and 33 sounds, which means I need to do the KRA AND my local assessment. The KRA asks students to name five numbers. I need to see if they can name 21 numbers, which means I have to do the KRA AND my local assessment. The KRA asks students to count a set of 7. I need to know if they can count a set of 20 objects, which means I have to do the KRA AND my local assessment.

We have been told that the KRA assesses what the preschool did and shows if they are "ready for kindergarten," but we do not get these results until November - three months after school has started. I had a parent once say when they received the KRA/Third Grade Reading Guarantee information in the mail, "It's DECEMBER, I'm glad to know that my child is READY for Kindergarten. She's been there for four months and is almost halfway to first grade!"

I understand that the point of the KRA may be to find out the students who need additional support. But do you want to wait $\frac{1}{4}$ of the year to find out that they need help? I don't! Our local assessments catch these students within the first two weeks. By the time the KRA is completed, they have been receiving ESL services, literacy interventions, or meeting with an intervention specialist support for 8-10 weeks (50 days!)

And, yes, you can now get a child's scores before November 1 but because it takes so long to do the full assessment, it's impossible. There may be districts that don't have

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valuable local assessments like we do, and maybe the KRA is a tool that helps those schools identify students of need. In that case, having access to the KRA is a smart local decision for the students and teachers in that school district. But, at the Mason Early Childhood Center in Mason City Schools, we found those students much earlier with our local assessments. Consequently, doing the KRA is redundant, gives us less info than we already had, is time consuming, and requires us to lose valuable teaching time.

Problems with the KRA

Now, let's talk more about the assessment itself. The state said they shortened and improved the KRA in 2015, but really they simply took out a few questions - barely saving a minute or two.

The iPad portion of the test actually tests kindergartners' ability to focus and pay attention more than their cognitive knowledge. I have had students end up "off track" to pass the third grade reading test who can already read! They were young fives when they came to school and had never done an assessment like that before. They did not understand what they are supposed to do and cannot pay attention for that long. Most of these students have never taken a test before - let alone one where they are not shown a visual model of what to do. They end up just moving the objects around and clicking the green arrow to move on.

This year, I had a child complete the whole thing, and when I asked him what the iPad read about the ant, he said "there was no sound." He did not know he was supposed to hear something on every page, nor did he know to tell me if the headphones did not work. He just guessed an answer for each page and touched the green arrow to move on. He was little, and he'd only been with me for ten half-days and was still trying to figure this school thing out. Needless to say, he had to start over. Just one of so many reasons that we do not feel that it is a valid assessment.

Another example is that the KRA asks two rhyming questions which are given on the iPad which gives three options to touch. So, there is a 33% chance of guessing the right answers. Then the following question is a beginning sounds question (very similar to rhyming in a five years olds eyes), again with a 33% chance of guessing it right. Would you want your child's rhyming and beginning sound ability judged off of only three questions total? I do not feel confident saying that a child can or cannot do those skills based on one or two questions each. Again, it is not a valid assessment of these skills.

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It's a guessing game. So, we have to go back and do our local assessments of these skills.

Doing double assessment takes away from the valuable time we have with our students. In those first weeks of school, we are trying to get to know the students, trying to start classroom routines, and have good classroom management. But, instead, we have to step away from these little, non-independent five-year old children to ask students to name a crayon, a teacher, telling about a child swinging, etc.. Really, is this a good use of our time?

Also, this year - the fourth year - was by far the most frustrating year with the technology not working. The ipads locked up on the first question of each test. You had to close the app, re-login, and start over--after each student. The password would not work the first time. You had to close it and reopen it. There was also the addition of the field test which was a separate assessment on the iPad. So, for each student (25 times in each session; 50 students total) you had to close the assessment and then go to the second one, which again would lock up. The time wasted with the technology this year was beyond frustrating. At one point, I called the state at lunch because of all these technical issues and wasted time our teachers had experienced. While the woman I spoke to was VERY nice, she said they are getting lots of calls from all over the state but cannot replicate the problems, so it must be a problem with our wifi. What?!? If they were getting lots of calls throughout the state, that would not be OUR wifi. And, of course, we had checked and tested the wifi before we called.

Speaking of the field test, why did we take the time to do that with students? There were five questions which were either exactly duplicates of the ones in the KRA or VERY similar. It did not go toward their score or have any report for parents. It just took precious time away from teaching our students.

The website entry was also very frustrating this year too. It would lock up and not allow you to scroll down the page so you could only see the first six students. In the spreadsheet entry, the name of the question would not stay lined up with the rows where you were inputting the results so you could not tell which question you were putting the scores in for each child. You would have to refresh the page after each entry. Then when the score reports are ready, you have to download each child's score report separately (50 separate downloads and reports) and then go to the print settings

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on each one to print only the language page that you need. For a test that we do not use the results for our teaching, these time consuming steps are extremely frustrating!

Restore Local Control; Support SB 216

Please, please, please consider allowing districts to make their own decision as to whether the KRA is beneficial to their students. Some districts, like Mason, have their own assessments which are much more valuable for our specific children. The KRA just points out those same students that we already know need support-- students who are English Language Learners, students with an IEP, and those students who we have already identified for literacy support long before we complete the KRA. Please give us our valuable teaching time back by allowing us to use our local assessments to help our Kindergartners learn!