Testimony on Eliminating the KRA

Provision of Senate Bill 216

Ohio Senate Education Committee

Senator Lehner, Chair

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Chairman Lehner, Vice Chair Huffman, Ranking Member Sykes and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today regarding the elimination of the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA) within Senate Bill 216. My name is Susan Pelton. I am a kindergarten teacher in the Copley-Fairlawn City Schools in Summit County. I have taught for 30 years, 27 of which have been in kindergarten in the Copley- Fairlawn City School District. I hold a Bachelor of Science degree from Miami University and a Master’s Degree in the Art of Teaching from Marygrove University. I am a State of Ohio Martha Jennings Holden scholar, a member of the 2015 – 2016 Summit County All-Star Teaching Team and twice recipient of the Fairlawn VFW Teacher of the Year award. I am currently a member of the State of Ohio Early Literacy Workgroup, along with Senator Sykes and fellow stakeholders as part of the Ohio Strategic Plan for Education. I would like to share with the committee how we are using the data from the KRA in our district to drive our instruction to provide early intervention and enrichment to the kindergarten students in our district and why I support the continued use of the KRA assessment.

In my testimony, I will address the challenges, benefits and recommendations of the following from a kindergarten teacher’s perspective:

* KRA-L
* KRA

**KRA-L**

When the KRA-L assessment was first introduced, our kindergarten program still included morning and afternoon half-day sessions. Our kindergarten team attended the state trainings on the KRA-L. A new assessment for incoming kindergartners with a fall deadline for entering scores raised several questions. How do we administer this assessment that takes approximately fifteen minutes per child? Do we have additional staff who can administer the assessment who have received the training? How do we best use the information gathered from this assessment? At the time, we had an intervention program called K+ in place at each of our three elementary buildings.

Students identified for the program based on their KRA-L, fall progress monitoring and teacher recommendation were moved to the a.m. class and attended an additional half-day of programming in the afternoon with a focus on early literacy skills. Since this class did not start until the second or third week of school, we utilized these staff members to test the p.m. students in the first week of school. The teacher of the morning session scheduled and administered the assessment to her own a.m. students. Data from the KRA-L proved helpful in identifying children entering kindergarten who would benefit from additional support in literacy areas. There was no component for math skills or other subject areas in the first version of the KRA-L.

**KRA**

There was a significant impact and additional challenges for kindergarten teachers and school districts when the State of Ohio updated the KRA-L to the new Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA). The assessment now addressed not only Language and Literacy skills, but the additional domains of Mathematics, Social Foundations, and Physical Well-being and Motor Development. When the new version of the KRA came out, we were still utilizing half-day kindergarten sessions in the district. This presented quite a challenge as we tried to determine how we would administer an inventory of skills that tripled our testing time per child. It was a much more comprehensive assessment. With no release time or provision from the state to allow for this additional testing time, it posed quite a dilemma for districts to find this time at the beginning of the school year, particularly when a teacher could have 40+ students on her class roster. We struggled with how we were going to administer almost 6 hours of testing with no release time, and what were we to do with the rest of the class when a one on one assessment was being given? Although we continued to use our K+ teachers to help test in the p.m. class, the extended time of the test allowed us to assess fewer students. We also encountered frustration with the early KRA website, and the KRA help desk, which was not always able to provide timely answers to our questions.

In the 2015 – 2016 school year, our district moved to a full day kindergarten program. Our district, along with many others in our area implemented a new format of scheduling kindergarten families for 45 minute appointments during the first three days of school. This release time to allow the kindergarten teachers to have an adequate amount of time to assess each child with the newest version of the KRA made all the difference in the world. This single change made the assessment manageable and instead of worrying about the when and how the KRA would be given, we were able to focus instead on each child and what the results of the KRA could tell us about our incoming students.

It is at this intersection of having experience with administering the KRA and the improved website, KRA help desk and manageable scheduling of assessments that I would like to address. What the kindergarten teachers in our district have found is that while the KRA doesn’t tell you everything about the child, it is a much more comprehensive assessment than the KRA-L. It gives us a beautiful “snapshot” of the whole child and we have learned how to use this data to drive our instruction and to individualize our classrooms to address the strengths and weaknesses of each child.

This brings me to why kindergarten teachers support the continued use of the KRA. In the current format of scheduling children for the assessment the first three days of school, we gain invaluable insight in to who each child is that is coming to school the following week. Spending 45 minutes with a child coming to kindergarten is a gift to get to know who he/she is, and to have a picture of his/her skills prior to the child walking in the classroom is vital. We administer the Language and Literacy and Mathematics portions of the KRA during these appointments. We are able to observe the child’s willingness to separate from their parent/caregiver, eagerness or reluctance to answer the questions, observe their learning style and the manner in which they process information. We are able to observe how well the child is able to follow directions, stay focused on the task at hand, and the level of focus or distractability of each child. The results of the assessment paint a picture of how “ready” the child is to learn what is about to be presented in the classroom. I make notes about the strengths and weaknesses of each child based on his/her testing. Prior to walking in on the first day of class, I am already able to put supports in place for the child who is prone to cry when his/her mother leaves on the first day of school, provide a specific place for a child to sit who needs additional space due to their handedness, vision, hearing or IEP needs. I am able to arrange the seating in my class to provide peer support to students in need academically or emotionally. As our subject content is presented, I already have initial data on who needs enrichment and/or intervention with letters, letter sounds, counting and number concepts. We are able to differentiate instruction in our computer lab and in the classroom to accommodate each student based on the skill levels identified in the KRA assessment. Knowing each student’s individual needs allows us to put our best research based practices into use to tailor the instruction for each child. The KRA provides a vital baseline data point for each child. Further progress monitoring at the beginning, middle and end of the year provide us with a picture of each child’s growth when compared to the KRA assessment of skills taken those first few days of school. This is all possible because the new KRA encompasses additional domains of learning.

I would respectfully request that the committee consider the KRA not as a test, but instead as essential baseline data that allows kindergarten teachers to bridge students from their pre-K experience to the K-12 school setting. It provides a growth measure for children as they begin their journey into a lifetime of learning. What a gift to be able to individualize that experience for each child before the day he/she walks into the classroom. The data from the KRA also provides us with information we can share with our local preschools. While we cannot share individual items due to the secure nature of the test, we can indicate general areas where we need to fill gaps between preschool and kindergarten. With the support of our superintendent Brian Poe, Assistant Superintendent Brian Williams, and my principal William Kerrigan, Copley-Fairlawn City Schools have already taken a lead in this area to prepare preschool parents in our district for the skills needed in kindergarten. We have for years partnered with the local preschools to host parent information programs with question and answer formats so parents can ask about the expectations ahead in kindergarten. Most recently, our district hosted an event that brought preschool teachers, local librarians, kindergarten teachers and administrators together with Laura DiCola from the Summit Education Initiative to discuss further ways we can provide education to parents to help them see the importance of their roles as their child’s first teacher from birth to kindergarten. I have really valued my time and work with the Early Literacy workgroup in Columbus. It has confirmed for me the importance of putting essential transitions in place for children from birth to the school-aged child to help each child be as successful as possible. Before eliminating the use of the KRA, I would ask the committee to reconsider how the data from this assessment and the time spent with each child prior to entering school is an essential tool for kindergarten teachers. It is a user-friendly assessment and should not be viewed the same as the testing so often addressed in the upper grades that the public is asking the state and federal government to reduce.

Chairman Lehner, this concludes my testimony. I want to thank the committee for you time and consideration in listening to how kindergarten teachers are able to maximize the data gained from the KRA to individualize the instruction of our students. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.