

HB 239 Proponent Testimony: Katrina Cook

Chairman Jones and Members of the Committee:

I am a fifth-grade teacher at Valley Forge Elementary in Columbus City Schools. I have taught for the last five years here in Columbus, and before that, taught at The Ohio State University while pursuing my doctorate in literacy. I have also taught in universities in China. I am giving this testimony today in support of House Bill 239, to request that you address the seriously detrimental testing situation in our schools.

My elementary school is one that has many students who are first- and second-generation English Language Learners. We frequently have students enroll who are brand new to the country and speak little to no English. Because of the district mandates, every new student is required to be given the reading and math MAP tests within one month of their enroll date. Naturally, assessing students for their knowledge and skills is necessary, but some of these students have never yet used a computer, and within a few days, they're placed in front of one and told, "Do your best." We have had students who had literally never seen a computer before. For this to be their entry into American public schools is to be saying, "Welcome to school. Prepare to fail."

In the past, English Language Learners were exempt from state tests for a year or two, until they had learned enough English that the test could truly determine what they had learned. In fifth grade, students take reading, math and science tests. The math and science tests can be quite difficult to read, even for non-English Language Learners. Two years ago, I had a student who came in from Gambia, reading at a first-grade level. She was brilliant at math and would often make her own math problems for herself to do while waiting for me to explain a lesson to her classmates. Her reading and English levels certainly improved greatly over the year, but by the time the Ohio State AIR test rolled around, she still did not read well enough to understand the questions. She could do the math, but she was punished for not having learned English fast enough.

In addition to the testing requirements placed on English Language Learners, the amount of testing allowed is obscene. School begins at the end of August. From the end of August to the end of September, I administer the MAP test, both reading and math, a district-mandated test that is supposed to determine a student's growth. Students have unlimited time and might take on average from 30 to 100 minutes for each test.

During that month, I also administer the BAS test, an individually given reading level test. This year, we also began the iReady, another computerized reading level test, which took one student four hours to complete. Every district curriculum map always has teaching beginning the first or second week of school, but I have rarely seen that happen. Every teacher knows the first month is for getting to know your students and testing. Realistically, in-depth teaching rolls out after about three weeks at the earliest. That's three weeks of content not taught.

Now we're into October. At the end of October, fifth- and second-graders take the COGAT and the NAGLIERI, respectively, a test of which the sole purpose is to determine giftedness. The questions require abstract thought and reasoning and leave the students drained and sometimes feeling defeated. It takes an hour out of every day for a week, but even when they are "done," the effects of taking the test do not leave them. They have just sat through questions they didn't understand for a test they didn't see the point of.

In December, the battery of tests begins again. We have six weeks to re-administer the BAS, the MAP and the iReady, hoping against hope that students have shown improvement. We try to determine, when would be the best time to give it. Between Thanksgiving and Christmas? After the New Year? Before the January 30 deadline but after the holiday break has worn off? We tell the students they are more than a test score, but we also know our administrators will be looking at the test scores. We need someone to tell US that WE are more than our students' test scores.

In February, OELPA testing begins, a battery of four tests for English Language Learners. For some schools, this is a minor blip, but for us, it is a major event. No ESL pullout can happen for weeks, so that is lost instruction that is desperately needed. When 50-75% of the class is gone, you have to decide, do I go on with the lesson and just repeat it later or just have them do something else? More lost instruction time.

Now we're into March; OELPA is done; no MAP; finally! I can teach. But wait, the AIR test is in a few weeks. Time to start reviewing and doing practice tests so my kids know how to use the testing platform. This involves reminding them the many ways this one is different than the other standardized computer tests they've already taken this year. There are just so many for their young brains to learn.

In fifth-grade, students take three AIR tests: reading, math and science. That's six days of testing, over a period of six weeks. It doesn't seem like much, but consider the covered walls, their worry, "If we fail, will I not get to go to 6th grade?" Consider a young mind constantly hearing exhortations of "you are more than a test score, but do your best anyway because it'll still show what you've learned" and having already taken so many tests this year.

But we get through them, and it's the beginning of May. Time for fun projects! Well, yes, but we still have to do another round of MAP, reading and math, and time-consuming individual BAS testing.

This annual testing schedule is daunting for an adult; it is psychologically detrimental for children. These tests are purported to help teachers, but in reality, they are used to judge teachers and schools. Teachers use assessments in class every day that help them. I can know if a student understands a math concept in five minutes with a whiteboard and a marker. That student can demonstrate understanding in many ways far more authentic than a computerized test designed to be challenging.

When a child looks up at me with a MAP score that has not improved, or worse yet, gone down, and asks, "Is that good?" with frustrated hope in his eyes, I am forced into an impossible position. When a child puts her head down in defeat because she thought she understood and liked math before taking the AIR test, I feel like an accomplice.

Every educator knows the nonsense of having multiple tests that evaluate the same concepts. Every educator knows the detriment of evaluating children over and over again. Every educator knows it is ridiculous to test children in on yearly knowledge when the year isn't over yet. And every educator knows something must be done.

I urge you to please listen to educators and trust us.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of HB 239. I welcome your questions.