

Tuesday, April 14, 2015

To the Bedford School Committee:

My name is Nancy Wolk and I would like to take a few minutes to express my concerns about the PARCC testing that is taking place in Bedford.

First, let me take a moment to give a short background on our family. My husband and I both have a scientific background, working in aerospace. I was also trained as a teacher and received my provisional certificate to teach physics and Earth Science in New York State. For several reasons, I did not pursue that career path.

We have two children in the Bedford Public Schools: Both of our children are non-typical learners. Sylvia, in 7th grade, has sensory and proprioceptive issues, that affect her ability to learn while being still. Leah, in 5th grade, has a yet undiagnosed learning disorder and an IEP. Despite these issues, both girls continue to do well with the wonderful teachers in Bedford. While we have minor objections to standardized tests, we are very concerned with the PARCC formulation and felt that we needed to act. Neither child was allowed to take the PARCC exams this year.

Tonight, I wish to address our concerns about the PARCC program.

The first has to do with the ‘cradle to the grave’ nature of this product. In this implementation, the Common Core goals are achieved through a new curriculum that is mostly taught via Pearson books supported by Pearson software and homework. The PARCC exams were separately bid on and won by the sole bidder, Pearson. If a student does not finish high school in a typical fashion, they can take the GED, which is also written by Pearson. Such a monolithic design of curriculum and testing prevents diversity in our children’s education. They are taught what Pearson wants them to learn, and then tested on what Pearson taught them. That might be fine for the area of a circle, but runs into trouble when discussing the reasons shots were fired at the Old North Bridge or the complex and diverse situations that led to the start of the American Civil War.

A second concern is the nature of the exams. It appears PARCC purposely tries to deceive the student in the questions. The guide for the exams specifically states that some answer choices will be “plausible, but incorrect” and “fully correct”. The idea is to engage a child in “higher level thinking”, but the wording of the practice exams does not reach this goal. Instead of allowing for analysis and evaluation, we have seen misleading answers on question and wording that allows for multiple answers.

A third issue is the cognitive levels of these exams. Several analyses have been done on the reading levels of the PARCC exams. Most are finding that using similar assessments, PARCC reading examples are either at the high end of the grade level or beyond. Diane Ravitch, an education historian has reported on analyses of these reading passages. Russ Walch, a literacy expert, reviewed 3rd-8th grade PARCC examples of reading. The results are listed in his blog, but I would like to point out that the grades 6-8 reading examples were mostly 2 grade levels above the tested children.

<http://russonreading.blogspot.com/2015/02/parcc-tests-and-readability-close-look.html>

PARCC's response is "Experience shows that students are capable of meeting rigorous expectations", and relies on 4th grader self reporting on the ease of questioning instead of the generally accepted literature levels.

By requiring the PARCC exams, Bedford teachers are being put in the position to teach the children skills for which they may not be cognitively ready. Basic skills in math are being pushed aside for the Higher Order Thinking skills. Higher Order Thinking skills are great, but only when they have a solid foundation.

A fourth issue is the time taken away from instruction. We send our children to learn, explore and grow. The PARCC exams, given twice in the spring, take far more time than the MCAS. For 7th graders, MCAS will take 225 minutes for Math and English. **PARCC will take 375 minutes per testing period, meaning a grand total of 750 minutes from the school year.** Source, <http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/cal.html>.

A fifth issue, and perhaps the most disturbing, is the money trail. By Pearson controlling the schools from textbook to testing, the company stands to earn a great deal of money. An analysis by Alan Singer, an outspoken PARCC critic and Hofstra University professor, indicates that a 5th grade class with 25 students would spend \$3,725.48 to collect all of the materials needed for this course. While I cannot speak to our current budget for learning materials and textbooks, I can say I have seen almost every textbook change between my eldest taking classes at Lane and my younger daughter. This is a huge expense to the district. Add to that the technical costs. Last meeting, Superintendent Sills reported on the near heroic work by the JGMS technical staff. We should all thank them for their efforts, but it means that our students and district are used as beta testers for Pearson's software. Normally, this is compensated for in the software industry. I doubt this is the case here, where we pay in time, frustration, meaningless test scores, and tears, to have the privilege to test their poorly written software.

This might all be worth it if the PARCC approach was a well-tested program with longitudinal studies shown to provide excellent results. It is not. There is, in fact, no evidence that the pedagogical approach deployed by PARCC is more successful than those already in use in this state and there is at least anecdotal evidence that it is worse. Not only are our children being used as beta testers for the technology, they are also guinea pigs.

We are concerned that the BESE has already made a decision on MCAS vs PARCC based on this position at Pearson and will use the mere fact that Bedford was able to administer the exams as evidence that they are effective.

Superintendent Sills reported at the last meeting that the BESE will make their decision before the test scores are back. This indicates, that the decision making process is, at best severely flawed, at worst...a farce.

In conclusion, PARCC testing raises several serious issues that affect students in Bedford. Pushing children when they aren't ready for new skills, testing at levels above their grade level, using our children to make a profit, and generally allowing a private company take over our children's education is not acceptable. We will continue to protest the PARCC testing as much as possible. We request that the Bedford School Committee make a stand and express concern to the DESE.