

Testimony Regarding Senate Bill 216

Ohio Senate Education Committee

Senator Peggy Lehner, Chair



Jessie Rindler, Kindergarten Teacher Kettering City Schools December 13, 2017

Good afternoon Chair Lehner, Vice Chair Huffman, and Ranking Member Sykes. I am Jessie Rindler, a kindergarten teacher in Kettering City Schools in Montgomery County, and I truly appreciate the opportunity to offer testimony on the subject of the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment currently being used in our district. Specifically, I wish to address how this impacts our community's students, their teachers and principals, and their families.

I currently am in my 11th year of teaching kindergarten with Kettering City Schools. I walked a unique path into the world of education. During my final years as a student at Fairmont High School, I felt called to develop a stronger voice to right the inequities I saw in my community. I wanted to find a career that would help me empower the voice of important members of our community who have too often gone unheard. I am a proud graduate of the Richard T. Farmer School of Business at Miami University. During my time in Oxford, I studied Organizational Leadership, and promised myself that I would take my discoveries in class and apply them to help others - no matter how difficult the obstacles would become. After working as an aide and a substitute teacher for several years, I returned to college at Antioch University Midwest to earn my Master's degree in Early Childhood Education. Advocacy is truly a passion of mine, and I am thankful that both universities I attended strongly encouraged civic service, promoting social justice, and helped me develop into a change agent for important causes.

I often look for ways to apply my Organizational Leadership studies while wearing my educator hat. In recent years, I have enjoyed working with Learn to Earn Dayton to improve early childhood issues in the Dayton area, including implementation of Montgomery County's Preschool Promise. I am devoted to improving access to high quality preschool and growing my region's population of engaged and successful readers in elementary school. In the classroom, I am an energetic and demanding teacher. I work hard to build relationships with all educational stakeholders. In the summer, I facilitate summer reading outreach programs and spend many days driving to my students' homes doing home visits. I am relentless in my pursuit of buy-in from families, and will do whatever it takes to help them partner with me for students' success.

I love using a project based learning approach with my students. Through authentic research, I guide students in asking and answering questions, and solving problems relevant to young people in our community. I have been blessed with many great mentors, including Stephanie Owens and Dr. Julie Biddle, through my participation with the Greater Dayton Reggio Study Group. My strong belief in having high expectations for learning in my classroom, and holding children and families accountable, has been developed with careful guidance from many highly respected educators.

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I also find great joy in my work as an adjunct professor at Antioch University Midwest. I enjoy gaining insight from preservice teachers, as well as reviewing articles and research to inform my teaching practice with both kindergartners and adult learners. In my first decade of teaching, I have sought out leaders willing to help me refine my craft and understand my place in advocating for all learners, with a special place in my heart for disadvantaged populations.

When I first starting teaching in Kettering, the environment felt well-known. It was my hometown and I felt like I was teaching a familiar population. In the past ten years, I've watched my students' needs change significantly. Many more children are living in poverty. The opioid epidemic is haunting children in my classroom at staggering rates. Too many of my students do not have access to preschool prior to kindergarten, and some do not speak English at all. Teaching in Kettering is very challenging due to the needs of these unique populations of students. However, helping children feel hope and develop a strong belief in the power of uplifting themselves and their families through educational experiences is the most important work I believe I can do.

First, I must admit I believe strongly in the importance of gathering data to drive good decisions. I enjoy, and see the tremendous benefit of, using data to inform my teaching practices every single day. Knowing precisely what my students' strengths and weaknesses are allows me to make quick changes to my instruction. Data helps me group children based on similar needs and informs my daily decisions on how to differentiate instruction to meet the specific needs of my students. Since I teach two sections of half-day kindergarten, I am often found in my classroom during lunch redesigning a lesson plan for my PM class, based on the data I collected from my AM class.

I progress monitor students that have significant gaps in literacy skills, including those on Reading Improvement and Monitoring Plans, every week, one-on-one. I enter that data into a database and analyze and track my students' growth. I can compare students' growth trends and achievement against norms for my school, my district, the state, and the country. I, like all of the colleagues in my school, could tell you very specific details of each students' strengths and weaknesses and my plans to meets their needs. Teachers are using many forms of assessment to identify the needs of our students. We have formal and informal assessments, including but not limited to observations, student conferences, performance on daily work, end of unit tests, skills checklists, summative projects, math and literacy computer-based assessments, AIMSweb universal screeners, and more.

Now that you know more about my passion for using data to drive instruction, I would like to share how the KRA is negatively impacting the academic growth of my students. First, the length of time it takes to administer is a tremendous burden, especially in half day kindergarten setting. I fight for every minute of instructional time I can get with my students since their day from arrival to dismissal is only two and a half hours long. Losing days of instruction to capture data that is not useful for driving my instructional practices, is unacceptable to me. This test is

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too long. It is not engaging for even the brightest students. It is damaging to the process of developing trust and love for learning with more fragile learners as well. Furthermore, The KRA provides pieces of essential information, but the data is not adequate to plan for the instructional needs of my students. I default to using my local assessments to inform my practice.

The timing of the testing is very disruptive to the important foundational work that occurs at beginning of the year in a kindergarten classroom. The first weeks of school are a critical time for making relationships and establishing routines. Continuity and structure are critical in the first months of school - especially for disadvantaged populations of students. Students who have never been to school need to have routines and procedures for learning modeled and reinforced much more than students that have schema for how to function successfully in a school setting. Some of my students have never been in the care of anyone other than a parent, and are working to adjust to being one of 25 students in a classroom. Some students who are unable to attend preschool are lacking in executive function skills that are reinforced in high quality preschool settings. It can be very difficult to work through distractions and self regulate needs and desires. The needs can be great, and meeting them right away helps to establish a trusting relationship. Some students are hearing English for the first time. During these first weeks of school, I work tirelessly to develop accommodations to help nervous, less-ready students feel a sense of belonging and success. For example, I make picture cards and develop physical gestures for my English Language Learners. In order to administer the KRA, I am pulled away from the classroom environment, and substitutes or aides have to teach my students in the classroom. That is particularly difficult for students that are in a school environment for the first time as well, as for those we already know are lacking in readiness skills.

It has been suggested teachers should be eager to have the one on one time to work with students, as provided by the KRA. Like I mentioned before, I strive to have individual opportunities to work directly with each of my students in a meaningful way to address their individual academic needs. However, it takes weeks of introducing and reinforcing routines to create a classroom environment where students can engage in sustained, quality independent and small group learning opportunities successfully while I work with other students. Each year I teach up to 25 students, some who are four years old, some have never been to school, some have unidentified special needs, many are living in poverty under stressful conditions, and some do not speak English. This year at least 40 percent of students in my building qualify for free and reduced lunch - a number which is likely much higher since kindergarteners do not eat at school. I have five English Language Learners and twelve of my 42 students did not attend preschool. I needed to deliver research-based interventions to many of my fragile, less ready students immediately this year; however, instead I found myself administering a lengthy test in a language that some could not understand. Instead of creating a sense of security and belonging, this process undermined my relationship with these kids. In my opinion, it is disrespectful to ask a child to listen to a story told multiple times, in a language he or she does not understand, and then ask comprehension questions thereafter. There is important

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one-on-one work I need to do with these kids, and this assessment simply does not meet the needs of my students.

Prior to the implementation of the KRA, with consistency and intentional focus on building relationships, I could model and reinforce expectations for working in small groups or independently starting with five minutes and building to sustain about 15 minutes of stamina (for independent or small group work) in the first two months of school. Now, the KRA is forcing me to skip the critical period of laying the foundation for how to accomplish meaningful independent and small group work. Many students (especially those from more fragile populations) have not had the opportunity to develop and practice the skills needed to self regulate themselves for long periods of time while teachers work individually with other students. Schools are forced to make difficult and expensive decisions which force teachers away from whole and small group teaching of procedural expectations, and teachers move immediately into delivery of very lengthy one-on-one assessments. Our district has opted to provide support by paying subs to teach for three days, while teachers administer the KRA. There is never enough time to complete the entire assessment. Thus after being away for students for several days, teachers transition to assessing students one-on-one in the classroom, while students are engaged in "busy work," or work that is not rigorous and meaningful, but work that occupies students while the teacher prematurely sits one-on-one with students for lengthy KRA assessments. What a loss of crucial instructional time.

I not here today to suggest we should be content with literacy intervention waiting until first grade. ***Elimination of the KRA will not end the intervention process for kindergarten students. It will in fact do the opposite, by freeing up time for teachers to focus on delivering already established local assessments and interventions.*** I am here to provide evidence of the tremendous work kindergarten teachers are doing to use other data to intervene with students as soon as possible. Teachers are using many local assessments to determine needs and are intervening as best we can to address those needs in the first month of school. I believe firmly that the demands of the KRA hinder our ability to deliver high quality instruction, including literacy interventions. I worry about the most at risk kids losing critical instruction that is needed to close gaps in foundational skills. Without the demands of the KRA, we could think much more proactively about literacy intervention for our youngest learners earlier in the year. Growing the number of successful readers is a common goal of ours and more time to deliver quality instruction and intervention is essential to meeting this goal.

It is critical to ask, "Is the elimination of the KRA best for children?" I firmly agree. This test is not used to inform my work with my students. It is getting in the way of my very intentional work of authentically instructing and assessing the needs of my students. It is of little value because it takes so long to administer. The time used to administer could be used to provide critical interventions. I question the developmental appropriateness of that much testing for young students, some of who are four years old, have never been in school before, and may not speak English. Many students, especially fragile populations of students, show signs of stress and

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fatigue during testing. Some are unable ability to effectively use technology or appropriately seek support for technology problems as they arise. The downfalls are many.

On behalf of many of Ohio's kindergartners and their educators, I sincerely ask you to support Senate Bill 216 and help return control of our youngest learners first months of school back to the educators' closest the classroom.