



Advocating for teachers  
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An affiliate of the  
National Education Association

*Testimony of*

*President Sheila Cohen & Executive Director Mark Waxenberg*

**Connecticut Education Association**

*Before the Education Committee*

**Re: Raised Bill No. 1095**

*March 19, 2015*

Thank you, Representative Fleischmann and Senator Slossberg, and members of the Education Committee.

My name is Sheila Cohen, president of the Connecticut Education Association. CEA executive director Mark Waxenberg and I will testify on Raised Bill 1095, An Act Concerning Student Assessments.

As you probably know, voters in Connecticut—by a two-thirds majority—say there is too much high-pressure testing in our schools. The same is true across the country. States are taking action to reduce testing.

Twenty-two states have designed their own assessment system—just this month New Hampshire received federal approval for a plan that eliminates yearly SBAC testing and replaces it with local assessments, and grade-span testing. Those who say it can't be done are wrong.

Our students deserve change now because Connecticut's high pressure test—the SBAC test—is not right for our children.

- The test is seven to eight hours long.
- Many days of classroom time are lost to testing and test prep.
- SBAC has not been vetted by classroom professionals for age and grade level appropriateness.
- The poorly-designed software of the test penalizes students who lack regular access to computers.
- Test results are not available until the end of the school year, and cannot be used to help students.

- The test is administered over many weeks, increasing the possibility of cheating and questions being leaked. This threat is so real that Pearson—the testing corporation working with SBAC—is now spying on students who comment about the tests on social media.
- Only seventeen other states are using SBAC, and that number is shrinking.

Mark Waxenberg will discuss our plan.

Thank you Sheila, and members of the Education Committee. My name is Mark Waxenberg, executive director of the CEA. We recommend that the committee amend Raised Bill 1095 to incorporate a proposal we released to the public in February and have shared with you—it reduces testing and improves student assessment.

Our plan eliminates the SBAC test, and instead relies on verified, progress monitoring tests, or PMTs, that are already integrated into classroom instruction.

- In many schools in Connecticut, PMTs in math and English are administered three times, at the beginning, middle and end of the year. We propose the same schedule. They last 15 to 20 minutes.
- PMTs have been around for many years, and are reliable.
- They measure whether a student is at, above or below grade level. Unlike SBAC, they also measure academic growth in the same school year.
- PMTs are aligned with the curriculum.
- Results are available immediately, providing teachers with tools to help students.
- Our plan does not add new tests—it utilizes proven tests that are already administered in classrooms. That seems like common sense.

Our plan also assesses vital skills that testing does not measure, such as collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and creativity. That helps us reduce the percentage weighting of test scores for school assessment, and helps avoid turning PMTs into high pressure tests.

In conclusion, our message is simple. Our plan provides better accountability, reduces testing, and increases time for learning. We have submitted additional written testimony that provides more details. Thank you.



DATE: Thursday, March 19, 2015

TO: Education Committee

FROM: Sheila Cohen, President  
Mark Waxenberg, CEA Executive Director

RE: Supplemental Testimony Regarding Raised Bill 1095 and the CEA Initiative to Reduce Testing and Improve Academic Assessment

**What our polling of Connecticut voters tells us:**

- 64 percent want legislators to take action **now** to reduce standardized testing.
- 67 percent say students are burdened with too much standardized testing.
- 78 percent say classroom-based information provides the most accurate assessment of student success.

**Our goals:**

**Less testing, more learning, and improved outcomes for students.** To identify and meet the needs of students, help them grow academically, and inspire the skills for success that testing cannot measure, including critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and communication.

- Our plan provides better accountability and reliability than the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium test (SBAC); our plan measures both academic grade equivalency and growth in the same academic year (SBAC does not measure growth in the same academic year).
- It provides teachers with assessments and tools to meet the academic needs of students throughout the school year (SBAC provides no such guidance or tools to help students and teachers; results are delivered when the school year is over).

**Finding better alternatives under federal law:**

Federal mandates that date back to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation of 2001 require a statewide annual assessment system for each year for grades 3 through 8, plus one in high school. There is, however, no uniform assessment system nationwide.

- Connecticut is one of only 18 states using the (SBAC) test to meet the federal mandate.

- In the rest of the U.S., 21 states are creating their own assessment programs, 10 states are using the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) test, and Massachusetts is undecided.
- This month federal officials have approved a pilot program in New Hampshire that eliminates yearly SBAC testing and substitutes local assessments and grade-span testing (standardized testing only once in elementary, middle and high school). Other states including Kentucky and North Carolina are investigating similar plans.
- Administering the SBAC test is a logistical challenge. Each student, third grade through high school, is required to spend a total of between seven and eight-and-a-half hours on a cumbersome computer-based system to complete the SBAC tests. The trend has been for states to move away from SBAC and PARCC.

### **Why the SBAC high-stakes testing model is obsolete and detrimental:**

The 2001 NCLB high-stakes testing model was based on the decades-old idea of “one high-stakes test, one high-stakes test score.” Under this model, the performance and ability of individual students, teachers and schools are reduced to the score of a single test taken at one point in time, hence the term “high-stakes.” This model is faulty and harmful for a variety of reasons:

- The SBAC high-stakes test is not a reliable, consistent or objective assessment.
  - Students are assessed on a single, long test administered over an extended time period in a problematic format, increasing the likelihood of inaccurate outcomes resulting from frustration, stress, and fatigue. This is expected to be especially true for elementary school students, for whom such testing is developmentally inappropriate.
  - SBAC is administered at different times in different schools over a two-month period—as a result, students who take the test at the beginning of the testing window will have had two months less of classroom instruction compared to students who take it at the end of the testing window, invariably impacting the test results.
  - The “cut scores” for the SBAC—the cutoff point at which a student is considered either proficient or deficient—are determined on an arbitrary percentage basis in order to ensure that only a pre-set minority of students will pass the test (for example, the cut score for 11<sup>th</sup> graders in 2015 is 41% proficient for English language arts, and 33% for math).
- Student growth within a school year is a key measure of the success of any student, teacher or school. The SBAC test does not measure student growth within a school year. SBAC and similar high-stakes tests are administered once per year—making it impossible to measure student growth within an academic year.<sup>1</sup>

- SBAC plans to measure student growth not within the same academic year, but from when the test is given in March to the following March, mixing grades, teachers, in some cases different schools, and summer break (when students who have less enriching experiences may suffer a greater loss and disadvantage). This ensures a poor if not meaningless measure of growth (our plan would measure growth from September to June, within the same grade, school year and classroom—a statistically sound measure of student growth).
- The SBAC is too lengthy—at seven to eight-and-a-half hours for the math and English tests combined, it breaks new and unwelcome ground.
- Many additional hours are devoted to test preparation and “teaching to the test.”
- Teachers do not receive test scores until after the school year is completed. As a result, the test fails to be of any meaningful service to students; teachers cannot use the results to address the needs of students.
- The time devoted to test preparation efforts and testing administration for high-stakes tests consumes an ever-increasing amount of precious classroom instruction time, blocks academic access to school computer labs for weeks at a time, and detracts from classroom learning.

**The latest reviews of the SBAC test are not good:**

“If the released items on the (SBAC) tests are indicative of the quality of the actual tests—and Smarter Balanced tells us they are—their shoddy craft will directly and significantly contribute to students’ poor and inaccurate scores.... And sadly, struggling students will likely be penalized more than proficient students as the cognitive load of grappling with poorly designed software will compound other anxiety-producing factors to unnecessarily reduce their scores.... There is no good reason for the tests to be this bad. The past forty years of extraordinary progress in research-directed development of mathematics visualization and technology for expressing mathematical reasoning could be put to use to power these tests—elegantly and effectively. The test makers failed to apply this research.” (From a report by **Steven Rasmussen, SR Education Associates, March 2015**).

**Our plan:**

- Eliminate SBAC and create a more comprehensive assessment system that utilizes tests that are already in use in most elementary and middle school classrooms, and measure student growth.
- Utilize a verified and appropriate progress monitoring tests (PMT) that are currently integrated into classroom instruction and usually consist of three short (10 to 20 minutes) tests at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year.
- PMT results are available immediately to teachers for their use in assisting students.

- PMTs are designed for different purposes; however, a number of PMTs in use in Connecticut classrooms are designed specifically for evaluating math and English grade equivalency, and academic growth over time.
- PMTs can yield not only scores that measure grade equivalency and are comparable among and between districts, they also measure growth within an academic year—a key failing of SBAC. Net result: a more accurate and comprehensive accountability system of two measurements—grade equivalency and academic growth.
- PMTs have been used, studied and verified for many years, versus SBAC and PARCC, which are unknowns with no track record. Our selected test would be reviewed by U.S. Department of Education officials in the same manner as any other test for the 21 states developing their own assessment systems.
- “Research has demonstrated that when teachers use student progress monitoring, students learn more, teacher decision-making improves, and students become more aware of their own performance. A significant body of research conducted over the past 30 years has shown this method to be a reliable and valid predictor of subsequent performance on a variety of outcome measures, and thus useful for a wide range of instructional decisions.” (Deno, 2003; Fuchs, Deno, & Mirkin, 1984; Good & Jefferson, 1998). *Educational Leadership, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Volume 62, No. 5, February 2005* (NOTE: PMTs have become even more reliable and innovative in the years since this 2005 article was published).

#### **Benefits of Progress Monitoring Tests:**

They are most often used in grades three through eight, and can offer a better, more reliable, less stressful, and less time-consuming alternative.

- Through utilizing PMTs that are related to classroom instruction, are already in use, and measure student knowledge and growth within the same school year, we can eliminate SBAC, create an improved assessment and accountability system, and recapture instruction time currently devoted to high-stakes testing and preparation.
- The use of PMTs, combined with assessing a portfolio of student skills that are critical to success in college and career, such as critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity, will result in vastly improved assessments of student knowledge and growth.

According to the National Center on Student Progress Monitoring, progress monitoring has the following benefits:

- Students learn more quickly because they are receiving more appropriate instruction.
- Teachers can make more informed and timely instructional decisions to meet the needs of specific students.
- Student progress in the same school year is measured and verified.

- PMTs are aligned to curriculum and classroom instruction.

#### Questions:

1. **Does the federal mandate in NCLB prohibit the use of PMTs in a statewide annual assessment system? Answer: No.**

NCLB requires a single accountability system (as opposed to a single test) with assessments in reading, writing, math and science that are verified and consistently administered statewide. PMTs are not prohibited as a measure of grade equivalency, and the NCLB doesn't require a single, annual test. The National Coalition for Parental Involvement in Education summed it up this way: "NCLB does not require the state to adopt an assessment system based on a single test administered once per year, but does allow the state to employ a combination of state and local assessments, as long as they are aligned with the state content and academic achievement standards, and allow for valid comparisons between school districts and schools." The use of PMTs to assess growth and grade equivalency will allow for comparison between districts throughout the state. Federal officials will need to verify the PMT selected by Connecticut for our statewide accountability system in the same way that federal officials must verify the non-SBAC or non-PARCC tests used by 22 other states. Our proposal should also allow for a reasonable state-to-state comparison of grade equivalency and provide additional information as to student growth; SBAC has committed only to provide a comparison to the ten other states in PARCC as to grade equivalency. There is no promise by SBAC to match up with the 21 states that are creating their own accountability system.

2. **Will PMTs become another high-stakes test? Answer: No.**

Tests now account for approximately 90% of a school's assessment. Our proposal reduces the weight of the test scores—in this case two scores representing averages of a) grade equivalency and b) student growth—to no more than 20%. In addition, PMTs are short and integrated into classroom instruction.

3. **Is this a better alternative than encouraging parents to “opt out” their children from the SBAC? Answer: The two are not comparable.**

4. Our proposal acknowledges the frustration of parents who are concerned about too much testing. The “opt out” decision is a personal decision for parents to make. Our proposal, however, goes much further than the “opt out” strategy. It eliminates SBAC altogether, and is a systemic solution that results in a net reduction of testing and a recapturing of classroom instruction time for all students.

5. **Will the PMT proposal save scarce educational dollars? Answer: Yes.**

The SBAC test costs between \$22 and \$31 per student. The PMTs cost between \$9 and \$12 per student—approximately one-third of the cost of SBAC—and are already used and paid for by school districts. The state would assume the costs of the PMT selected as the mastery exam, resulting in savings for both the state and local towns. This proposal will save the state and local districts all of the costs of the administration of the SBAC test.

**6. Will the PMA proposal be acceptable under ESEA and the ESEA Waiver Round?**

**Answer: Yes.**

According to the U.S. DOE, the state can always amend its waiver request if it changes assessments (i.e., change from option A to option C). Any assessment the state plans on using must be submitted for peer review to make sure it meets the statutory requirements for statewide assessments.

**Action steps for legislation:**

1. Eliminate the burdensome SBAC test. This will save significant time for students, teachers and administrators. Administration of the SBAC up through the end of the 2015-2016 school year will be considered pilot applications of the test.
2. Establish a State Mastery Examination Board comprised of educators and experts to convene on July 1, 2015. On or before April 1, 2016, the board shall identify the progress monitoring assessment that will take the place of SBAC from among those PMTs already administered in classrooms, and how the results from such tests shall be reported provided that there shall be measurements of both grade equivalency and growth within the same school year. The criteria for test selection shall be a) a test that best assists teachers in measuring the growth and academic needs of students throughout the same school year, b) a test that best supports and does not subtract from classroom instruction and, c) a test that is developmentally and age appropriate for students. Beginning in the 2016-17 school year, the progress test (already administered and in use in classrooms) will be substituted for the SBAC in grades 3-8.
3. Prohibit statewide high-stakes testing in pre-kindergarten programs through the second grade.
4. Create an improved system of school accountability that is not tied to an arbitrary test score, but to a more robust and meaningful assessment of student knowledge and growth. Reduce the amount that testing counts toward measuring school quality from approximately 90 percent to no more than 20 percent; include assessments of important college-and career-ready skills that testing cannot accurately measure, such as collaboration and communication skills, creativity, critical thinking, self-direction, and social and civic engagement.



5. Establish a commission on student learning and school quality to identify key measures that indicate how well schools and districts prepare students to meet the objectives in the system of school accountability described above.
6. Allow high schools, on a voluntary or permissive basis, to substitute a portfolio system of assessment as an alternative to the mastery examination. The alternative assessment would require students to demonstrate accomplishment in critical and creative thinking, collaboration and communication, reading comprehension, research and writing skills, mathematical problem-solving, self-direction, and community engagement, and would be developed by school districts in cooperation with the State Department of Education.

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<sup>1</sup> The SBAC Consortium reports that in addition to the SBAC test, "optional interim assessments" developed by the consortium may be administered by schools. The optional assessments will not, however, count toward any overall measurement of student growth. According to the SBAC Consortium, the purpose of the optional assessments is to "identify strengths and limitations in relation to the Common Core State Standards," and "support the development of state end-of-course tests," or help develop yet more testing.



## GUIDANCE FOR SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING DURING THE FIELD TEST

### Smarter Balanced Test Security

Maintaining test security during administration of the Field Test is critical to preserving the integrity of test items and validity of the test itself. The Consortium is closely monitoring social media networks for security breaches and escalating to states when appropriate. These guidelines provide recommendations for monitoring social media and we hope you find them helpful.

### Test Administration Procedures

It is important to be vigilant before, during, and after testing for any situations that could lead to or be an impropriety, irregularity, or breach. Please remember that only individuals who have been appropriately trained and whose presence is required may be present during the administration of the Field Test.

To get ahead of the problem and reduce the number of security breaches on social media, we encourage you to refer to the Smarter Balanced Test Administration Manual (Appendix B) for detailed information on the impact and definition of incidences as well as the timeline for reporting these activities.

### Sites to Monitor

#### Twitter (<https://twitter.com/>)

- If your school has a Twitter account, you can take advantage of following your students by requesting their @username and/or encouraging them to follow the school Twitter account. Following @SmarterBalanced will also help you to monitor our news feed.
- To search for conversations and posts about the Field Test, consider the following search queries:
  - #sbac or #smarterbalanced
  - #[insert name of school] or @[insert school Twitter handle]
  - "smarter balanced" or "sbac"

#### Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/>)

- If your school has a Facebook page, invite your students to join.
- If your students have public profiles, you can also search their news feed and photo gallery for security breaches.
- Similar to Twitter, you can conduct searches by entering "smarter balanced" or "sbac" or "[insert name of school]"

#### Statigram ([statigram.com](http://statigram.com) )

- Statigram is a webviewer for Instagram and allows you to search and manage comments more easily. You will need to create an account for yourself to search comments on Statigram. If you have a private account, you can use this information to login and review information.
- To search for posts about the Field Test, use the same search queries recommended for Twitter.

### What to look for

- Images of the computer screen that show ELA or math test items
- Any photographs that appear to be taken in the test administration room. These can be images students have taken of themselves or their classmates as well as pictures taken by test administrators of the testing session.
- Tweets that indicate test security policies are not being upheld.