

Testimony

of

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Good morning. My name is Stephen Kozol, and I'm proud to say I am a social studies teacher and department chairman at Upper Merion Area High School. I myself attended Upper Merion from Kindergarten through 12th grade, a school district generally recognized as one of the best in our region. In fact, many Upper Merion teachers also attended our schools, and that is a tribute to their effectiveness, as well as to the loyalty of parents, students, and the surrounding community.

After graduating from Upper Merion Area High School, I majored in American Studies at Brandeis University and received a law degree from George Washington University. Before I entered teaching, I worked for the accounting firm of Price Waterhouse, and for one of Philadelphia's most prestigious law firms, Drinker, Biddle and Reath.

I decided to become a teacher because I wanted to have a direct impact on the youth of tomorrow. I wanted to help them compete in the global economy we know they will lead. Since I also completed an undergraduate major in African-American Studies, I also care deeply about children of color, who have been all too frequently left behind.

I am also proud to say that I am the father of a first-grader who attends Upper Merion's schools, that I teach Advanced Placement courses at Upper Merion, and that I have instructed a variety of courses as an adjunct at three universities. Finally I should note that I am the president of the Upper Merion Area Education Association and a member of the Board of Directors of the Pennsylvania Council for the Social Studies.

I give you this background not to glorify myself; I do so to show that I have been part of what some commentators refer to as "the real world:" the world outside of schools. I do so also to emphasize that I take my continuing professional development seriously, and so do my teaching colleagues, and that, together, we work as hard and do as much for our country as our counterparts in the private sector. Yet my colleagues and I are frequently denigrated as wanting to avoid accountability. That is a complete falsehood. In fact, teachers pride themselves on their accountability and responsibility every day. The belief that teachers do not want to be held accountable has been perpetrated in some sectors of the media as fact, and that misinformation has unfortunately been intensified by the law labeled No Child Left Behind.

Let me state at the outset my belief that NCLB was enacted with a core of admirable intentions. Like its sponsors and supporters, I believe that, as a country, we must ensure that all of our children receive a quality education. My concern is not necessarily with the existence of NCLB, but rather with some of its "side effects," if you will. Because of these side effects, this well-intentioned legislation has become what Stanford Education Professor Linda Darling-Hammond has accurately labeled "a law that wastes scarce resources on a complicated test score game that appears to be narrowing the curriculum (and) uprooting successful programs."

Let me give you some examples of this. I work very closely with the English and Math teachers in my building. This year approximately one month before the state

standardized tests were to be administered, one of these colleagues informed me that he would have to deviate from both our school board-approved curriculum, which is based on the latest education research, and his customary form of instruction, solely for the purpose of preparing our students to take the upcoming PSSA tests. In fact, curriculum is being re-written all over Pennsylvania to reflect what is being tested by PSSA, and even to coach students on the prompts that students see on the tests. Districts have even lowered themselves to giving students free breakfasts, T-shirts, and class trips, in a disturbing effort to bribe them to take the tests seriously, since the results do not count toward their course grades or even graduation.

I myself am increasingly aware of a new and troubling attitude toward social studies, history and any other subject that is not tested. We are quickly entering an era of significant de-emphasis with respect to those subject areas that do not have a test. While I sincerely believe this was in no way the intent of NCLB, it is, in fact, exactly what is happening. What is more, it is not just happening in my district; I have spoken with numerous colleagues across Pennsylvania, and they all recount the same experiences.

This law also concerns me greatly as a parent. My first-grader truly enjoys and benefits from school, but I worry about whether this can continue with NCLB as it is currently written. Her classwork and homework make it clear to me that she is already being prepared to take the PSSA test in third-grade, to the exclusion of numerous topics and lessons I believe are critical to the intellectual and social development of a young child. This truly takes “teaching to the test” to the extreme, but I do not in any way blame the teachers or administration of her school. Rather I recognize that it is the inevitable and sad outcome of high-stakes standardized testing – whether it is federally or state-mandated.

The aspect of NCLB that most urgently needs revision is another cited by Darling-Hammond. She says, it “has misdefined the problem. It assumes that what schools need is more carrots and sticks rather than fundamental changes.” The law is based on the fallacious, and, frankly, insulting, notion that educators have been almost willfully doing bad things to children, and that the federal government can fix that alleged problem. Both assumptions are wrong.

As I stated at the outset, teachers want to prepare young people as best they can for our world. They want students to have the best curriculum we can provide, not tests that often have little to do with today’s realities. I have taught students who failed my course but received the top possible score on an AP test. Conversely, I have taught students who succeeded in my course but were disappointed in their AP score. The point is, tests are admittedly one valid measure of the academic success of both students and teachers, but they are only one measure. Good classrooms use many varied means to assess the progress and mastery of our students, and federal and state government should do the same with respect to our schools. After all, while standardized tests have their place in education, one might ask: how many students will face standardized tests when they go out in the world after school? Or rather, will they face real-life situations where they need to think critically and act and react rationally and responsibly?

A brief word about testing and evaluation of schools and school staff: I am neither a researcher nor a statistician. But PSEA has researched the subject of growth/value-added models and has reached these two conclusions:

- Growth/value-added models can serve as a better indicator of student academic growth. However, many of the foremost experts in educational measurement have written that growth/value-added models cannot isolate the impact of teachers on student performance.
- Growth/value-added models can serve as signals, but they cannot substitute for an in-depth, onsite evaluation by educational experts if the goal is to meaningfully evaluate the performance and effectiveness of teachers.

My bottom line is this: I urge you to revise NCLB before tests take over our schools. We do not want to turn out great test takers who will be helpless when they have to think through complex problems and situations. Instead we should allow schools to be places where original thought and creativity flourish, places that produce enthusiastic children ready to take on the world.

As a final note, I ask you also to consider the effect of this kind of testing on student and teacher morale. The system, as currently designed, makes it virtually certain that all public schools, including high quality districts like Upper Merion, will inevitably fail “AYP” and thus be described as a “failing institutions.” The consequences in the current law are virtually all punitive rather than supportive. I can tell you from first-hand observation that this can turn a positive, productive faculty that is in fact succeeding into a fearful and hopeless one overnight.

Schools do not need punishment; we need support. We need more relevant professional development for teachers, and solid mentoring programs for new and young teachers. We, as a nation, need to rely less on property taxes to fund our schools, because they discriminate against poor communities and those on fixed incomes.

As you consider its reauthorization, please revise NCLB in a couple of critical ways. Make it less punitive and more supportive. Focus those scarce resources – and come up with new resources -- on the districts that need the most help.

Finally, let me and my colleagues do what we want so much to do – teach our children the best way we know how.

Thank you.