

The Eights Issues

(Quotes are from the Commissioner's Letter)

1. Given Connecticut's effective and rigorous testing program the addition of three tests is a waste of money and does nothing to assist us with the improvement of schools in CT.

"First, Connecticut wishes to continue its effective 20-year history of testing in alternate years (the Connecticut Mastery Test in Grades 4, 6 and 8 and the Connecticut Academic Performance Test in Grade 10). We have always disaggregated data by subgroup (including gender, which NCLB does not require). Our tests are among the most demanding in the country and give us excellent data for use in identifying student strengths and weaknesses and areas in which instructional changes should be made. Adding tests in Grades 3, 5 and 7 will cost millions of dollars and will tell us nothing that we do not already know about our students' achievement and what we must do to improve it."

2. Resources could be used for better school improvement initiatives, such as formative assessments, integrating technology into testing.

"Second, the resources that would have to be used to administer and score tests for Grades 3, 5 and 7 could be much better used in an effort that we know will improve student achievement – for example, integrating technology (student use of computers) into the existing testing process or developing formative, ongoing, common assessments that would be used to modify instruction for individual students, rather than to report accountability measures to the public."

3. We support more reliable ways of tracking performance over time through the use of cohort analysis and not the absolute performance of different groups.

"Third, we request the option to employ a cohort analysis, rather than NCLB's current year-by-year data analysis that amounts to a series of "snapshots" of how individual groups of students are performing. A cohort analysis will show us how each group of our students is doing over time; this analysis has greater meaning both as an instructional tool and as a way to convey accountability for the same set of children over time."

4. Special Education Testing Issue: Planning and placement teams that include parents, teachers and specialists know children best and they need to retain the flexibility to determine what is best for a child's school program. They need to retain the flexibility to offer out of level testing as an alternative when it is appropriate.

"Fourth, we request that we be allowed to return to our practice of out-of-level testing of special education students when their planning and placement teams determine that this is most appropriate. Currently, we are being required to develop specialized tests that are keyed to the standards of special education students' grade levels, and to assess these students using these tests, even when their PPTs determine that this is not appropriate. We believe that this costly requirement is inappropriate, ineffective and unfair to the students involved."

5. ESL Issues: We support the concept of testing children in English after a reasonable length of time learning English. The research tells us that it takes seven years to become fully proficient in the language. We would support a three year period of instruction to prepare the children with the skills to read the tests.

"Next, while the U.S. Department of Education is telling the states they can test English language learners in their primary language, the logic and effectiveness of this approach is questionable. Approximately 160 languages are spoken as the primary language in the homes of Connecticut students; the cost of developing alternative tests would be in the tens of millions of dollars. Limiting the development of alternative testing to

the most frequently spoken language – Spanish, spoken by a significant majority of our non-English speakers – would limit the cost but create justified equity questions. Let us suppose, however, that it were economically feasible to develop assessments in all other primary languages. If the ultimate goal is to ensure the English language and literacy skills of all students, testing students in their non-English primary language would miss the point. So, too, would testing students in English the first day they come to the United States and enter our schools. Our proposal is that there be a reasonable length of time – in our view, three years – for students to be in our schools learning English before being tested in English in reading, math and science.”

6. Supports not Penalties: the consequences of NCLB focus on penalties and not on support. We know a great deal about improving schools

“Finally, we in Connecticut believe that the consequences piece of NCLB needs to focus on supports rather than penalties – specific supports that we believe will make a difference in the lives of the students attending schools identified as “not making adequate yearly progress” or “in need of improvement.” Connecticut currently has eight

schools in their fourth year “in need of improvement,” and we have identified a set of four areas in which specific steps must be taken if student achievement in these schools is to increase. These areas are preschool; family resource centers; incentives to retain outstanding teachers, support staff members and administrators; and longer school day and year. (Our specific proposals are attached.) I would welcome the opportunity to discuss with you ways to make the consequences part of NCLB more conducive to real and constructive change.”

7. Future Expansion of Testing into Grades 9 and 11: We in CT view this as a regressive move back to the kind of basic skill testing that the state rejected twenty years ago when legislators and educators sided with more rigorous testing programs. The CAPT test is a progressive response to the need to develop more rigorous high school programs for all students in CT.

8. Highly Qualified Teacher Provision is creating problems in two areas: middle school education and special education. We believe that teachers need to have a strong content knowledge to teach subject matter and that they also need to have strong pedagogical skills. The unintended consequences of creating a blunt policy such as NCLB:

- Middle school teachers with little knowledge of the unique needs of early adolescent students
- Highly trained special education teachers are restricted in working with students who need their services.