

Testimony of AFTNJ President Donna M. Chiera
NJ Senate Education Committee
Monday, May 18, 2015

AFTNJ supports the intentions and spirit of the legislation/resolution that is being debated today.

AFTNJ believes that the passing of this legislation is a **positive first step** to “Reclaim the Promise” of American public education by creating strong, effective neighborhood public schools that are safe, collaborative, and welcoming places.

Most educators enter the profession with the belief that the goal of public education is to demonstrate, through their own teaching, there should be joy in becoming a life-long learner. The excitement of entering a classroom and opening doors to countless possibilities is now at risk because everything about teaching and learning is evaluated through the lens of an assessment. We continue to see States and local school districts applying data methodologies such as value-added and student growth percentiles to high stakes decisions such as determining which students graduate, teacher evaluation and funding allocations. These methodologies were not designed to support these types of decisions.

Parents, students, community members and educators continue to stand up against the trend of standardized testing increasingly driving education policies and practices. They are rejecting the concept of the disastrous “shame, blame, test and punish” accountability system that is dismantling the teaching and learning process. Disbelief and outrage was expressed when it was learned publishing companies are “spying” on students without any prior notification to the school systems, parents or students. We have witnessed an increase in parents protesting the number of hours schools spend on test prepping and test taking rather than teaching. This movement has grown as more required assessments and district level benchmarks have been implemented.

Performance data in the United States is often used purely for accountability purposes compared to the other high performing countries. These are the same countries many legislators, policy makers and think tanks use to justify the reforms they propose to our public education system. However when you look at the research, the countries out performing us tend to use the data to guide intervention, reveal best practices, and identify shared problems so all stakeholders can design real solutions for the students in their systems. These same policy makers have signed on to the implementation of strategies that substitute test scores for student and teacher supports, fire teachers and close schools instead of giving them the resources they need to help struggling students succeed and communities thrive. Many have irresponsibly sold off our public schools to privatizers and other groups eager to profit on the backs of our children.

For more than two decades this punitive test-based accountability system has been in place and has failed to improve student performance or ensure equity of educational resources or services. In fact since implementation of use of these large scale assessments to measure schooling outcomes and identify struggling learners and perceived poorly performing teachers, the achievement gap has widened in many districts.

We just celebrated the 60th anniversary of Brown v. BOE. We should have learned there can be no excellence in public education without equity and yet we continue to disinvest in our public schools while expanding charter schools and privatization. This trend has contributed significantly to increased segregation with the result that many children of color and children living in poverty still receive separate and unequal schooling.

AFT and AFTNJ still believe the adoption of the National Core Standards was the important first step in bringing equity to all and students who can successfully compete in a global economic structure. Unfortunately the implementation of the standards was overshadowed by the tenure legislation and new evaluation systems. Testing and consequences took priority over teaching and learning. With the controversy around standards, assessment and consequences, now is the time to form a task force to study and make recommendations on how New Jersey should proceed to improve its public education system so it works for all students. The task force should be charged with reviewing the professional resources allotted district for the implementation of standards and the time and the appropriateness of district and State testing. ***While this evaluation process is going on there needs to be a “time out” or moratorium on students, district and staff on all consequences related to the implementation of the core standards, PARCC assessment, including school closing, consequences for student placement and the new teacher evaluation system which is referenced in the NJTEACH law.***

This is the time for New Jersey to take the lead to create a public school system that focuses on teaching and learning. To do that AFTNJ believes the following principles need to be the basis of that system:

- Accountability systems which are transparent and readily understandable by teachers and families and the broader public;
- Engage a broad cross-section of the school stakeholders—teachers, students, parents, and community organizations—in planning and implementing accountability policies and strategies that are tailored to each school and district’s unique context;
- Inform parents and communities of the amount of resources being spent to implement an accountability system including statewide and district assessment schedules and the cost of the assessments being given;
- Giving parents notification and say of what and how their child’s assessment data can and will be used;
- Allow parents to “opt-out” of the formalized assessment process, providing alternate assessment options and alternate education settings during the assessment process;
- Ensure the delivery of a broad and well -rounded curriculum, including the arts, science, social studies, civics, career/ technical options, health, physical education, and social/emotional and character development;
- State and districts support meaningful learning that links curricular tools and resources, instruction, and new assessments to ensure the development of higher order thinking and performance skills that students need to be successful in and outside of school;
- Accountability tools and systems are designed to enhance learning environments, improve curriculum, and increase teacher efficacy;
- These tools not only significantly involve teachers and other education professionals in the development and decision making about the standards and assessment processes but use feedback from parents, teachers and students to evaluate and continuously improve the system;

- Retain disaggregated reporting by race, ethnicity, poverty level, English language status and disability, but no longer require testing of every student at every grade level every year, and instead employ sampling methodology to determine how well the system is meeting its goals;
- Identify schools needing improvement by qualitative observation as well as multiple measures of students, educators and schools that reach beyond standardized math and reading test scores and instead capture the multi-faceted aspects of education valued by parents, the profession and the community;
- Hold policymakers responsible for appropriating the necessary funding for implementing the new accountability system;
- Hold administrators responsible for distributing the funds equitably and for creating a collaborative environment that includes teachers in decision making about the curriculum, the assessments and the professional development necessary for successful implementation;
- Hold ALL education stakeholders responsible for using wisely the resources –e.g., enriched and engaging curriculum, well prepared teachers, safe and orderly schools, teaching supplies, computers and other technology—necessary to meet student needs and achieve both equity and excellence for ALL students;
- By doing this we believe that the public education system will be renewed to reclaim the promise of motivating individual self-fulfillment, supporting a thriving global economy, and serving as a foundation for racial, social and economic justice.