

House Education Primary and Secondary Education Committee

HB 67 – Proponent Written Testimony

February 23, 2021

Laura Sheets, 8th grade ELA in Southeast Local School District

Chair Manning, Ranking Member Robinson and members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee,

Thank you for this opportunity to provide proponent testimony in support of HB 67.

I have been a teacher for 27 years. During my tenure, I have endured the building of my new middle school, the renovation of the old middle school, and while this was being accomplished, grades 7 and 8 were housed in trailers. I thought that experience was dreadful until March of 2019 when Covid-19 had schools shut down. I was grateful, extremely grateful, to be back in school with my students in a hybrid condition at the beginning of this school year.

However stressful, let me just say, I loved being able to see the children. The hybrid situation is very stressful. During the first two-three weeks of school, the teachers instructed the students in what we called a Google Classroom “boot camp.” This was so each student would know how to get to their Google Classrooms, their emails, their ProgressBook grades, Google Docs, Slides, etc., The boot camp was necessary because we never knew when the school was going to go on full remote. Our district even provided more teacher professional development days prior to the return of school in order for teachers to be prepared for remote teaching/hybrid teaching.

The students faced countless struggles. Every class had to learn Google Classroom forums and quickly in case we went remote learning. Not all students had a support system at home to help them with their off days when they had homework. We had issues with making sure every student had internet access or hotspots to be able to connect to Google Classroom. Having the hallways divided with tape showing where to walk, arrows on the walls, water fountains covered with plastic and tape, red X marks to show where a student is NOT allowed to sit, all student desks facing the same way and distanced six feet apart, having temperatures taken upon entry of the building, having the students’ hands washed or sprayed with sanitizer after their temperature was taken, wearing masks all day: these are numerous stress factors that students are faced with during their on day of school. How different this was from almost a year ago. No group work. No partner work. A student can almost feel isolated even when they are in school.

For my classroom, the hybrid model has been stressful in that it’s been very hard to keep organized which class is doing what. First, class A was ahead, now the Bs are ahead, and so forth. I try to use what’s called Literature Circles but our school calls them Book Clubs. That has been nearly impossible with hybrid and with the rule of not letting kids work in groups. I was told I’m allowed now, but the students have to be six feet apart discussing their books. I’m not sure if you know what that looks like, but it looks downright ridiculous.

I was instructed this year to cut or strip the standards I teach to the bare minimum. I’m not sure how that’s possible with English Language Arts. I am trying. However, I have lost an extensive amount of instructional time. I see half my students every other day. I need more precious instructional time to meet the “bare minimum standard” and educate my students as much as possible. How can I identify weaknesses in their learning and formulate my instruction to meet the needs of individual students when I see them every other day. This wouldn’t cause them to have to lose test time, and I would be able to identify these needs and address them in real time instead of based on data I get months later.

Also, I am lucky if my students complete homework on the off day since these families have been hit hard by the pandemic; mothers and fathers have more than one job to take care of their families. I teach 8th graders so they are the babysitters for younger siblings. I can not fault these students whose parents gave them big responsibilities at home.

My students will not be prepared for a spring test this year. The results will not reflect what they are truly capable of if this had been a “normal” year; one where they did not have to worry about babysitting their sibling because a parent had to get a second job, or because a family member became sick with Covid or died from Covid, and they are expected to perform well on a state test when they went to school every other day.

It is of my opinion that a waiver should be exercised for this school year as stated in HB67. This year has been a constant state of emergency. Every single day could be a game changer. In addition, the state needs to recognize that some students, in some families, have been living in a constant state of emergency and an achievement test in the spring is the last thing they need. The results I receive to analyze from this year’s achievement test will tell me what I already know: Covid-19 wreaked havoc on my students, their lives for over a year, and their struggle to learn in abnormal situations that was not their fault.

I ask the committee to act on this important issue and to waive state testing requirements for the 2020-2021 school year, to require the Department of Education to seek a waiver from federal testing requirements, and to declare an emergency.

Thank you for your consideration. I am available to respond to any questions you may have.

Laura Sheets