

Center for Education Reform

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE
PENNSYLVANIA HOUSE EDUCATION COMMITTEE
ON SCHOOL CHOICE

BY
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AUGUST 17, 2011

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee:

My goal in being here today is to reinforce the need for an extensive school choice program that serves the educational needs of families throughout the state. Those needs are far greater than many perceive. For while Pennsylvania has a proud history of developing schools and programs intended to meet children's needs, the fact is that the system has fallen short of that important goal, and structural changes are needed to improve all schools wherever and whenever there is a need.

That is the goal inherent in the school choice debate before you. Since 1990, this nation has been engaged in efforts to reform education, moving beyond discussions of money, poverty, and inputs, to discussions focused on consequences, accountability, and choice.

Nothing you face in Pennsylvania today is new. Nothing said or negotiated this last session of this esteemed body was new to the debate, or to the practice we see in nine other states.

Rather than dwell on why school choice is an imperative for reform – for both children stuck in failing schools as well as those who benefit daily from better comprised and more advantaged schools – I thought I'd spend just a few minutes providing a slightly different perspective.

I'd like to talk to you about student achievement, which should be our sole concern.

On paper, Pennsylvania boasts what appear to be relatively strong results on its state tests, year after year.

Cohort grad rate: Of the 78.7 percent who graduate, it is reported that 75 percent of those high school students are bound for postsecondary education. That on the face of it would sound like a very strong showing indeed. While those students were in school, they posted 75% proficiency rates on the math section of the PSSA and 72 percent in reading. Since 2004, those scores have steadily climbed. So what's the problem? What I heard last time I testified from leaders of education groups in Pennsylvania is that the state does pretty good on education generally. Indeed, the problem seems manageable if indeed only a quarter of all students are not proficient and not higher education bound.

Some might indeed think that those students are the ones we read about in the extremes every day -- they are the kids of color, the kids in disadvantage, the ones that poverty or misfortune has thwarted. For those kids, you've created before school and after school programs, sent more funds to their districts, and tried to attack the root causes of failure. Research tells us that those are the students who have the most ineffective teachers assigned to them, those whose unions ensure protections like seniority and tenure that are not related at all to performance. But if you only had to worry about 25 percent of the kids who are not meeting proficiency and not going to college, it might be hard, but it seems a lot more manageable than say, 40% or 50%.

But it turns out that your data is wrong, and there are not just 25. Indeed, it turns out, it's more like 40%, and those 40% cross every income, every socioeconomic group and, indeed, every region in the state. There is much more to the aggregate scores on PSSA than many of us realize.

According to Philly Inquirer reporter, Dale Mezzacappa (June 2009), this state's test score gap is not only wide -- it's among the widest of all states.

Mezzacappa writes: "There's sobering data in the report released yesterday by the National Center on Education Statistics on the racial 'achievement gap.'" The study uses results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, given periodically to a sampling of students in each state since 1992. Pennsylvania has one of the largest gaps between White and African American students in fourth grade reading scores, a 33-point gap that has not narrowed much since 1992. Indeed, in Philadelphia alone, the proficiency rate on the state's test is just 56% for math and 50% for reading. Other regions have spotty records:

Scranton SD: 74% math, 70% reading

*Testimony by Jaanne Allen
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Lancaster SD: 55% math, 48% reading
Pittsburgh SD: 61% math, 56% reading

In wealthy Central Bucks SD (Bucks County), the numbers are as one would expect: 92% math, 89% reading

However, what if those PSSA scores were inflated? Indeed, what if the state's proficiency standards themselves were low? It turns out, that's a reality that we can ill-afford to ignore. **Indeed the National Assessment reports that there is a wide variation among state proficiency standards.** The National Assessment is an independently created, nearly universally recognized standard that sets what it is students should know and be able to do at every level. The nation's report card as it's often called, is the barometer against which state standards have been judged. According to NAEP: **Most states' proficiency standards are at or below NAEP's definition of *Basic* performance.**

- ❖ In grade 4 reading, 35 of the 50 states included in the analysis set standards for proficiency (as measured on the NAEP scale) that were lower than the scale score for *Basic* performance on NAEP and another 15 were in the NAEP *Basic* range. In grade 8 reading, 16 of 50 states set standards that were lower than the cut-point for *Basic* performance on NAEP and another 34 were in the NAEP *Basic* range.
- ❖ In grade 4 mathematics, seven of the 50 states included in the analysis set standards for proficiency (as measured on the NAEP scale) that were lower than the *Basic* performance on NAEP, 42 were in the NAEP *Basic* range, and one in the *Proficient* range. In grade 8 mathematics, 12 of 49 states included in the analysis set standards that were lower than the *Basic* performance on NAEP, 36 were in the NAEP *Basic* range, and one in the *Proficient* range.

Pennsylvania has had as much as an 11 percent negative difference in the proficiency value of its test scores versus NAEP. That is the second highest discrepancy among all states. The wide variation between Pennsylvania tests and NAEP suggests that data gleaned from PSSA scores is not to be taken at face value. Indeed, NAEP standards are where students should be in their grade.

Harvard researchers affirm the discrepancy. They reviewed the comparative strength of state proficiency standards versus the nation's report card. For Pennsylvania they found that, overall, the strength of the state's test in assessing real student achievement is only average. Meanwhile, the standards students must meet to show proficiency have actually declined 2.3 percentage points. Thus, increased scores are actually a result of lowered standards.

Reviewing the Strength of State Proficiency Standards, Harvard grades Pennsylvania a C from 2003-2009 for its relative strength compared to nationally recognized benchmarks.

4th Grade Math – C
4th Grade Reading – C+
8th Grade Math – C
8th Grade Reading – C

Using NAEP, the PSEA proudly proclaims on its website that “ Pennsylvania public schools are among the best in the nation, according to many objective measures and research from respected institutions. They go on to say that only a few states have significantly higher NAEP scores than Pennsylvania. Not said is that NAEP scores remain critically low. The average 4th and 8th graders on math and reading scores are barely above a third proficient! When broken down by race, or even parental income, the stats are much more dramatic.

4TH GRADE READING

40% Proficient & Above
32% Basic
27% Below Basic

4TH GRADE MATH

46% Proficient & Above
39% Basic
16% Below Basic

8TH GRADE READING

36% Proficient & Above
42% Basic
21% Below Basic

8TH GRADE MATH

40% Proficient & Above
38% Basic
22% Below Basic

Looking more deeply, we can see that this is not just a problem for children of color. Only 53% of white fourth graders are proficient in math. That figure is 22% for low-income students; and only 15% for black students.

Even using PA's own test results, one out of every four Pennsylvania students is still not competent at math or reading. Low achievement is an even more pronounced problem for some groups. In 2009, Black and Latino students were only 50% and 51% proficient in reading, and "economically disadvantaged" youth were only 56% proficient. Unfortunately, the state's data is not broken down enough to draw sharper conclusions, but Pennsylvania's educational problems are clearly not solely limited to urban minorities. In 2009, 22% of white and 18% of Asian students were not proficient in reading as well.

My point here is not to malign the good people of this state, but to point out that there is much, much more to achievement data than meets the eye.

Throughout the last several months I've heard discussions on how best to craft a school choice program. I've heard many of you defend the educational progress in your districts, the great work of their teachers, administrators, parents and students. I've heard many say that choice was an issue for the poor, the minorities and those in failing schools.

Members of the Committee -- with all due respect -- 50% of your population is not poor and 50% of your population is not at risk or minority. But more than 50% of your student population is not proficient in reading or math at critical grade levels and by the time those students reach high school, they lose, not gain ground.

The other day, a friend of mine attended the graduation of Kaplan education, an online provider of higher education that tends to attract -- by virtue of circumstance -- students who failed to make progress in high school. Like these non-traditional institutions of higher education, so-called "normal" colleges and universities also attract students who in show up needing remedial education. Indeed 75% of such institutions nationally must deliver remedial education to a large percentage of their entering freshman classes, and we know that the matriculation rate does not match the freshman enrollment.

But our problems are masked by aggregate test scores, a sense that poverty is to blame, and cries that we can't do it without more money.

The reality is the opponents fear loss of money, not the creation of more competition. And knowing how hard the job of schooling is day in and day out, we begin to sympathize and find it difficult to believe that there could be there ways to do education well and even better than what we do now.

That was the sense of the debate during last session. Time and time again, reported in literally hundreds of media outlets and in personal conversations with you and your colleagues, supporters heard many all too familiar excuses for why school choice should not be enacted:

- ❖ Pennsylvania already does well
- ❖ Cities and regions that do not do well have poverty and risk behaviors to blame
- ❖ There is not enough money
- ❖ There is no proof it works

The reality is, Pennsylvania does not do well when nearly half of its students are not proficient in reading and math. The reality is that poverty is not an excuse for failed education, which scores of data you have on effective schools in high poverty areas shows you. The reality is there will never be enough money to satisfy those who believe money is the answer, but there is enough money to reallocate to choices made by parents who know how to find better or more personalized alternatives for their children.

As for proof that it works, we have a generation of students that have no grown up with choices at this point and a generation of researchers that have followed them. From charter schools to private school choice, 10 states have seen hundreds of students experience choice, and in every city, state, and region it's been enacted, there is evidence that all schools improve.

Some of those statistics are appended here. Others will give you different studies and tell you these are not true. But rather than decide how and whether to advance school choice based on what others have done, I'd implore you to create school choices to improve what you can do. Your achievement data speaks for itself, and it is lacking. It is critical that more quality educational opportunities be afforded to families to help them do their first job in educating and raising their children to reach their potential.

I'd recommend you not consider this a reform just for the really bad cities, but a reform that is designed to give students most in need – wherever they live and whoever they are -- access to better opportunities than the ones the system now affords them. And I'd ask that you consider a proposal that extends throughout the state, to significant percentages of students, not just 5 or 10, who are the future of your state, of this generation and of this nation.

Evidence of both media and public support is attached, along with key quotes by opponents who have no interest in seeing such a reform enacted, on any scale.

I thank you for your time and your important focus on this critical issue. It is not in vain.

Jeanne Allen
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August 17, 2011