

My name is Walter S. Gershon and I am an Associate Professor in the School of Teaching, Learning, and Curriculum Studies at Kent State University where I have also served as Provost Associate Faculty for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (2014-2017) and am an affiliated faculty with our LGBTQ program. I write this email in support (in favor) of HB 2318 (“Too Young to Test”) and would like to briefly share some of my personal and professional understandings about contemporary testing practices in K-12 schools. As a person who taught fourth and fifth grades prior to graduate school in the late 1990s and has since spent time with young people in grades one through twelve in a variety of contexts—as a researcher, giving workshops, and volunteering for example—I have seen first hand the damage that our testing culture has on children’s everyday lives. What is depressingly consistent is the deep strain constant pressure to score well places on young people. I have seen not just our youngest children fall to body wracking tears, have painful stomach aches, and doubt their own actual skills and understandings when faced with the pressures of testing. That such overwhelmingly negative experiences are so clearly expressed in embodied and verbal ways by the very young but echoed by tweens and teens—it heartbreaking to see Kindergarteners and first graders crying in their lunches and utterly tragic seeing older students similarly wracked with tears over fears that their futures might be curtailed over their scores on a test rather than their actual gains in understanding and progress. In short, these tests often turn what should be empowering everyday learning experiences into anxiety-filled snapshots. I don’t think I’ve ever met a student who’s told me they actually like the tests and many voice their fear of them aloud even when I am a visitor at a school during testing season, another phrase that we would be wise to eradicate. It is truly heart wrenching to watch first graders crying as they walk in line after testing on their way to lunch, talking about how their stomachs hurt too much to eat from the anxiety they feel.

As an educational researcher and scholar, my work has attended to other aspects of testing culture on the daily life of schools and children in their roles as students. Aligned with decades of research in this area, the studies I have conducted have clearly documented how testing culture at once narrows knowledge for all students while reinforcing sociocultural differences as educational deficits. The combination of tests constructions and the weight placed on them for teachers and students has created curricula that are more often scripted, a move that tends to take the joy out of teaching for students and teachers alike and substituting open-ended questions and true inquiry for what Hugh Mehan 40 years ago famously called “known information questions”: those that have prescribed singular answers that the teacher already knows in advance of asking. While this kind of knowledge is easier to test on selected response questions (multiple choice) that are how standardized assessments are constructed, they are also very limited in teaching students the kinds of critical and creative thought much research documents to be necessary to produce either the future citizens or workforce our nation needs. Then there are the ways in which such assessments and the curricula that support them are raced and classed to create self-fulfilling feedback loops of success for some that requires the failure of others. It is unnatural in statistical distribution and likely internally invalid (doesn’t measure what it says it does) for the color of a child's skin or the language they speak at home to have such strong negative impacts on how they score on an assessment that has been truly vetted and standardized.

In sum, the drawbacks and problems created by testing in general and testing our youngest in particular far outweigh their potential merits. Like my age-mates across the nation who are doctors, lawyers,

professors, skilled laborers, creatives, tech industry workers and the like, we all attained our respective roles and education without this kind of testing. It is unnecessary and damaging, and high time we find another pathway for evaluating our children.

Thank you to the committee for taking the time to read this letter of support, it is much appreciated. Should the committee have any additional questions, please do not hesitate to find me at your convenience either through this email address or through the phone number and address listed in my signature below.

Sincerely,

Walter S. Gershon