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# *Committee Meeting*

of

## JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

*“The Joint Committee on Public Schools will meet on Tuesday, December 6, 2022, at 12:00 p.m., via Zoom to take testimony on student assessments”*

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**LOCATION:** Meeting Via Zoom

**DATE:** December 6, 2022  
12:00 p.m.

### **MEMBERS OF COMMITTEE PRESENT:**

Senator Joseph P. Cryan, Co-Chair  
Assemblywoman Mila M. Jasey, Co-Chair  
Senator Renee C. Burgess  
Senator Declan J. O’Scanlon, Jr.  
Senator Michael L. Testa, Jr.  
Senator Samuel D. Thompson  
Assemblyman Ralph R. Caputo  
Assemblywoman Victoria A. Flynn  
Assemblywoman Michele Matsikoudis  
Assemblywoman Verlina Reynolds-Jackson  
Assemblyman Erik K. Simonsen  
Assemblyman Benjie E. Wimberly



### **ALSO PRESENT:**

Rebecca DiBenedetti  
*Executive Director*

Ivy Pomper  
*Executive Assistant*

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**Hearing Recorded and Transcribed by**  
The Office of Legislative Services, Public Information Office,  
Hearing Unit, State House Annex, PO 068, Trenton, New Jersey

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## SENATE

Hon. James Beach  
Hon. Renee C. Burgess  
Hon. Joseph P. Cryan  
Hon. Declan J. O'Scanlon, Jr.  
Hon. Michael L. Testa  
Hon. Samuel D. Thompson

## ASSEMBLY

Hon. Ralph R. Caputo  
Hon. Vicky Flynn  
Hon. Mila M. Jasey  
Hon. Michele Mätsikoudis  
Hon. Verlina Reynolds-Jackson  
Hon. Erik K. Simonsen  
Hon. Benjie E. Wimberly

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## MEETING NOTICE

### **TO: Members of the Joint Committee on the Public Schools**

The Joint Committee on the Public Schools will meet on Tuesday, December 6, 2022, at 12:00 p.m., via Zoom to take testimony on student assessments.

**The public may address comments and questions to Rebecca DiBenedetti, Executive Director, at 609-847-3365, or by email at [Rsapp@njleg.org](mailto:Rsapp@njleg.org)**

Issued November 22, 2022

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**ASSEMBLYWOMAN MILA M. JASEY (Co-Chair):** I want to welcome everyone to, I guess it's afternoon -- no, not yet, just about -- to this afternoon's meeting of the Joint Committee on the Public Schools.

I am Assemblywoman Mila Jasey from District 27, and I am joined by my Co-Chair, Senator Cryan, who will speak after me, if that's OK.

State-mandated assessments are a subject that nearly everyone in education -- be they students, parents, teachers, districts, boards of education, stakeholders, advocates, policymakers, and legislators -- hold a strong opinion. The debate has been raging for years, with proponents believing they are an accurate evaluation, and opponents disagreeing, saying the results are skewed and inaccurate.

My Co-Chair, Senator Joe Cryan, and I thought the time was right for an informed discussion about state-mandated testing and assessments. There are as many definitions as to what assessments are and what purpose they serve. Generally, they are described as a systematic collection and analysis to gather information about across-the-board student performance and learning progress. Assessments determine current averages and high and low performers, and because students take the same test, answer the same questions, where scoring is uniform. Individual students can be compared based upon test performance.

Today's hearing will focus upon the state-mandated (indiscernible) here in New Jersey-- Good morning, Senator.

The first, Start Strong Assessment, is designed to help teachers understand the level of support needed in ELA -- or English Language Arts -- math, and science post- the learning interruption of the pandemic.

And, I will just, as an aside here, I live with a teacher, a high school teacher, who every day at dinner tells me about how much students are struggling post- the pandemic in social, emotional, as well as academic ways. So, we have a lot to deal with, here, and certainly teachers have a lot to deal with as well as parents. And, so, I think it's incumbent upon us to find out what is needed and how we can best support, rather than criticize.

And, finally, the NJGPA -- or, the Graduate Proficiency Exam -- is currently being used as a field test, and it will require passage, or a substitute portfolio, to graduate high school, beginning with the class of 2024. It will be administered in March. We have amassed an outstanding group of experts and practitioners to examine assessments and educate us.

Senator Cryan, do you have anything you would like to add before we begin?

**SENATOR JOSEPH P. CRYAN (Co-Chair):** Madam Chair, thanks for bringing us together; very much appreciated.

Just a couple brief comments before we start. State of New Jersey invests, as you all know, tens of billions of dollars into public education. The idea that taxpayers have a right to understand, via assessments, as to how students are performing is only reasonable. And, I do think one of the things, as we continue this discussion, is that we understand that the group of folks who are indicated in this are every taxpayer in this state. And, that reference point needs to be emphasized, I think, sometimes -- at least in the brief testimony that I've read so far.

Secondly, I'd love to hear -- as we speak through these -- as to how we can use assessments more effectively. One of the things I wonder often, and it may be a layman who is not involved in this day to day, is the

reaction time from an assessment, what's done, and how does it actually affect not only the individual child, but the school that's actually doing the teaching?

One other thing -- and I do know there are a number of proposals out there -- Mila, the Chairlady, was nice enough to reference those; but, also, within districts. Most of the stuff I've seen so far talks about district assessments, things like that. There are schools within districts in many cases, and how we analyze those, how we react, and how those parents understand that, as well as the taxpayers of that community, I think is also something I'd like us to keep in mind as we move forward.

I think we're all open to something better. The Chairlady mentioned it -- in a post-COVID world, we need to be a whole lot more flexible, not only so that you can have a more peaceful dinner, Chairlady--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: (laughter)

SENATOR CRYAN: --But, that parents and society alike can know that we're reacting where we need to be.

So, thanks very much for the opportunity to speak.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Senator.

Becky, would you please do the roll call, and then we'll start with Paula White, Executive Director of NJCAN, to be followed by Dr. Chris Teen-kin -- I'm not sure I'm saying that correctly -- Associate Professor of Education at Seton Hall University.

And, before you take the roll, I want to thank Becky and Ivy for putting today's meeting together. And, as always, we'll ask speakers to limit their remarks to five to seven minutes. Written testimonies are available to all on the New Jersey Legislature homepage, under "Publications."

Becky.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Thank you.

Senator Burgess.

SENATOR BURGESS: Present.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Senator O'Scanlon.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: I saw him.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Yes, he is here.

SENATOR O'SCANLON: Sorry about that.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Thank you.

SENATOR O'SCANLON: (indiscernible)

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Senator Testa.

I know Senator Testa is here as well.

SENATOR TESTA: Yes, I am on. Thank you.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Thank you.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Senator Thompson.

He's here.

Assemblyman Caputo.

Is here.

Assemblywoman Flynn.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FLYNN: Here.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Thank you.

Assemblywoman Matsikoudis. I know she's on her way.

As well as Assemblywoman Reynolds-Jackson, she is also on her way.

Assemblyman Simonsen--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN MATSIKOUDIS: Present.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Thank you.

Assemblyman Simonsen.

ASSEMBLYMAN SIMONSEN: I am on, thank you.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN WIMBERLY: Here.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Assemblywoman Jasey.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Present.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Thank you.

And, Senator Cryan.

SENATOR CRYAN: Here.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: All right, thank you very much.

And, we have quite an esteemed group of people to testify, and we're going to start with Paula White, Executive Director of JerseyCAN, followed by Christopher Tienken -- please correct me if I'm not saying that correctly -- Associate Professor from the Department of Education, Leadership Management, and Policy at Seton Hall University.

Paula.

**P A U L A L. W H I T E:** Thank you so much, Assemblymember Jasey, and good afternoon to the entire Committee.

I am grateful to be able to be here today to testify before you, and I thank you very much for your time.

I would like to start this afternoon by simply saying that a standardized assessment is a test that is administered and scored in a consistent manner. And, in a universe of schools -- a universe of schools is a dynamic universe with a myriad of variabilities. In New Jersey, for example,

curriculum is a local decision, and, so, what that means is that there could be as many different curricula as there are districts, and, in fact, there could even be multiple curricula within a particular school.

Within the State of New Jersey, also, quarterly or interim assessments, if administered at all, are made based on local decisions. We do have the Start Strong Assessment that the State Department did mandate, but those are not going to be administered quarterly and, in fact, if we have interim assessments, those are based on local decisions. And, so, within districts, schools make unique choices that align with their understanding of their community's needs vis a vis the resources that they have at their disposal.

And, then, at the building level, teachers are unique professionals who, within an established standard of delivery and care, they bring their own decisionmaking to the table. In fact, some research has told us that teachers make hundreds of decisions within a given school day. Everything from when to decide to take a break; to who to call on for a question; to what worksheet to use; to what activity to engage in; to what experiment -- what hands-on experiment students engage in; and so on. So, there are many, many variabilities in the universe of schools that exist. And, rightfully so.

And, so, I will return, then, to the definition of a standardized assessment, which is that it is a test administered and scored in a consistent manner. Given what I have shared with you about the variability within schools and the very legitimate variability within schools, one can see why there would be a benefit to having standardized assessments, and how it would give us information that other assessments cannot give us. And, to be clear, those other assessments are very important assessments, and, so, this is

not a zero-sum game. It is not that we should only give teacher-based tests in the classroom; or we should only give district-based tests that are decided at the district level; or we should only give standardized assessments. That is not the case.

Standardized assessments *cannot* replace teacher assessments at the classroom level, nor can they replace building-level assessments determined by the teacher, the school, or the district; nor are they designed to. However, what a standardized assessment can give us is information about students across our state who are being administered the same test under the same circumstances. We all know that an A in one teacher's class may not be the same as an A in another teacher's class. And, we probably remember that from our own school days where somebody says, "Oh, make sure that you take Algebra I from Ms. So-and-so, or Mr. So-and-so, because it will be easier." And, it doesn't necessarily mean that the teacher was any better or any worse, but there was a way in which their class was structured which yielded sort of different results and what those outcomes were.

And, so, a standardized assessment allows us to move past that noise and to be able to have apples-to-apples conversations about how our students are faring. To be clear: First and foremost, the value of a standardized assessment is to gain independent knowledge of each individual learner, independent of any comparisons to anyone else but that learner themselves. And, so, what we want to know is how is Paula doing, or how did Paula fare in a particular topic? We don't care about the student to her right or the student to her left in this moment; we just want to know how Paula did. And, we can compare how that student did to prior performance.

Secondly, then, we can compare within a school. We can say, “How did students do in a particular class, as compared to students in another class?” And, we can compare at the district level, and we can compare at the State level. So, comparisons are legitimate, but they must begin with comparisons looking at the student and comparing that student to their past performance.

And, once we dig--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Paula--

MS. WHITE: Yes?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Time. Can you--

MS. WHITE: OK -- yes, yes.

And, so, once we dig into that, we can go even more granular with like demographics and unlike demographics so that we can see if students who share the same characteristics are faring better or worse, and we can learn from places where students are faring better than we might expect based on their demographic profiles, so that we can learn from them.

The one last thing that I would like to say is that it is important for us to have full transparency about our tests in order to fully understand them. For example, our tests got cut scores. We have to know if the cut scores of the tests being administered this year are the same or different from last year. If we change the cut score to say, “Well, last year, students had to have a 50 in order to pass, but this year, they went through a rough patch, we’re going to lower that to a 45,” we need to know that so that we can have a full understanding when we’re doing an evaluation of what is going on.

So, standardized assessments are important. They're not the sole assessment, but they are a crucial and unique variable in understanding the health and knowledge of the students in our state.

Thank you so much for your time.

SENATOR CRYAN: You're muted, Mila.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Ah, technology, clearly, is not my strong suit.

Dr. Tienken.

**CHRISTOPHER TIENKEN, Ed.D.:** Yes, hi, good afternoon Senator Cryan and Assemblywoman Jasey, and honorable members of the Joint Committee.

My comments today are based on almost 29 years in education, 14 of which I spent as a teacher, assistant principal, director of curriculum, middle school principal, and assistant superintendent. For almost the last 15 years, I've been a professor of education leadership, management, and policy here in New Jersey, conducting research on curriculum and assessment at the local, state, national, and international levels. I've also been a visiting professor at two universities in Italy, where I lecture on international testing and education policy. I am also currently the National Research Professor in Residence for the American Association of School Administrators -- AASA -- and I assist them in conducting some of their national studies. I've been the Researcher of the Year for the College of Education at my university twice; had my research recognized by United States Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences; several of my books on education policy have won national awards. I was given the outstanding scholarship award from Kappa Delta Pi International education honors society. I've provided

testimony on issues related to assessment and curriculum in several states, including to this committee in May of 2019. To date, I've published eight books on education policy and over 125 articles; conducted dozens upon dozens of research presentations in mainstream speaking engagements. And, my testimony today includes information that has been previously published in peer-reviewed academic journals.

So, in addition to the federally mandated testing, New Jersey continues to voluntarily administer Start Strong, high school exit exams, making New Jersey students some of the most tested students in the country. And, overall, the large body of results on the usefulness of standardized tests suggest they are blunt and inaccurate measures of the quality of teaching and learning that take place in schools, and they've done nothing to address inequality of achievement -- described by some as the achievement gap.

Unfortunately, standardized tests, whether they be high school exit exams or any other standardized test, have no history of closing any type of gaps. If they did, New Jersey wouldn't have any gaps; as we've had high school exit exams for almost three decades; annual standardized testing in some form or another, for just as long. And, I think, surely, 30 years should be long enough for us to know whether an education-reform intervention works.

Standardized test results do not consistently measure student learning, and they can't accurately tell us what and how well students learn, or how much they know about a specific topic. The results tell us more about the social and economic conditions in which students live and grow than what they can know and do. That's because the tests are picking up the noise from students' lives, not their potential as human beings; not how much they learn;

not the kind of people they are; not their hopes, passions, or interests. And, this is all explained by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory.

So, simply put, standardized tests *do not* move past the noise of student background, which makes any comparisons flawed. For example, to demonstrate just how noisy standardized test results really are, colleagues and I and other researchers have conducted a series of studies in New Jersey, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Iowa, Michigan, Virginia, and Ohio, in which the results from standardized tests were predicted for schools and districts, knowing only a few demographic factors found in the U.S. Census data about the community served by the schools. To be clear, this doesn't mean money determines how much students learn. In fact, that couldn't be further from the truth. Study after study has demonstrated that students from poverty learn as much in the school year than students not in poverty; they just start in a different place. And, standardized tests are not measuring that.

Though some proponents of standardized tests claim that scores can be used to measure year-to-year academic growth, simply too much noise in the scores to be useful indicators of learning or teaching, and, in fact, the inventor of the student growth percentile -- that's the thing that's used right here in New Jersey -- Damian Betebenner said as much in his September 2011 article, yet here we are now in 2023 -- almost 2023 -- still using them, and still arguing over the facts.

New Jersey's test scores track very closely to per capita income in New Jersey's communities -- very closely. There's almost a perfect correlation. When looking at the results of test scores in New Jersey on a bar graph, it looks like a staircase. As community wealth rises, test scores rise. So, I ask, how could it be that the quality of hundreds of schools just so

happens to correlate to per capita income of the towns? Are the teachers in poorer towns incrementally worse teachers? The research-based answer to that is no, it's just that standardized test results are fundamentally flawed. They are primarily driven by out-of-school factors. Although some might not want to accept it, over time, assessments made by teachers are, in fact, better indicators of student achievement than standardized tests. High school GPA derived from teacher assessments is a better predictor of first-year college success and four-year persistence than the SAT itself. And, that's not me saying that. That comes directly from the yearly research of The College Board based on their own data from SAT takers. High school GPA is also less discriminatory against students from poverty and students of color than the SAT.

Further, standardized tests are not diagnostic; they can't possibly be, because a test must have a minimum of 20 to 25 questions per skill to be considered diagnostic. Standardized tests simply don't have that many questions. But, I guess the question I want to answer is, "Why do standardized tests end up measuring student background instead of knowledge and skills?" Well, that's because of the way they're designed. Most standardized tests are heavily text-based -- the tests require a lot of reading, even in the mathematics section. There's a very strong correlation between reading and the math on these tests. The main problem with text-heavy standardized tests is with the context and the situations of the questions. Those contexts and situations rely on life experience and background knowledge to answer them. In many cases, standardized tests include reading passages and questions, situations, that are not universally common. So, they include situations that are really, mostly, based on

contemporary suburban life and other context that requires students to have varied life experiences and background knowledge to successfully answer the questions.

And there's been several well-known experiments on this: The baseball experiment years ago, where they gave a bunch of middle school students -- they had them read a fictional story on baseball, and then they gave them a test, and, lo and behold, what they found was, regardless of reading level, regardless of reading ability, students with background knowledge about baseball did better on the test. Similar study done with over 3,500 high school students just two or three years ago -- again, the more background knowledge a student had, regardless of reading ability, the better they did on a test.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Dr. Tienken?

DR. TIENKEN: Yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Can I interrupt you for a moment?

DR. TIENKEN: Of course.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Senator Testa has a question.  
Senator.

SENATOR TESTA: Thank you.

I mean, I have a few questions, and I also have a statement, just because what I'm hearing I don't think addresses the real issue of learning loss that we're facing in the State of New Jersey.

When you look at the results from the recent NAP assessment, it is clear that our students are falling behind in their math and reading skills. And, it's abundantly clear: Eliminating testing does not fix that issue, it

simply obfuscates it, in my humble estimation. And, while the shift to the use of Smart Start was a way to stay in compliance with Federal requirements, it was also, as well, to get some common information about how our student learning was progressing. I think the question now becomes what role does Smart Start play in directing state resources, school instruction, district resources -- you know, all those pesky things that are necessary to effect real change and outcome.

So, I have a couple questions here. You know, Doctor, does the Smart Start predict performance on the state assessment?

DR. TIENKEN: So, I haven't seen data, and I'm not sure there's actually been studies done to suggest that.

Although, the issue with Smart Start and all standardized testing is exactly what I just described. Those tests aren't giving you an accurate measure of what students know and can do, because they are measuring background knowledge. They are highly predictable. When I mean highly predictable, Senator, I mean our prediction models predicted -- accounted -- for 50 to 75% of the test score based on student community factors. That's background knowledge.

SENATOR TESTA: Well, Doctor, look. I went to Vineland High School, I went to Vineland public schools, a part of Abbott District schools. I have one of my superintendents from Millville on right now.

I guess I'm just really confused. How are we supposed to gauge where our students are going if we can't have any standardized testing whatsoever? And, you know, I don't know that your--

DR. TIENKEN: So, Senator, let me--

SENATOR TESTA: --I don't know that your answer answered my question at all. I asked, does the Smart Start predict performance on the state assessment? That's what I asked.

DR. TIENKEN: Senator, I haven't seen independent research. And, when I contact the State and the testing officials to get simple data like standard error, standard deviations, and things like that, they don't release those things.

So, I can't tell you that, because we can't get the data to run those models. What I can tell you is, in addition to the oral comments I made today, I did send the Committee two articles and a longer version of this testimony, which answers your questions about what we could be doing.

SENATOR TESTA: How are we addressing the honesty gap with our NAP performance and the promoted quality of our schools from the state?

DR. TIENKEN: Well, that's a different question. The NAP -- first of all, the NAP results are based on samples of students. So, the NAP results are nowhere near designed to give you an idea of how individual students are doing.

SENATOR TESTA: So, Doctor, you talked about--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Senator, excuse me.

I'm going to interrupt you here, because I want everyone to have a chance to present, and I want everyone to have a chance to present questions. So, perhaps if we hear from some of our folks who are in the trenches, our superintendents and others who are on my list, that might answer some of your questions, and if not, we'll come back to those questions.

SENATOR TESTA: I appreciate that, because I would really like to hear from people that are on the ground, on the front lines, rather than, you know, in an ivory tower of academia.

So, thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: I think it's important to have a certain level of understanding of the environment, if you will. But, shortly, we will get to practitioners in the field, all right?

Thank you.

Professor, do you want to wind up? Where are you? Did I cut you off?

DR. TIENKEN: Sure.

I would just like to provide some comments about standardized testing for English language learners and--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: OK.

DR. TIENKEN: --and students with disabilities. Because, the results are not accurate for either of those groups, either, for various reasons.

And, again, I submitted articles -- two articles for you, peer-reviewed articles with the research on this, and the comments that my testimony that I submitted is much longer than I'm able to provide orally today. Which goes into deep detail and answers Senator Testa's questions about what we could be doing, and why we should be doing things differently.

But, the ultimate issue here is, standardized tests -- using standardized test results for high-stakes decisions, like we do in New Jersey -- does little to inform the system of education and, using those results actually ensure that certain students -- certain groups of students -- will have to jump through more hoops and pay a higher price to graduate than other

groups of students. And, again, what they do is, students who need the most get the least, and they're doing more work than everybody else.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Right.

DR. TIENKEN: Because we're not really measuring what those students know or can do.

Thank you very much.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Professor, I think we could have this conversation go on all day and still not be done with it.

So, I thank you for that, and I urge my colleagues to take a look at the information that has been provided as background to this discussion this morning.

Let's see. Stan, where are you? Stan Karp, can you hold up, and allow Jennie Lamon and Deborah Cornavaca testify? They have some time constraints.

(Affirmative response muted)

Thank you, I appreciate that. So, next up, I would like to ask Jennie Lamon, Assistant Director of Government Affairs for New Jersey Principals and Supervisors, who will introduce Dr. Arlene Rogo, President of NJ Principals and Supervisors.

Thank you.

**JENNIE LAMON:** Thank you very much, Madam Chairwoman; members of the Joint Committee. And, thank you for inviting the perspective of the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association.

As Assemblywoman Jasey said, I am Jennie Lamon, I am the Assistant Director of Government Relations for NJPSA, and, it's my pleasure

to introduce to you today Dr. Arlene Rogo, the current Board President of the NJPSA, and proud Principal of Neptune High School.

Dr. Rogo is in her 41<sup>st</sup> year as a New Jersey educator. She began her career in Bergen County as a teacher in middle and high school, and then she gained administrative experience as a high school-grade administrator, a middle school department chairperson, a K-8 curriculum supervisor, and a K-8 vice principal. She has also served as principal of Neptune Middle School, Summerfield Elementary School, and Midtown Community Elementary School. Dr. Rogo is also a coordinator of the Monmouth County Elementary-Middle Schools Administrators Association.

So, clearly, this speaker comes to you today with a wealth of knowledge and experience as a practitioner in the field, and she's got great insight on the issue of student assessments. We're thrilled that she's able to join us today and to speak on behalf of NJPSA's statewide membership.

And, thank you again so much for the time courtesy, we do have a time constraint.

Dr. Rogo.

**A R L E N E M. R O G O, Ed.D.:** Thank you, Jennie, for that nice introduction.

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Jasey, and members of the Joint Committee on Public Schools.

I do want to say, I started my career when I was, like, 12. Because it makes it sound, after 40-something years. (laughter)

But, it's that experience and the perspective of NJPSA membership across the state that I bring to the discussion this afternoon on the subject of student assessment in education.

As an instructional leader at the school building level, I can see firsthand the importance of student assessment as an integral part of the instructional process. To be an effective tool, our assessments must be linked to the New Jersey's learning standards, our local curriculum, and strong instructional practice in the classroom.

And, just as a doctor relies upon many datapoints, blood tests, MRIs, other functional data to diagnose a patient, educators also rely on multiple datapoints, including assessment results, teacher observations, and more, to identify learning issues and respond appropriately.

Teacher engagement and firsthand observation of students within the instructional context provides critical information to the student learning process. And, these factors -- assessment data, a strong curriculum, and strong instructional practices -- provide the key ingredients to effective learning and student learning.

However, the use of assessments must be balanced with other critical factors in the learning process, including such basics as the amount of instructional time that is available during the school day. The amount of instructional time has been significantly threatened by curriculum updates, mandates, and assessment requirements. NJPSA members believe we must be strategic in our use of the state assessments, streamlining and targeting student assessment to appropriate times within the school calendar, and avoiding duplication and over-testing.

This fall, for example, the NJDOE suddenly required all public school districts to administer Start Strong assessments across grade levels and subject areas. The surprise requirement provided little added value and information to school districts, since all districts had just administered more

comprehensive state assessments to students only a few months earlier, and even though we had not received the results of the testing as of that point. It also interfered with every educator's goal of welcoming back students, creating the culture and climate for the building, and setting a positive learning climate for students who have experienced so much upheaval, trauma, and interruptions to the instructional time.

But, despite these challenges, assessment is so important. The benefits depend upon the type of assessment and its purpose, and I will give you a building-level perspective: Teachers utilize assessments regularly within their classrooms to understand the level of student understanding and students' ability to apply subject matter content in a problem-solving context. The information assists the teacher in refining his or her instructional approach, modifying curricula if needed, setting the pace of instruction, and providing instructional assistance and interventions to individual students as needed. Learning challenges can be shared with parents, who can work in partnership with the teacher to assist the student. These teacher-developed diagnostic assessments are among the most important and effective tools we use to assist students in their learning throughout the school year.

School districts also use a broad system of benchmark assessments to review the progress in student learning as the year progresses. Again, the assessments provide important information to educators, students, and their parents on the learning levels of individual students. But, benchmark assessments provide important data on instruction across curriculum and grade levels. The information is analyzed locally by teachers and instructional leaders during the school year to fine tune instructional practices, pacing of the lessons, curriculum, and school-based interventions.

State-level standardized assessments are another component of our assessment system, that seek to measure not only students' learning growth, but also school system accountability under Federal legal requirements. Our NJSLA tests are administered annually to all public schools in the state in grades 3-8, and once in high school in language arts, math, and science. We are currently giving those assessments this week. These assessments provide comparative information on student performance across subgroups of students within and across school systems. The test results are also used to identify districts in need of improvement where there's a real need for systemic support and assistance to address comprehensive learning gaps within the district. These are important functions of system accountability, but the results have no high-stakes outcomes for individual student scores below expectations.

The test results and other student performance measures in the evaluation of individual teachers and principals under our educator evaluation law Teach New Jersey, and since the pandemic put a temporary hold on state testing requirements, the use of outdated standardized test scores to evaluate current educator performance is questionable, as a fair measure of an educator's performance. And, this is an issue that does require further consideration.

One of the things that my district did last year at the middle school, and now currently is being done in all schools in the district, is the creation of a data team. We have so much data to use on student performance, and it gets to the point where you wonder which data are we actually going to use. So, those data teams actually identified key strategies

that could be used in all grade levels to address specific skills that we found were lacking on the test scores.

A final component of the formal assessment landscape is the statutory requirement that high school students pass the NJGPA, our legislatively mandated do-or-die graduation exit exam. Students who do not pass the assessment cannot receive a high school diploma unless they demonstrate proficiency. The process is stressful, labor-intensive, and time consuming, and the purpose of the exam is to hold students individually accountable for meeting all learning standards. But, the test requirement also, arguably, provides a level of assurance to the public that the high school diploma in our state signifies that a student has, in fact, met the core proficiency marks. But, the reality is that current high school seniors have demonstrated proficiency at other points in their high school career; they also have a lot on their plates. If intending to pursue higher education, they are taking an SAT, ACT; completing college applications; assessments that are more comprehensive and challenging; they're moving onto the world of work; they may be taking equally challenging professional licensing exams. They must meet state graduation standards by passing the required course, and they've also been assessed over the course of their educational career in each course and classroom.

NJPSA, as an association, is currently reviewing A4639 in the contents of today's learning environment in New Jersey. As we seek board input from our members and review the educational research, we will share our recommendations as the legislation moves forward.

I would like to thank you personally and professionally for allowing me the opportunity to address how student assessment is used in New Jersey schools.

Thank you, and thank you for the time consideration.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: I thank you. I think you have shed some light that we need to be aware of.

Senator Testa, are you still on? (no response)

All right.

SENATOR CRYAN: Well, can I ask a quick question then?

SENATOR TESTA: I'm still on.

SENATOR CRYAN: OK, my bad. We'll go right back to you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Senator Testa, and then Senator Cryan.

I wanted to share with the Joint Committee a memo from the Department of Education that was sent to all local education agency leads. Part of it, it's in your -- we're sending it as part of the background for today.

The Strong Start assessments were not designed to predict future student performance on the NJSLA. They were developed in response to learning disruption, and, specifically, inform -- to specifically inform instruction moving forward.

So, I think one of the things that I'm hearing, too, and I've felt for many years as a board member and as a parent, and now a grandparent, of public school children, we really need to think about how we use our time and use it to the best -- use it for the best outcomes for our students. Because, time is limited, and the more time we spend testing, the less time we spend teaching.

And, so, I will now pass this onto Senator Cryan, and then to Deb Cornavaca.

SENATOR CRYAN: Just a real quick follow up, because I know Arlene isn't going to be here long, so I apologize for that.

The data team -- I just wanted to understand, how is that data team assembled, how is it done, and could you just take a moment and explain? One of the things I want to get out of this conversation today is to understand what's done from an assessment. You touched a little bit upon it, I was hoping you could just take a moment or two. How are they assembled, and what kind of steps do they take to react to the data that's in front of them?

DR. ROGO: So, one of the things-- Last year, I was principal at the middle school. And, we had created a data team where teachers from different grade levels, subject areas, had a true interest in analyzing the data from tests. So, we took several different things. As a school, we were using Achieve 3000 which was a program to increase Lexile levels, reading levels, for students. We also took standardized tests.

And, the teachers began to really dig into the data to see what specific skills did many of the students have difficulty with. You know, there's also the issue of terminology where, if you're asking, let's say, on a test to analyze something, a student may know how to do something, but not necessarily understand the term "analyze," or, if it's used in one classroom one way and another classroom a different way--

SENATOR CRYAN: I know, with the doctor's baseball thing, right?

DR. ROGO: Yes, so, it's kind of, you know, some teacher might say, "Synthesize this." If the student doesn't know what that word means, they may actually know the right answer, but because they don't know what the terminology is, they can't do that.

So, one of the things they looked at was, for example, compare and contrast. So, that might have been one skill in a particular grade level a number of students did not know how to do correctly. So, the data team actually developed "skill of the month," where they would say, "OK, so, on a sixth-grade team, during the month of March, every one of the teachers -- science, social studies, language arts, math -- they're all going to do activities within their content area of comparing and contrasting."

SENATOR CRYAN: OK.

DR. ROGO: And, maybe another month, it might have been summarizing.

So, it was one way of starting to go a little deeper into the data.

SENATOR CRYAN: To your knowledge, are data teams -- Mila, this will be my last question -- to your knowledge, are data teams a common practice throughout the state, or are they fairly, for lack of a better way to put it, unique at the moment?

DR. ROGO: I don't know if they are in the state, quite honestly. The middle school last year was one of the schools that had an annual school plan, so we were able to use money from the plan to budget for those positions. This year, the district decided that it was important enough that they would do it at every school.

SENATOR CRYAN: Thank you very much.

Sorry, Mila; thanks.

DR. ROGO: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, I think that was a really concrete example that you gave us in terms of some of the difficulties of relying on standardized tests, or-- Assemblyman Simonsen has a question, and so does Assemblyman Testa.

ASSEMBLYMAN SIMONSEN: Yes, thank you, Chairwoman. I'll make it -- I'll be brief.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: OK.

ASSEMBLYMAN SIMONSEN: I would like to hear the-- I have, actually, the superintendent just made all the points for me, I won't waste anybody's time, because she pretty much hit them all.

A bill coming up getting rid of SGOs, abolishing SGOs -- which are student growth objectives. I would just like to get a quick opinion from the superintendent, if I may. And, I'm someone who has been involved in education for 30 years -- I don't have 41 in, but I've worked in all capacities for a long time. And, I know on both sides, as far as administrator's end, teachers, it is really time consuming. It takes away from a lot of the time that teachers have to actually teach kids, and it's been an overburdening assessment for both teachers and students.

So, I'd, real quick, just like to hear an opinion on SGOs and I'm working hard to get rid of them.

And, Chairwoman, if you'd -- I'd love to have you on the bill, so I'll talk to you about it later, but I'll get off and let other people talk.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Assemblyman.

DR. ROGO: Are you asking me about SGOs?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Yes.

ASSEMBLYMAN SIMONSEN: Yes.

DR. ROGO: Oh, I'm sorry--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: And, then, followed by--

DR. ROGO: --I'm not a superintendent, so, that's OK.

ASSEMBLYMAN SIMONSEN: Don't curse, or anything, but give us your opinion.

DR. ROGO: Never.

So, SGOs are very time consuming for administrators as well. I'm not, you know-- The question you're asking me, I'm not answering as an NJPSA rep, I'm just answering as a building-level principal. They are very time consuming. Very often, they can be written in such a way that you're going to get the answer that you want based on how you've worded the SGO. And, it's not -- very often, there are outliers within the process that can also skew the results of the SGO as well.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you. Thank you for that, Arlene.

Hang on a second.

ASSEMBLYMAN SIMONSEN: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: I know there are some questions pending. Deb Cornavaca has a time constraint. Deb, if you're still on, would you like to give your testimony, and then we'll get back to this discussion?

**DEBORAH CORNAVACA:** I would be most grateful, thank you, Chairwoman, and I'll also rejoin as soon as I can get out of the other meeting.

Good afternoon, and thank you all very much for the opportunity to be here representing NJEA. I think I will be as succinct as I can; there is submitted written testimony to supplement.

The first thing I would like to say is I am going to focus my comments today on the exit exam as a specific example of where we have an objection. But, before I get into that, I want to remind everybody that, as has been stated previously by educators with more expertise and experience than I have in the classroom, that our members assess our students all the time in a variety of ways. Sometimes, they're unaware they're being assessed; other times, it's a quiz, a test, an essay, an exam. We support assessments, and we use them strategically throughout the education of our students.

But, we do object to the use of high-stakes standardized tests, and, in specific, that would be the exit exam that I'm going to speak about today. They are what we would consider to be not only not useful, but detrimental, and antithetical to the pursuit of justice.

And, at this moment, I just want to acknowledge the contributions of Senator Ron Rice towards this Committee's work, towards all of us sitting together and having these types of conversations, and towards what I know we have a shared goal of equity and justice in our educational system. He has been such a magnificent influence on the work that we do, and, while he may not be sitting at your virtual dais today, I feel he is here present with us, and our work will continue to honor the work that he has done and his legacy.

So, let me just say two quick things before I focus on the exit exam. The first is regarding Start Strong. The exam that was brought about as a result of the pandemic wave at the Federal level, and to use to measure

where students are at the start of a school year, concerned that they had not met the standards that have been set in previous years, while getting virtual education. Start Strong is not an exam we should be using anymore. It was not properly field tested or constructed. It was done so under duress of the pandemic. It was required this year; we do not think it should have been, and we hope that this Committee will join us in calling upon the Governor and the Commissioner of Education, as we have spoken to both of them already, to make sure that Start Strong does not remain as a requirement at the start of the year. It is time consuming; it interferes with the relationship that our educators are building with their students, and the trust that they're building; and it interferes with the assessments that they use specific to their curriculum to meet state standards to assess where our students are at.

The second thing I'd like to raise is that the NJDOE is in the process of procuring a vendor to develop the test for the Federal testing requirements. We encourage this Committee to insert yourselves and be part of that discussion and that process. As they seek a vendor to construct the next round of Federally-mandated tests, they will have choices to make. And, I want to remind all of us that as expert as some of the testing companies may be, the more they test the more they earn. They have a for-profit model. We should not be subject to their recommendations to over-test our children. We should be meeting the Federal requirement of what is necessary, and we should stop with that and be done. So, we encourage you to get the DOE to have these discussions with you, because this will be a pivotal planning for the next five years of standardized tests from the Federal requirement.

So, let me turn quickly to the issue of exit exams. And, let me just start by actually one more thing. If you haven't ever been to a school

during testing, you haven't visited, I highly recommend you do. You will understand from the moment you enter the door that that entire school community knows that standardized testing is going on, and the disruption is far more than the two hours a day. They move classrooms, they move teachers, they hire substitutes, they close down rooms for security purposes. It is incredibly disruptive, for days, to the learning environment, far beyond the hours that we ascribe to the actual testing. So, I would implore all the Committee members, if you have never visited a school during standardized testing -- for example, in the spring -- please ask. They may or may not let you for security reasons, because these tests are so highly guarded, but I would encourage you to do so, because it really opens your eyes.

But, with respect to the exit exam, I want to be clear that the NJEA is advocating for requesting your support for the elimination of the high school exit exam, currently known as NJGPA.

Our first objection -- and I'll only go through the five quickly -- is that no single test should be allowed to determine a student's qualifications for graduation, and that's what NJGPA is: a singularly high-stakes test that tells students, despite the fact they've advanced year over year through curriculum and grades and exams to their junior year, if you do not pass this test, you cannot graduate. I am not sure how that is logical or fair as a message to give our students, given the whole that we ask them to learn in high school and in grade school and in middle school. And, in fact, I would argue that, based upon the processes we have in place, we all know it's not fair. Because, the truth is, if they don't pass it the first time, we have them take it again. And, they will take it again until we move to the portfolio as an alternative.

Because we know, as adults, it is simply not fair to say that, despite all your successes -- and, some of them may have been struggles -- to get to where you are, that you could be told you cannot get a diploma because you do not pass this test. So, I question our logic as adults to say we should use this test, but we know it's not fair or logical, therefore we will make you re-test, and then have a portfolio to try to help you graduate. At best, it's time consuming, it's stressful; at worst, we have people who have dropped out and get frustrated and leave without a diploma when they should have and deserve to have it.

So, the second reason is we know this is an inappropriate test, and the data -- and, Dr. Tienken and others, and Stan, I'm sure you will speak to this -- speak an overwhelmingly singular voice on this that standardized tests are a better marker of socioeconomic and resources than a test of the student's knowledge, and that which we judge to be most useful for future success. Critical-thinking skills; the ability to articulate an idea; the ability to solve problems; resiliency through challenges. Those are the things we find we value, and that is not what we're testing. But, worse than that, we find that it disproportionately hinders students of color; our English language learners; our students with disabilities; and they are the ones most frequently forced to test and retest and struggle through this and *maybe* get to a portfolio.

And, that is the definition of a structural and systemic racism. And, we should not be allowed to perpetuate that in an educational system that we collectively know and need to strive towards justice and equity and closing of the gaps. We do not need further use of assessments to demonstrate, as the doctor previously said. It is a socioeconomic ZIP code

issue more than it is the students' knowledge and potential of future growth and success.

Our third objection -- it was probably already stated, but I'll be quick on this -- is that a high school exit exam administered is not a good indicator of students' overall abilities or potential. It's a very narrow lane tested.

My fourth -- and I only have one more after this, Chairwoman -- is that it is an arbitrary decision on where the cut scores is. And Ms. White, Dr. White, spoke to this early on. There was a recent kerfuffle in the State Board of Education regarding 25 points. Realize that it is an arbitrarily decided cut score, not by educational experts, on whether or not a child should get a diploma. We should not allow for that level of arbitrary decisionmaking by a state board, by testing companies and others who are not in the classroom and not in the schools to determine to whether somebody gets an agenda -- a diploma.

And finally -- and this has been touched upon, so I'll only just mark it -- the diversion of resources is extreme, onerous, and detrimental to education and we should not perpetuate it, because where the money goes speaks to our values and priorities. When we put money into a high school exit exam instead of lifting up these children for success, we are telling them that their test scores matter more than what we have spent the K-12 years telling them, which is a well-rounded education, critical thinking; all those things matter the most. That, again, is a piece of structural racism, that if we allow to continue, we are diverging away from the equity and justice that we seek.

So, we ask you to support the elimination of the high school exit exam. We are but one of 10 states that continue to use this, and we hope that you will support the legislation and move it this year so we do not continue to have our children tested at this high-stakes level in their junior year, telling them -- giving them -- a message antithetical to that which we ultimately want them to achieve, and success in life.

Chairwoman, members of the Committee, thank you very much.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you--

SENATOR CRYAN: Chairlady, can I ask--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Yes, absolutely--

SENATOR CRYAN: --one thing for the rest of this discussion, if somebody has it and I don't.

Do we have data points on how many folks take the high school proficiency, the -- whatever Debbie called it, GPA -- and how many fail that will all have the same data point that we're listening to? How many fail the first time, how many fail the second time, and therefore go to portfolio.

Does anybody have that, ice cold facts, that we can all have the same thing?

MS. CORNAVACA: I believe Dr. Karp will.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: And, he's next.

SENATOR CRYAN: I apologize, Mila, but--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: No, don't apologize.

This is a tough subject, and, you know, I think that this conversation -- this discussion -- is worth the time that we're putting into it. And, I think that we're going to have to put more time into it. And, I think, perhaps, always looking for the silver lining -- perhaps the silver lining in the

pandemic is that it gives us a chance to step back and reevaluate some of the things that we take for granted that we do as a matter of course.

So, thank you, Deborah, and next up is-- Oh, Senator Testa and Senator Thompson, I know you both have questions for Dr. Rogo, but she had to leave. That's why I moved her up. But, if you can put your questions, if you can pose them to some of our guests that come up that haven't spoken yet, and if that doesn't work then submit them to us and we will ask her to answer those questions for you.

So, thank you. Stan Karp, where are you Stan? Thank you for your patience, and you are next; you have the floor.

**S T A N K A R P:** Thank you, Assemblywoman Jasey, and Senator Cryan.

Senator Cryan, I will try to answer your question, specifically, in the course of my presentation.

My name is Stan Karp, I am the Director of the Secondary Reform Project for Education Law Center. Before I came to ELC, I was a high school teacher for 30 years at John F. Kennedy High School in Paterson. During that time, I helped students prepare for an alphabet soup of New Jersey high school exit tests, from MBF to HSPT 9 to HSPT 11 to HSPA, to SRA, to OSA, to PARCC, to NJSLA. And, if you know those initials, you spent a lot of time in New Jersey high schools.

And, a lot of the answer to Senator Cryan's question begins when the HSPA -- a test that was given up to about, I think it was 2010-2011 -- has about a 80-90% pass rate for the first time on the ELA section, and about a 70-80% pass rate on the math. And, that was replaced with PARCC. And, PARCC had a pass rate around 50-60% on the ELA, and about 40-50% on

the math. And, that, actually, is the beginning of about 10 years of chaos in New Jersey graduation assessments.

And, today, I would like to talk to you about the latest of these tests, with some specific information about the NJGPA, and about why it's time for New Jersey to end its 40-year-old policy of exit testing. And, by exit testing, I'm referring to the policy of tying a high school diploma to a score on a specific test, even if the student has met all the core credit, attendance, service, and other requirements for graduation.

The NJGPA was a new assessment that was given for the first time last March to the class of 2023 -- our current seniors. The Department of Education has not released much information about this test. An OPRA request from ELC for the technical reports from the Technical Advisory Committee on the creation of the test, and for information from New Meridian, the test vendor, was denied. Another OPRA request last September for the results of the March administration was also denied. But, ELC knew that the Department had given the results to the districts, and we were able to find some district reports that included partial state results.

Multiple district reports compared district results to state results, and they confirmed that, statewide, just 39% of the students who took the NJGPA last March passed the ELA section of the test, and just 50% passed the math. Typically, there are about 100,000 students in the graduating senior class across the state. So, we're talking about 50,000-60,000 students who did not pass the test the Department, the State, are going to make a graduation requirement.

Moreover, these low passing rates were directly connected to a last-minute decision by the State Board to raise the passing score -- or the cut

score -- on the new exam, and to reject the lower benchmark recommended by both the test vendor and the Department's own assessment officials. The State Board set a passing or cut score of 750, instead of the recommendation of 725. The ELC estimates that that reduced the passing rate by about 15-20% on each section of the test.

But, even more concerning, the passing score set by the State Board was not based on any publicly available data or test results. In the past, several years of field testing were typically required before rolling out a new graduation test. The Department would typically release detailed charts showing the results of the field testing; this, aggregated by student sub-groups and by district factor groups. Such data was publicly available, for example, when the Board (indiscernible) making earlier versions of the State biology test, an algebra test, and the controversial PARCC exam, a graduation requirement.

But, none of this was done with NJGPA. Fortunately, the Legislature stepped in quickly, fighting the pressing challenges of the pandemic and the worsening student mental-health crisis. Assemblyman Caputo and Senator Turner introduced legislation that suspended the testing requirement for the class of 2023, and directed the Department to use the new exam as a field test only. The legislation passed 73-1 in the Assembly, and 40-0 in the Senate, and was signed by Governor Murphy in July. The fifth legislation is the only thing preventing a graduation crisis right now for current seniors. If the legislation hadn't suspended the requirement, the NJGPA results indicate that somewhere between 50,000-60,000 students would be taking additional tests to satisfy the requirement and try to graduate on time.

But, the legislation *only* covers the class of 2023. The test is scheduled to be given again this March as a graduation requirement for the class of 2024. And, similar results could mean that again next year, 60,000 current juniors will need multiple additional assessments to satisfy the testing requirement to receive a diploma. And, it has been said, it is the students who struggle with standardized tests who have to take the most tests repeatedly when a standardized -- the first standardized test is not passed.

Furthermore, the State Board, to date, has not even adopted new cut scores for the alternative assessments, which can be used as alternatives for students who don't pass the New Jersey GPA. The previous cut scores required with the graduating class of 2022, because they were actually connected to the court case, which ELC had successfully challenged the old graduation rules back in 2018. The agreement that was in place kept the rules that had existed at the time in place for five years, through the graduation class of 2022. But, now, we are in a new situation, and there are no substitute cut scores that the Board has adopted. There's even been talk at the State Board about raising those cut scores on the substitute assessments, as it did with the NJGPA. And, this would only narrow the hoop that the exit testing made and asked our students to jump through.

And, again, one consequence of this is that right now, in the middle of their junior year, students in the class of 2024 *still* do not know what they have to do to graduate. When the State Board raised the passing score, they promised that the Department would provide a public analysis of the March results by the Board's September meeting, and that it would make a recommendation to either maintain or modify the cut score. But again, none of that has happened. Under public pressure, the Department,

reportedly, will release more assessment data tomorrow, but there is no indication as to whether or not this will include more NJGPA results, or whether the board will revise the cut score, or adopt the missing cut score to the alternative assessment.

At a minimum, the Board should do both: adopt the lower cut score that was originally recommended by the Department and readopt the previous cut scores for the substitute assessment. But, to reliably avoid another recurring mess that the Department and the State Board have repeatedly made of the graduation rules, the Legislature needs to step in again. It needs to finally end exit testing for high school diplomas in New Jersey. New Jersey already has more testing than ever. The NJSLA assessments, by themselves, exceed the requirements of Federal accountability under ESSA. ESSA requires one math and one ELA assessment at the high school grade; NJSLA has four, and that doesn't even count NJ (indiscernible). We also have Start Strong and NAP.

NJGPA is an unnecessary, wasteful layer of state testing that does not satisfy any Federal requirements and simply creates hurdles for the most vulnerable students, who already have too much testing and too little learning time. This test adds no instructional value; it does not provide any information to teachers; and it is going to have too-negative effects on high schools across the country in addition to that. It's going to lower the graduation rate by about five points. The Department of Education -- U.S. Department of Education -- came in in 2021 and ordered the NJ DOE to change the way it calculates the graduation rates.

Because the state has an exit test, the Federal government said, they can no longer count special education students who have IEPs that

exempt them from passing the test in order to graduate. There are about 5,000 such students each year. Now, the Department, the U.S. Department of Education, has said those 5,000 students cannot be included in the official graduation rate, which is going to cost the state's graduation rate -- which has been a source of much pride -- drop by about five points. It is also going to result in an increase in the number of schools who are classified for intervention under ESSA. Because, the graduation rate of the student subgroup -- special education students who will no longer be allowed to be included in the official graduation rate -- is going to drop below the level that triggers Federal intervention.

New Jersey has had a dozen different exit tests since the state law mandating one was passed. Each promised to ensure that high school graduates would be well prepared for college and careers and citizenship, and each test failed, because that's not something that standardized tests can do. That's a job for educators; for families; for communities; for all of us. High school exit tests don't reliably measure what they portend to measure -- academic ability, college readiness, mastery of standards -- and they don't measure at all qualities we all want high school graduates to have: responsibility, resilience, critical thinking, empathy. New Jersey moved in the right direction a few years ago when it increased the number of high-level math courses and lab sciences that students needed to take to graduate. But, tying those diplomas to a standardized test score hurts the most valuable students, and does not add anything to their education.

Exit testing for high school graduation is a failed policy that doesn't help the students who pass, and hurts the students who don't. Today, the number of states using exit tests for high school graduation is down from

a high of 27 in the early 2000s, to 10 or 11. In recent years, more than a dozen states have repealed their exit test mandates. It is long past time that New Jersey do the same.

We really would like to express our specific support for the A4639, S3308, which would keep a test that (indiscernible) for what they can provide, but end the high school exit testing policy.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Stan, it's great to see you after so long. I look forward to seeing you in person soon.

I know that Assemblywoman Flynn has a question, and, so, I'd like to ask you to ask your question now, and you'll be followed by Tony Trongone from Millville.

And, I thank you for your patience.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FLYNN: Thank you, Chairwoman, and thank you to all the people who are participating today.

My question is, how many students are we talking about who are required to sit, take this exam, and then are failing and not graduating? Because, it's my understanding that it kind of almost-- If you're not able to pass this exit exam, you're kind of put in the portfolio category, and then you're still graduating. It's not like we're not graduating students, isn't that correct?

MR. KARP: The numbers are hard to track. Can I answer that question?

About four years ago, there was some pathway data that suggested that as many as 2,000-3,000 students may be lost. What happens in a lot of cases is that students who struggle in school run into certain

obstacles, and, at some point, they opt out -- especially if they are not able to, you know, jump over the hurdle.

So, I cannot answer your question specifically, as to how many students are denied a diploma or leave school because they didn't pass this test. I *can* tell you that one of the things that happens under the consent decree, is that students could use any of a variety of alternative assessments available to them, in order to meet the--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FLYNN: Yes. And, you know, representing students, I have personal awareness of it. I'll say it: My own kid would have gotten a portfolio as a special ed. student. I never felt like there was a high-stakes issue with dealing with special ed. students.

So, the problem I have with-- And, I get if the test is not a good barometer of student success; I don't think it should be, it's not valuable. Agreed. But, I do think it's fair to parents, to school districts, and to the community to know whether or not what's going on in that building *is* building success.

And, I don't think it's fair. And, I know we're going to have this; we're probably already seeing the data that shows these kids are graduating high school and then they're going off to college; and people are writing checks for \$30-60,000 a year; and they're very unprepared for college.

So, wouldn't it be better if we could catch them while they're still younger? There is value to some type of testing at the high school level. And, as a former board member, one of the things we struggled with as a board is that there wasn't a lot of standardized data being available to us as board members to figure out, "What did our students need to have success on that next level?" Because it kind of-- If we had a lot of students taking the Algebra

I exam in eighth grade, by ninth grade -- a lot of them, done; we were done. So, after that, you were not tested on the math level. And, then, it's a big surprise when that SAT test is taken and that comes home, and it's like, "Oh my God," you know, my kid is -- everyone is paying.

The people -- to your equity point -- the people that could afford it send their kids off to try and get an SAT, and they're still behind, but they're trying to kind of cover up what kind of could have got caught before that. But, then the equity issue is kids that don't have access to that.

So, I think we have to find that right balance of, "Is there a test that can adequately measure where we are?" It's not high stakes to sit and take a test. You have to take a test to figure out where you are. We understand, maybe special ed. students shouldn't be subject to this. But, as a parent of a special ed. student, I want to know where my kid is so I know what I need to do so that kid can be successful, because the stakes are even higher if I don't know that.

MR. KARP: Assemblywoman--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FLYNN: So, there's a lot of these issues.

The thing I have a problem with: Until we have the data -- which, I'm sure, we all share in the frustration right now that we don't have the data from last spring to speak to and inform anyone's decisions. Teachers; superintendents; principals; legislators. The fact we don't have that is inexcusable, because we can't figure out what to do next without that data. Or, we should just, like, get rid of it and move on. Because I don't know why -- because it's not fair to those kids; it's not fair to those teachers; it's not fair to those school districts who stopped everything, to your point.

Someone spoke about the impact it does have, I think it was the NJEA, who said the impact it has on the school building when you run these tests. It's disruptive. It's damn right disruptive.

So, what are we doing? We're going to get this data. One day, we're going to trip along -- it'll probably be a Friday, it'll probably be an afternoon; I'm going to guess it's going to be sometime right before Christmas. We're going to drop this data and we're going to find out where we are as a State. And, then what are we going to do? We wasted -- I'm sorry, I'm passionate about this -- we wasted time, so much precious time, by not looking at it.

So, I think we need that data, and I think we, as a group-- If the experts believe this past data, this exit test, is not a predictor of where students are, and it's not helpful, then we are wasting time by not finding out what will do it. And, that's my frustration. That's what-- But we need more data. We need to know who-- As a former board member, I do believe we graduated everyone and people who didn't pass, they took the portfolio. No one was having-- The thing that people are panicked about is that they wake up or they sit down in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade -- maybe even 12<sup>th</sup> grade -- they sit for an SAT, they get that SAT score back, and that tells you you're not ready for college. But, they're still going, and people are writing checks and sending kids to college. Or, students are incurring debt and going to college. Despite the fact they went to high school for four years, they're not ready.

So, that's the conversation we need to have, and that's -- that's why we need more data. Chairman, respectfully, I think if we can get data -- like, real strong data points -- of how many kids took the test passed, that's one column; next column, who didn't pass, who got the portfolio. And, then,

out of that group, who got the portfolio. And, I think you're going to get right to a very close graduation rate. If they didn't graduate, it might have been because of something else; I don't know, I don't have the data.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Assemblywoman, I hear you loud and clear, and we will follow up.

Stan, would you like to give any parting thoughts for the Assembly with these questions? And, we'll follow up with Superintendent Trongone next.

MR. KARP: Just a quick thing, I'm sorry, Superintendent, I will be really quick.

I just want to make it clear that we do totally support the continuation of the assessments. NJSOA has an English I test; an English II test; an Algebra test; a Geometry test. Whatever data standardized tests can provide is well provided. What we need to stop is the NJDOE sending home notices like they did with this specific test for the NJGPA, saying that if your student got a 751, they are ready for high school graduation, and if they got a 749, they are not. That has to stop; that's high school exit testing.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Stan.

ASSEMBLYMAN CAPUTO: Mila.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Yes.

ASSEMBLYMAN CAPUTO: Assemblyman Caputo; can I make a comment, or a question, or whatever?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Certainly.

ASSEMBLYMAN CAPUTO: First of all, I think -- let's look at what's happened. What have we learned because of the COVID travesty that has occurred in our schools and our society? What we learned is that our

kids were devastated. They were absorbed with anxiety; depression; trips to the hospital; suicide threats; etc., etc., etc.

At the same time, the State Board of Education -- being so detached from the reality of this world -- wanted to raise test scores to 750. That's when I got involved in this conversation -- which, I thought they were completely out of any rational reasonable thinking, to impose a higher test score on kids that were suffering during this COVID situation.

To get our bill through to make it a field test was a very big struggle. Those people that are on this meeting today know that. It was not easy to get the bill through, and I'm grateful for those that testified to make it a field test.

We have not come out of the COVID travesty at this point. Our kids are still suffering from those conditions that were imposed on them because of this situation that we're dealing with. Our teachers are tremendously overstressed.

The fact that we want to raise tests, and over-test our kids, is bordering on child abuse. I don't think that the education -- State Board of Education -- raise the scores. They committed educational malpractice.

I want to commend those people that came before us today -- Stan Karp, and others that will testify -- to eliminate this New Jersey proficiency exam, for the right reasons. Not because we're against assessing children. Not because-- We're losing-- Just take a look what's happening with our school managers and administrators; they're leaving. Our teachers are leaving the system, because they can't deal with the pressure and the trauma of trying to educate kids under these conditions. We don't need another stress level.

These kids need help. They don't need more tests. And, they certainly don't need a test to get a high school graduation diploma. Local administrators and the teachers are very well qualified to determine who should move ahead and who shouldn't.

And, I'm just very, very upset over those people that want to insist on keeping testing as a way of assessing our kids. Our educators are the ones that have the ability and the capability and the competence to deal with that. Some test company that's making money because of what's been imposed on our students -- I'm not concerned about their profits, and I'm not concerned about the political ramifications of the position that we've taken.

So, I want to thank Stan and others for coming forth today. Julia, of course, was very much in support of making our bill a field test, but we've got to go further. We have to eliminate the New Jersey proficiency exam.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Assemblyman, and I couldn't agree more.

I know that Senators O'Scanlon and Burgess have questions, but I wonder if you can hold them until we give Superintendent Trongone a chance to testify. Because I am certain he's busy, as a superintendent.

Superintendent.

**TONY TRONGONE:** Thank you, Assemblywoman.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you (indiscernible)

MR. TRONGONE: Morning, the Committee on the Public Schools.

I am Tony Trongone, Superintendent of Millville Public Schools, a high-needs school district in Cumberland County, and I currently serve as President of the New Jersey Association of School Administrators. And, I've been a member of several Department of Ed. assessment committees, and was the representative in the development of the Algebra I assessment years back.

And, I want to thank you for allowing me to testify today -- add testimony today.

I just want to go -- I want to jump to one issue. The NJGPA, for Senator Cryan, and the Assemblywoman, the NJGPA last year -- that's not embargoed information. In the language arts last year's field test, 60.6% in language arts were not ready for graduation, which means they didn't pass. So you wanted the number: 60% did not pass; 40% passed, of those juniors that took it. And, then, in math -- actually the math was slightly better; 55% were not ready for graduation, which means 49.5% were. So, you're looking at the magnitude of it, it's 60% in language arts that aren't going to make it, and then math 50%. And, as the Assemblywoman mentioned, they'll go through the portfolio process.

And, one other issue that we're forgetting -- if you go back, I've done this a long time -- back in 2011, 2012, the county colleges had an epidemic with kids passing the HSPA, but then taking remedial math. And, that's how this all started. So, I just want to add that point. But, I want to go on with my testimony now.

My topic to address today is the further administration of the Start Strong assessment program, as others have mentioned. As you all know, we had a pause in standardized testing between 2019 and 2022 in the spring assessments. And, the interim assessment was the Start Strong assessment.

And, as Deb Cornavaca mentioned, I understand the Federal requirement for the first assessment of administration of Start Strong, but I disagree with the current fallout administration of the Start Strong, and I feel it was a waste of our time.

New Jersey did administer the typical state assessment this past spring, the NJSLA. And, the (indiscernible) data. It's not public data, but we got our data in July. So, when we received that data this past summer, just like in previous years -- I was in Cherry Hill, Pemberton, and now Millville -- we get together and we disseminate that data amongst data teams, and we take actions. Those actions revolve around changes in curriculum, professional development for staff, and support for that we line up the support for students not meeting the standards as well as those who meet and exceed them. To my knowledge, school districts have done this for more than three decades.

And, also, on a daily and weekly basis, really more important that we're not talking about is the professional development on having teachers working in common affirmative assessment teams. And, then, to answer four critical questions, what do you want students to know and be able to do and understand? That's the curriculum.

The second question: How will you know they learned it? The assessment. Not a standardized assessment, but the classroom assessment, or the district-approved assessment.

And, then, the three and four -- the big one. What will we do when they didn't learn it? What are we going to do? And, then, what are we going to do if they did learn it? It's that simple, but we're complicating it.

From the spring NJSLA assessment, we took -- we look at the evidence statements; that's what people have not mentioned here today. The State provides us -- the assessment provides us -- with evidence statements in its report that shows how your school district performed on each standard, relative to the state average, for each standard. And, then, taking that information and addressing each of our courses in third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, we make those adjustments with frequency -- maybe it wasn't covered or not, maybe not enough; coherence. Maybe one skill should have been on one grade before another. And, then, also, the depth of knowledge. Sometimes, the problems or prompts or the skills are a little too weak, and we have to ramp it up, or, you know, break it down for the kids.

And, now we're hearing that Start Strong assessment might be administered again in the future. And, again, I want to go back to that. Why? I have done an analysis using test scores from report outs from each school district's public presentation of the Spring 2022 NJSLA data. So, it's for last spring. And, so, we find that the average decrease in overall proficiency, which I'll refer to as learning loss. I know people argue and that they want to debate on what they want to call it; I call it learning loss. For each former Abbott school district from the spring of 2019 to spring 2022, there was a learning loss of 30% from 2019.

And, what I did, I compared it to high-performing school districts, and they had an average of 10% of a learning loss or less; some districts had a 3% learning loss from the higher performing school districts. Three times less than the former Abbott districts. I also performed a statistical analysis called a Pearson Coefficient to that correlation to test the

relationship between socioeconomic status and learning loss. And, it just reiterated the same outcome -- that there is an issue with the environment where the kids are at, and then how they performed this past spring.

So, I'm not questioning the Start Strong assessment on its face. I'm questioning the need to do so knowing we have the current assessment program in place. We have determined the issues at hand, and need to focus our time on teaching and learning. Also, addressing the achievement gaps between certain demographic groups, and providing-- That's where I think we need to put that. The State needs to help these districts and provide them resources where we don't have it. We're delayed in the resources that we need to close those gaps. And, administering Start Strong is duplicative, and takes time away from the school districts in addressing the needs of our students that are not meeting the standards.

In closing, Rick Stiggins, the preeminent authority of assessment in education, has reminded us over the years that if our educational tests lead too many students to conclude that they're not smart or capable enough, and that school success is hopelessly out of their reach, then the entire use of educational testing is dysfunctional. Again, the administration of another Start Strong assessment is duplicative, and needs to cease. Let's direct our time, energy, and resources where they are needed.

And, thank you for allowing me to speak to you all today.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you very much, Superintendent. I think you summed up a lot of what we've heard today already.

The question will be, how do we move forward? And, we will -- we, as a Legislature -- will be looking to you, the professionals, to help us craft whatever is necessary to support the students.

MR. TRONGONE: Those of us in the field would love to be a part of that conversation.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you. I hear you loud and clear.

MR. TRONGONE: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: I realize -- Dawn, are you still on? Dawn Howlen?

D A W N H O W L E N: Hello, yes; I'm still here.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: I apologize, I forgot to call on you after Deb Cornavaca.

So, I'm going to let Harry Lee speak, and then I'd like for you to come on and add what you would like.

MS. HOWLEN: All right, thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Dawn.

Harry.

H A R R Y L E E: Thank you, Chairwoman Jasey, Senator Cryan, and the rest of the Committee for this opportunity to testify today.

My name is Harry Lee, and I am the President of the New Jersey Public Charter Schools Association.

I know we have a lot of folks left, and, so, I'm going to do my best to make my comments brief.

The Association represents 60,000 students throughout New Jersey. Three out of four students in public charter schools come from low-

income backgrounds, and 85% of the students we serve are students of color. Public charter schools are tuition free, nonprofit, nonselective schools that are open to all students, and they are subject to the same requirements around standardized testing as every other public school in New Jersey.

This is not about schools teaching to the tests. This is about teaching to the standards and making sure that we have a high quality assessment that measures content knowledge. I think it's important -- and a lot of folks have addressed this today. There are different types of tests that are used for different purposes. We've heard about diagnostic, formative, benchmarker interim, and summative assessments. The focus of this meeting is really to discuss the summative assessments given at the end of the year with the state assessments NJSLA and NJGPA.

And, so-- And, you heard this from Superintendent Trongone. We need (indiscernible) data to determine how our schools are doing and to provide supports and interventions for schools that are struggling. And, also, the flip side of this is learning from the schools that have produced excellent results. And, as policymakers, this information is vital to ensure that all children are receiving the highest quality education that they deserve. And, if you think about any lawsuit in the country that has been brought against a state or a district that is providing a subpar education to families, it is very likely that the used state assessment results has evidence to bring out that change to that additional system.

And, so, when I testified about this in the past on a variety of topics, you've heard me say this before. Public charter schools are the most accountable public schools in New Jersey. Like it or not, our schools are evaluated annually based on state assessment results, and how we do on these

tests is a major factor in determining if a charter contract is renewed. Public charter schools that are not meeting expectations academically, fiscally, or organizationally -- they can be closed by the department. And, there's nothing more high stakes than that: school closure.

And, so, these tests mean a lot to us. And, I believe that there are really two core competencies that public charter schools demonstrate that have been shared and continue to share with the rest of the public education system.

And, first is strong teacher training and professional development -- which we can discuss at another time -- and, second is really using data that they get from internal tests to drive instruction. And, what our schools tell us is that aligning your benchmark or interim assessments to the rigor of the (indiscernible) statewide assessment is absolutely critical.

And, so, benchmark or interim assessments allow teachers to know whether or not students have mastered a unit or content. And, these may be given four to six times per year. And, in a perfect world, schools should (indiscernible) surprised by how they do on NJSLA or NJGPA because of the interim assessments are telling them. And, our schools (indiscernible) internal assessments that meet the rigor of the end-of-year state assessment, and, therefore, it's really about those grade-level standards. And, they use this to help teachers deliver high quality data-driven instruction.

A quick example: At North Star Academy in Newark -- one of the highest performing charter schools in the country -- after each interim assessment cycle, teachers and school leaders analyze the data, they reteach around the highest level of standards and practice, and they implement those in the classroom. And, they determine which students need additional

support, (indiscernible) the skill or content consistently within the curriculum for additional practice time. It really is a painstaking, tightly coordinated process that schools like North Star implement to make sure students can master content.

And, these are systems that charters have put in place to really beat the odds. And, we've heard a lot today about low-income students not being able to pass the test, and, many of our charters have beat the odds to get students to and through college. And, there's a reason why we have some of the best charters in the nation. And, just because a school serves a lower-income community doesn't mean that all those students can't pass the test.

And, so, based on the latest data that we have, the Newark Charter Sector, where 85% of children qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, they are outperforming the state average in math and reading. And, let me repeat that: The Number 1 public education system in the country, on average, Newark Charters -- which serves nearly 90% low-income students -- are beating the state average. And, so, Newark has the best performing (indiscernible) sector in the country, based out of a recent study that came out of Stanford. And, so, even before the pandemic, addressing student learning gaps in our most economically disadvantaged communities is what our schools have done.

And, so, we want to provide several recommendations to the Committee, to the Department, as we think about standardized testing. And, hopefully, it's clear from this testimony that charter schools are not afraid of accountability, and there are really higher expectations for charter schools when it comes to standardized testing than other districts. And, so, that's just the case at this point.

But, in terms of our state assessment system, it must make sense, and I agree with the Superintendent. The first recommendation we had is to make fall New Jersey Start Strong assessment optional for districts. New Jersey's Start Strong made sense to administer when we did not have the spring assessment, but now that we have spring testing, kids are being assessed on the exact same standards that they were tested on four months earlier. I don't know of any districts that are using NJ Start Strong to inform (indiscernible) instruction. It's a summative assessment, because you're looking at the previous year's standards, and you're assessing the same ones that students were assessed on four months earlier. And, so, if no districts are really utilizing the data, why administer it? We already have NJSLA, and there's a lot of redundancy there.

Second, we really need statewide assessment data earlier. We are one of two states in the country that have not publicly released statewide and district data. We've always been late on test results, as we typically get them in October, and then the school performance reports -- which have additional data -- don't come until the spring of the following year. And, so, that's not a helpful timeline for us. Other states have figured out how to get all the results out in the summer, which is eight to 10 months earlier than New Jersey typically releases results. And, so, we really need to speed up that timeline, and if we had data today, we'd be having a much more robust discussion at this hearing.

And, the final recommendation is for the Department to review the data as it comes out and give the stakeholders, and really create a framework around a statewide master plan based upon what it tells us. We know that the pandemic has had disparate impacts on communities in New

Jersey, we know that the communities that enroll the most kids in public charter schools were devastated by COVID, and we need to be honest about where our kids are, support them socially, emotionally, and academically. And, tomorrow, for the first time in three years, we're going to hear from the Department at the State Board meeting as they release statewide results for NJSLA, and we are waiting to see the results. I am assuming that the students that didn't have access to resources and tutoring and a stable home environment saw a greater drop off in test scores. And, we on average were Number 1, but until every single child has access to a great school, our work is really not finished.

And, we need to really think through what those interventions are to help kids recover; how we are averaging high-dosage tutoring, so that kids can read at grade level; and, just a greater sense of urgency as we tackle these challenges.

And, of course, I believe that charter schools are part of the solution for social-emotional health and academic recovery. And, we eagerly await the data to talk to schools who are thinking (indiscernible) that have beat the odds, and (indiscernible) results for families.

I'll stop my testimony there.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you; thank you, Harry.

OK. We have -- two senators have questions, Senator Burgess and Senator O'Scanlon, and then we will finish up with-- Oh, Dawn, did you want to add something, testimony-wise? I didn't call on you, and I apologize.

MS. HOWLEN: That's OK.

Yes, I did write some testimony; you all should have it.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: OK.

MS. HOWLEN: A lot of it is just reiterating what a lot of people already said. So, that's up to you, Assemblywoman.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: OK. We'll come back to you at the end, if we have time. Is that OK, Dawn?

Thank you, I appreciate that.

Senator Burgess, and then Senator O'Scanlon.

SENATOR BURGESS: Good afternoon, everyone, and I appreciate the dialogue that we're having this afternoon.

Your honorable Assemblywoman Jasey, thank you for what you are doing.

I just want to say there's a couple of things that stood out today that I've been listening to. I heard someone say teaching versus testing. Teaching versus testing -- I really think more time and energy should be put towards the teaching rather than making another test for our students. Inaccuracies in the data, especially with the information I've been receiving from this meeting, is not helping us any. And, then, it seems like the data that had been discussed and the data that we do have, they're not being applied accordingly.

I think the passion and information that Assemblywoman Flynn discussed, I totally agree. And, as far as Assemblyman Caputo, he summarized my thoughts and feelings thoroughly. So, I really think at some point in time we should actually listen to what he said again, because, again, he basically -- I'm sorry my phone is ringing, I'm not sure if you can still hear me, oh my gosh.

Hello? OK--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Yes, we can hear you.

SENATOR BURGESS: Oh, great.

So, I just want to say at this time I am against the exit testing. I think more attention should be individually placed in our schools to see what we can do to improve maybe some of the needs and the assessments in particular with our students within individual communities, within environments.

Right now, I am against it, and I don't want this phone to cut off, so I'm going to end there.

Thank you.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Assemblywoman, you're muted.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: I just realized it, sorry.

Senator O'Scanlon, are you back?

SENATOR O'SCANLON: I am, can you hear me OK?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Yes we can.

SENATOR O'SCANLON: Great.

I really appreciate this, Assemblywoman. And, you too, Senator Cryan.

These meetings are always informative, and you always bring a really great group of people together to really flesh out these issues. It's much appreciated.

So, a lot of things have been said today that I won't reiterate. Hat off to my running mate, Assemblywoman Flynn, who put on the table that there's real value to objective assessment. But, there's also a limit to objective assessment.

Now, it seems like everybody on this phone agrees with that. It seems that -- and, look, we can argue more or less -- but virtually everyone, I

think, is arguing for less but more effective objective assessment. It seems the only entity -- the only people in New Jersey -- are a handful of folks at the Department of Education that apparently believe more testing is better no matter what, and releasing the results months and months after other states do is OK, too. We're five years into this administration -- and, look, one could cast dispersions on previous administrations, too. But, I know for a fact that previous ones aspired to get these results out earlier.

"What's the problem?" one must ask. It's outrageous that we're this far into this, and we're not seeing results in time to make a difference in children's education. Which means -- and, it's been said by numerous people on the phone today -- the detrimental impacts with testing are impacting our children, and we're getting none of the benefit or very little. That needs to stop immediately. And, Assemblyman Caputo really -- I couldn't state it any better than he did.

But, I've got to ask the question: What's wrong with our Department of Education? How could they not understand this? It seems so fundamental. And, then, how can they not solve the problem that virtually every other state has solved? This is a real, real problem that's damaging our children long term and will affect children in the system's lives for the rest of their lives. This needs to be bipartisan outrage, and we need to rise up and demand answers.

Lastly, what is the motivation within the Department to do things like mandate the Start Strong this fall? Nobody in academia on the ground, even in the ivory tower, thinks that that was a good idea. What was the motivation? Someone mentioned, I think it was Deborah Cornavaca mentioned, that there is a profit motive here. Well, if our Department of

Education's decisions are being motivated by profits to these testing entities, we have a real problem.

So, we need to start asking these questions and we need to start demanding answers. But, I think also acknowledging that, that objective testing is of real value along with all the other metrics -- along with the in-class tests; along with the building assessments. There's a balance here. I think it was Dr. Tienken who mentioned that because objective testing hasn't eliminated the difference in education achievement, that testing is useless. Well, then you have to argue that everything we've done over the last 30 years is useless. I don't think you would make that argument.

So, I don't think we want to throw out any one of the things we're doing -- we just want to do them all better.

Again, thank you very much for the opportunity to comment, and thank you all for the really constructive input today.

And, thank you, Chairwoman.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Senator, I appreciate your comments.

I want to give the remaining time to Betsy Ginsburg, Executive Director of the Garden State Coalition of Schools, followed by Julie Borst, who is the Executive Director of Save Our Schools New Jersey. And, if we have any time at the end, you can pose questions if you have them, and we'll try to get answers back to you.

Also, I want to remind members that you can request a written transcript of this meeting. Because, we went through a lot of information today, a lot of questions were posed, and I think having the written testimony is helpful.

And, Senator Cryan, thank you for sticking with us. I want to give you some time, too, to make comments if you'd like. Do you want to do that now, or after our last two speakers?

SENATOR CRYAN: Mila, I'm just very appreciative of the-- I like Declan's comments, and the idea that this has been one of the more informative sessions we've had, and I'm grateful for that.

We'll learn a lot, and, frankly, we all get to reassess.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Senator.

Betsy.

**ELISABETH GINSBURG:** Thank you.

Good afternoon, Senator Cryan, Assemblywoman Jasey, and members of the Committee.

I am Betsy Ginsburg, Executive Director of the Garden State Coalition of Schools. I am the daughter of a teacher; I am the mother of a teacher. I can empathize completely, Assemblywoman Jasey, with what you hear at the dinner table. I hear it twice a week, at least, from my daughter.

Thank you for the opportunity to share the thoughts of our members on this important topic. And, I must say, we agree with most of what we've heard today.

The consensus among my members is that, for a standardized assessment to be useful to educators and, above all, a benefit to students, it has to be well designed with a defined purpose or rationale, and thoroughly field tested. Results should be delivered promptly, in a format that is as simple and accessible as possible.

Recent New Jersey standardized assessments have not always met those criteria. Our members have asked me to highlight three specific areas today, and I'll be quick. And, you do have my written testimony.

The first concern is the impending release of the New Jersey student assessment results for the spring of 2022. We are very concerned that the analysis of this data will involve extensive comparison to the 2019 results, to the detriment of students and educators. Test results have long been used by some individuals and factions inside and outside the education policymaking apparatus as a way of demonizing educators at the public education system. Doing so in the wake of COVID would be unconscionable, as well as unproductive. When the results are publicized tomorrow, we urge legislators and policymakers not to rush to judgement and make unwarranted assumptions based on one set of data. Reactive solutions are rarely the most effective in the long run.

Remember that New Jersey educators, as our educators have already said this morning, have been assessing students and aligning instructional strategies for those students' needs in various ways ever since school reopened post-COVID. So many of them have the kinds of teams that our educators have described. Rachel Goldberg, who is superintendent in Springfield said, "Our strategies are not based on a single assessment taken at a single point in time, but rather continuous points of analysis about a student's level of understanding and processing of critical skillsets."

While the delayed release of the NJSLA results will not start the process of learning remediation and acceleration, educators will certainly take what is most useful and practical from those results. Readington superintendent Jonathan Hart said, "There are learning gaps that need

remediation. Educators have always identified learning gaps and provided instruction to close those gaps. This situation is no different. The gaps may be wider and perhaps more unique than we have seen before, but nothing is lost.”

Our second point is about the Start Strong assessment. The vast majority of my members believe that the test is unnecessary now that the State is once again administering the NJSLA. Teachers and administrators are nearly unanimous in saying that the administration of Start Strong this past September upended schedules; disrupted students’ acclimation to school routines and procedures; and took away valuable instructional time. In effect, the 2022 Start Strong test was an attempt to quantify delayed learning by actually delaying learning. We suggest that if Start Strong is not abolished altogether, it be made optional for districts in the fall of 2023. In the words of Kelly Wenz, who is a friend and a 17-year veteran high school teacher in Union City, “We continually squander limited resources, attempting to prove learning loss. The existing data is definitely sufficient. It would be a far more prudent allocation of resources to discuss tangible and practical ways to support growth before the available resources are depleted completely.”

We also take issue with the rollout of the New Jersey Graduation Proficiency Assessment -- and others have discussed this -- which was done in a way that was detrimental to our students. The Legislature -- and, thank you to the Legislature -- intervened to make the GPA a field test. But, that did not change the fact that we subjected our students to an assessment that had never been thoroughly field tested before it was administered for the first time. The reporting of results has been equally botched, forcing superintendents to explain to parents that a test report that states a student

is not graduation ready has no meaning for that student. There is absolutely no benefit to students, educators, or family in the 2022 GPA. If we must use a standardized assessment as a graduation requirement, that assessment should at least have some validity.

And, finally, we are united in saying that no student was ever healed, comforted, inspired, or instructed by a standardized assessment. No matter what we hear tomorrow, when the NJSLA results are revealed, let us keep our focus on creating humane and creative solutions for our students and school communities.

And, thank you for your time.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Betsy.

Always words of wisdom from you, and, I appreciate the fact that you come from a background similar to mine. So, these topics are constant.

And, I'll tell you: We have to do a better job, we really do. And, that is our intent.

So, Julie, you have the last word, I believe.

**JULIE LARREA BORST:** All right, thank you very much.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you for your patience, and everyone who is still on.

MS. BORST: Well, thank you to this Committee for taking on this topic. I think that this is, obviously, a conversation that has to continue past today.

And, I want to say brava, Betsy, I'm 100% with you there.

So, let's just-- So, my name is Julie Borst, I am the Executive Director of Save Our Schools New Jersey. We organized an all-grassroots organization of 36,000 parents. We're in every legislative district in the state.

We've been around for about 12 years, now, and mostly we provide testimony on budgetary issues, because funding our schools and ensuring that every single student in New Jersey has a good education is incredibly important to all of us.

So, I just want to say that during the pandemic, there was a lot of talk about how we would do education differently when we came back, and do it in a way that's more equitable and sustainable. A system where students are met where they are, and challenged in strong, supportive environments. And, instead, what we've returned to was more standardized testing.

New Jersey students take an awful lot of tests. So, you know, Start Strong obviously, NJSLA, and now NJGPA in order to graduate. On top of that, every Title I school is required to have benchmark testing. Many other school districts that are not Title I also do benchmark testing. And, then, of course, there are whatever the classroom assessments are that are teacher-derived.

And, to me, those are probably the most valuable. I'll put on my special ed. mom hat, here. Those were the most important assessments in my daughter's time in school. And, mostly because it was because a teacher knew what she was supposed to be learning, and she could tell immediately whether or not Maddie was actually grasping and understanding what was happening. And, if not, she could immediately do something about that.

And, the problem with standardized tests -- and I think we end up kind of conflating these things -- the standardized tests are a really broad view. This does not give you information about an individual student at all. It's completely unhelpful. And, I will tell you, as a special ed. parent, for

years -- and my daughter is from mostly from the NJ ASK era of things -- “not proficient at grade level” is not helpful. Those tests told me virtually nothing about where her specific deficits were. You could only get that from what was happening inside the school building; not on a standardized test. So, I just want to put that out there.

I also want to say that given the number of tests that we give -- standardized and otherwise -- it is not credible to say that we don't know where students are, and that we don't know where the resources need to go. More testing does not equal better outcomes for students, and, perhaps more to the point, this is not a system that supports critical thinking and comprehensive literacy. This is not a system that treats educators as professionals. This is not a system that treats students as human beings.

We all want accountability -- that is not in dispute. Asking for valuable and reliable tests that are not punitively used is not anti-testing. We want accountability to include understanding the effects of a 40-year-old state statute that requires a high school exit exam. I'm old enough, I was the first class. Forty years ago and a couple of months, we took the first test -- the first high school exit test that counted, I should say.

So, I think what we also need to know, though -- and because we are giving more tests than are federally required -- is how many lives have been negatively impacted by not having a high school diploma. We know that nationally, 41% of incarcerated individuals don't have a high school diploma. The effects of drastically underfunding our schools for years -- what are the effects of that? I can tell you right now, it's really hard to teach students, especially ones who come from low-income areas and who have so

many needs. Those needs are not being met, and, historically, we have not done a very good job of that in New Jersey.

So, understanding the schools -- that is, teachers and administrators can only do so much with so little. Tests do not create equitable schools. Funding; economic development; public policy aimed at eradicating poverty; ending discriminatory housing practices; and so on move us towards equity.

And, so, what is required federally, versus what we actually do? So, federally, we're required to test math and English -- or ELA -- in grades 3-8 every single year. And, that's a relatively new policy thing. It used to be grade span, so once in elementary school, once in middle, and once in high school, the same way we currently still do science testing. And, then, they're supposed to test once in high school for English language arts, and math. Potentially in New Jersey -- depending upon where you are in the math world -- you could potentially be taking three math tests, and you're taking two English tests, *and* you're taking NJGPA. So, we're taking four extra tests in high school that are not federally required. What would that money do directly inside school, supporting -- directly supporting students? We're talking about millions of dollars here.

I did give you a list of what the grades are and who takes what test and when. That's in my testimony. I just want to say that also, to Save Our Schools New Jersey, over the last, I don't know, seven years or so, we've delivered over 60,000 letters from parents and advocates, turned in 13,000 signatures to the Legislature, over 10,000 signatures to the State Board of Education asking for shorter standardized tests -- which we did get, by the way. New Jersey has the longest tests; fewer of them, so they match the

Federal requirements; for the elimination of the high school exit exam; and calls for the State to participate in U.S. Ed.'s pilot for alternative assessment.

There has been no leadership on assessment in New Jersey; we just keep doing more. So, somehow, more, harder, longer, equals better in some peoples' minds, and I am here to tell you that's not true. New Jersey's testing regime reduces the amount of time available for teaching and provides no additional information regarding individual student performance. Any school district or charter school that wants to do additional testing is certainly free to do that, but the rest of the taxpayers shouldn't have to be paying for that.

On exit testing, it should be noted that New Jersey is just one of 11 states that still uses this regressive form of gatekeeping. It's not a Federal requirement, it never has been. What is the cost -- besides the millions of dollars that we spend on that -- but what are the social costs? It feeds the school-to-prison pipeline; we know this. Exit assessments do nothing for students who passed, right, and these tend to be the kids who have the most resources. The ones who don't pass it are left having to jump through multiple hoops.

It is not just going to portfolio. The portfolio itself has changed over the years. It is now incredibly onerous; it takes up a lot of time; it must be submitted electronically now. So, we've added yet another barrier. What is actually happening is kids are either dropping out or they're taking multiple tests multiple times, and these are the kids who had the least personal and institutional resources. This is definitely, as Deb said, an inequitable practice.

Also, it should be noted, too, that exit exams, those scores -- they're only good here in New Jersey for the purpose of getting that piece of

paper. So, if anybody goes onto college or any post-secondary training or whatever, nobody is looking at those scores.

So, and I also want to remind this Committee that there are other things that students have to do besides pass a test in order to graduate, right? You have to have a certain number of credits -- there's a minimum that's required. You have to take certain classes certain years; you have to have (indiscernible) time. Many school districts add community service; many school districts have more credits that you have to do. Some of them actually even require kids to sit for an SAT, like Elizabeth for instance -- they have to take the SAT in order to graduate. Talk about something that's onerous and just arbitrarily put in somebody's way.

A high school diploma is not what you did in four years in high school. A high school diploma is 13 years of learning, right? This should be enough in order to graduate. And, the states in the last few years -- as Stan mentioned -- who walked away from having an exit test, many of them, including California, went back and retroactively awarded diplomas, because they were recognizing how detrimental it was to the economy and to those people personally, not having a high school diploma, even though they checked all those other boxes as well.

So, I think that is a story that New Jersey needs to be aware of.

So, I also want to echo Betsy here. So, when the NJSLA scores come out tomorrow -- and, indeed, we're already hearing noise about the NAP scores that came out -- I urge you to remember that our children lived through a pandemic that has claimed over a million lives in the United States. Their formal education was disrupted to varying degrees, right. Many lost family members. The scores are going to be lower than they would have been

without the effects of the pandemic, and that should be a surprise to absolutely nobody. Those gaps were there before, they're probably bigger now -- they're probably glaring now, which, in a lot of ways is a good thing, because now people will actually be paying attention to this. Nobody is afraid of the test scores. Nobody is afraid about having discussions about them. We want something done that will actually help students; more testing doesn't do that.

And, I just want to say one word about the NAP scores, because I'm seeing this -- we see this all the time. There's talk about "NAP proficient," and you need to understand that proficient in NAP world is not the proficient that we talk about here when we talk about our State tests. Proficient on the NAP is somebody who is exceeding what the standards are. And, I want to be clear here: NAP is not based on New Jersey state standards; it is based on something completely different. It might be, possibly, the equivalent of getting an A. So, when people are clutching their pearls and saying, "Oh my God, everybody wasn't proficient," is everybody an A student? No, of course they are not. There's also no reason to expect that in the next running of NAP, or the one after that, that our kids won't be caught up because they will be back in school again.

So, I just want people to take a deep breath; do not be reactionary to this. And, included for all of you, a bunch of links, a couple of studies for you to read and consider. I'm asking you, please, *please* reach out. I think everybody who provided testimony here today would be more than happy to speak with any of you about these things and provide more resources.

And, because I hate pointing things out and then not having ideas for what to do. So, one is, get rid of the exit testing -- we don't need this. Number 2, explore alternatives. The New York Performance Standards Consortium provides a really strong roadmap for where New Jersey could be doing assessments differently, particularly at the high school level. I am happy to organize a trip to New York City to go visit one of these schools so you can see this in action. And, by the way, Mila, some of those are community schools, too, and we should be talking more about community schools, also. And, I include some research in there so you can see what the results are from doing assessment in that way versus just doing standardized testing.

So, thank you all very much for your time today. I really appreciate everybody hung in there until 2 p.m. It's been a long afternoon, and I very much appreciate the time.

Thanks so much.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Julie.

You're on. I want to go visit those community schools, because this Committee is not just about asking questions and exposing issues and problems but, also, coming up with answers and solutions and guiding the direction.

So, I want to thank everyone for hanging in here and for participating.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Assemblywoman.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Yes.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Assemblywoman Jackson has a question.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: OK.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: I just wanted to say thank you all--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Sorry, Verlina, I didn't see your hand up.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: It's OK, it's OK.

I've been on a listening tour today, and I just want to thank everyone for all of the valuable information that you have provided.

And, Chairwoman Jasey, you were about to say, this Committee is a working committee. I think these types of hearings that we have bring out some very important information as we look to guide in our legislative powers, whether it's regulatory, how we can go back and work with the Department of Education as well.

This has just been very, very valuable, and I think we've heard some things loud and clear that we want to give the direction and let the commissioner know -- in education -- how we're feeling and what we like, what we don't like, and how we need to pivot and address the issues of our children.

So, I just wanted to say thank you all for your testimony today, and I'm going to turn it back over to Chairwoman Jasey.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you very much, Assemblywoman.

Is there anyone else who would like to speak, since we haven't been cut off yet? (no response)

OK, lunch, right; it's time for lunch.

I want to thank everyone again. Make sure you get a copy of the testimony today, because a lot was covered, and there's no way we can all remember it. I've been taking notes the whole time, but I'm going to use those notes to mark the testimony so that we know what kind of follow up.

And, I may be in touch with some of you in terms of your ideas and your willingness to try to address some of these issues.

And, with that, I wish you all a good day.

**(MEETING CONCLUDED)**