

Legislative Budget and Finance Committee
A Report on Standardized Tests in Public Education
Report Comments by Jason R. Brehouse, Esq., Project Manager

June 19, 2019

Good morning. My name is Jason Brehouse (Project Manager) and it is a pleasure to be here today with the members of the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee to discuss our report on “Standardized Tests in Public Education.” Present with me are committee staff persons, Anne Witkonis (Analyst) and Rick Jones (Counsel). Senate Resolution 2018-322 (SR 322) highlighted that in recent years, officials have debated whether there is an over-reliance on standardized testing in schools at the potential expense of a broader, well rounded education. As you know, SR 322 directed the Committee to study and provide a report on standardized tests in Pennsylvania public schools.

Our report defines “standardized test” as “any form of test that requires all test takers to answer the same questions, or selection of questions from a common bank of questions, in the same way, and that is scored in a standard or consistent manner, which makes it possible to compare the relative performance of individual students or groups of students.”

Standardized testing in America dates back to 1845 and was predicated on the goal of replicating the best teaching methods to ensure all children had equal opportunities. However, the modern standardized testing movement in the United States began with the enactment of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965 (ESEA), which included mandated standardized testing and accountability provisions, subject to strict federal oversight. The No Child Left Behind Act in 2002 (NCLB) reauthorized and amended ESEA by mandating annual testing in reading, mathematics, and science subject to strict federal oversight. Most recently, in 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) repealed NCLB and reauthorized and amended ESEA by shifting power back to states and local school districts to determine how to improve public schools with performance issues. The enactment of NCLB, and the subsequent enactment of ESSA, expanded the number of students taking standardized tests in most states by requiring the administration of math and reading tests in grades 3 through 8, and once in grades 9 through 12, and science tests in at least three grade spans consisting of grades 3 through 5, 6 through 8, and 10 through 12.

Prior to NCLB, Pennsylvania utilized the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) for assessment purposes in certain elementary grades and grade 11. Following the enactment of NCLB and ESSA, Pennsylvania now administers

PSSAs in grades 3 through 8 and has replaced the grade 11 PSSA with the end-of-year course Keystone Exams in the subject areas of English language arts, mathematics, and science. Pennsylvania also initially established Keystone Exams as a graduation requirement beginning in the 2016-17 school year, although that requirement was subsequently postponed until the 2021-22 school year along with alternative methods for students to demonstrate postsecondary readiness.

The current Pennsylvania state assessment system (PSAS) consists of various assessment tools, including six standardized tests that students throughout the Commonwealth may be subject pursuant to federal and/or state law depending on their grade levels and cognitive abilities:

- 1) Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA).
- 2) Keystone Exams.
- 3) Pennsylvania Alternative System of Assessments (PASA).
- 4) Accessing Communication and Comprehension in English State-to-State for English Language Learners (ACCESS for ELLs).
- 5) Classroom Diagnostic Tools (CDT).
- 6) National Assessment of Educational Performance (NAEP).

These standardized tests are part of an overall assessment system through which the Pennsylvania Department of Education (department) seeks to ensure rigorous requirements for Pennsylvania's students, while also equipping them to be 21st century college and career ready. The department indicated that overall Pennsylvania state standardized tests still meet their intended uses to assess whether students are learning the required curricula.

A number of states, like Pennsylvania, have developed their own state specific assessments to satisfy the federal assessment requirements in grades 3 through 8 and high school with regard to the three subject areas of English language arts, mathematics, and science. Other states, however, have chosen to administer the Common Core-based assessments, Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Smarter Balanced) with regard to the English language arts and mathematics subject areas. The PARCC and Smarter Balanced multistate consortiums that developed these two tests limited them to the two subject areas of the Common Core initiative for both elementary and high school students.

We also identified fifteen states, in the 2018-19 school year that administered either the ACT or SAT to satisfy federal statewide high school assessment require-

ments in English language arts and mathematics. Three of the five ACT states also use the ACT test as their science assessment and only one of the ten SAT states uses the SAT test for its science assessment. All of the ACT and SAT states are currently either preparing to submit for or are in various stages of the United States Department of Education (USDE) peer review process. We determined it is unlikely a transition to a nationally recognized high school assessment, such as the ACT or SAT, would require or result in the need for realignment of a state's academic standards as each state is authorized to establish its own academic standards and administer assessments, subject to USDE peer review, that can be adequately measured for comparison purposes.

We surveyed the superintendents from all 500 Pennsylvania public school districts to determine which tests schools administered in the 2017-18 school year, in addition to the five state and federally mandated assessments that include the PSSA, Keystone Exams, PASA, and NAEP. We found that, of the 23 specific standardized tests included on our survey, 21 are administered in Pennsylvania school districts. The most frequently administered tests are the AP and ACCESS for ELLs tests, followed closely by the DIBELS, ASVAB, and PSAT 10. School districts also administered a number of other tests that we did not identify in our survey. With the exception of the ACCESS for ELLs and NAEP, which are both

state and federally mandated, the other exams are either voluntarily or mandatorily administered at the discretion of the local school district. The two main reasons cited for administering these tests were readiness for college or career and shaping instruction by assessing student progress.

In order to determine standardized tests' effectiveness, we surveyed principals and teachers throughout Pennsylvania to solicit their views on the effectiveness of both PSSA exams and Keystone Exams, based on the 2017-18 school year.

A majority of principals, 67 percent, and teachers, 76 percent, indicated they disagree or strongly disagree that the PSSA exams are effective indicators of student achievement. Additionally, 77 percent of principals and 93 percent of teachers indicated that they disagree or strongly disagree that the tests are effective indicators for teacher evaluation. Seventy-eight percent of principals and 86 percent of teachers disagree or disagree strongly that the tests are effective indicators of school building performance.

In regards to the Keystone Exams, although 45 percent of principals disagree or disagree strongly that the exams are effective indicators of student achievement, only 27 percent agree or strongly agree that they are. Sixty percent of teachers disagree or strongly disagree. A majority of principals, 56 percent, and teachers,

78 percent, indicated that they disagree or strongly disagree that the Keystone Exams are effective indicators for teacher evaluation. In addition, 59 percent of principals and 75 percent of teachers disagree or strongly disagree that the Keystone Exams are effective indicators of school building performance.

We also surveyed principals and teachers regarding the issue of reduced curricula and found members of both groups indicated they have narrowed the scope of the curricula to prepare students for the PSSA exams and Keystone Exams. Principals specifically indicated in regards to PSSA exams that PA Core Standards are adhered to over other curricula, and in regards to Keystone Exams that more focus is placed on the Keystone Exams subjects areas, thus limiting the scope of the curricula.

With respect to the impact on compliance with federally required tests and accountability measures in the event Pennsylvania expanded the options for opting-out from its statewide assessments to include objections based on philosophical grounds or due to health issues, it is possible that a small number of opt-outs could impact Pennsylvania's Future Ready PA Index rating system. Federal law specifies that state and local laws are not preempted from allowing parents to have their children opt-out of assessments. The existence of opt-outs, religious or

otherwise, has the potential to negatively impact a state's participation rates and may potentially impact a state's local education agencies' and schools' federal achievement/proficiency rate along with ultimately, the ability of a state to be in compliance with federally required assessment and accountability measures. Although the department indicates that the vast majority of Pennsylvania school districts exceed the federal 95 percent participation requirement in all subject areas and participation issues are relatively uncommon, opt-outs appear to be on the rise in some areas of Pennsylvania.

Finally, we also reviewed the types of accommodations currently being offered to students with disabilities by Pennsylvania and the adjacent states. Most states indicated they used four primary categories of accommodations: 1) Presentation, 2) Response, 3) Setting, and 4) Scheduling/Time. Accommodations are tools and procedures that provide equal access to instruction and assessment for students with disabilities. Accommodations do not reduce expectations for learning. We also determined that accommodations do not impact the validity of assessments or the validity of the test as a growth measure as long as the state adheres to the recommended process for developing the assessment and developing the state's accommodation policies.

In closing, we extend thanks to the various stakeholders that provided guidance and insight with regard to our numerous inquiries. In particular, we thank the Pennsylvania Department of Education staff who provided information in response to our inquiries and assisted us in relation to the three critical surveys. We also thank the following for their input and assistance in relation to the surveys: Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators (PASA), Pennsylvania Principal's Association (PPA), Pennsylvania School Boards Association (PSBA), American Federation of Teachers – Pennsylvania (AFT-PA), and Pennsylvania State Educator Association (PSEA).