



**pennsylvania**  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

## **Testimony**

*presented to the*

### **House Education Committee**

*Sherri Smith, Ed.D., Advisor to the Deputy Secretary of Elementary and Secondary Education*

*Monday, October 28, 2019*

### **Educator Evaluation**

Chairman Sonney, Chairman Roebuck, members of the Education Committee, thank you for hosting today's hearing and providing us the opportunity to engage in a critical conversation about the educator evaluation system used in Pennsylvania public schools. My name is Sherri Smith, and I serve as an Advisor to Matthew Stem, Deputy Secretary of the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. Secretary Rivera and Deputy Secretary Stem send their regards and apologize for not being able to attend.

Before joining the PA Department of Education (PDE), I completed a 33-year career in public education, most recently serving over 14 years as the Superintendent of Schools in the Lower Dauphin School District. I began my career as a Special Education Teacher working with students from kindergarten through high school. Additionally, I have served both school districts and intermediate units directing development of curriculum and instruction.

The Department of Education and Wolf Administration greatly appreciate the leadership of Senator Aument and Representative Topper in taking a close look at the current educator evaluation system. As I'm sure you'll hear today, the current system does not align to the original intent of the statewide evaluation system. It is critical that educators are provided meaningful feedback on their job performance. Altering the current system in a way that reduces an overreliance on achievement on standardized tests will produce evaluation outcomes that more closely reflect teaching and learning.

The Department appreciates the work that Senator Aument and Representative Topper have done to bring stakeholders together to come to consensus on SB 751 and HB 1607 and PDE supports the proposed changes to the evaluation system. Secretary Rivera and Deputy Secretary Stem have had conversations with members of the legislature since 2015 regarding the importance of taking a close look at how we evaluate our schools and educators.

Over the past five years, PDE has worked diligently to improve public measures of school performance in preparing students for success beyond high school graduation. In November 2018, PDE launched the Future Ready PA Index as Pennsylvania's primary public-facing school

progress report<sup>1</sup> and moved away from measuring schools based on a single summative score. The Future Ready PA Index was informed by thousands of stakeholders across Pennsylvania who challenged state leaders to develop a more comprehensive set of school quality measures that acknowledge that, like the students they serve, schools are more than just a number or a result on standardized tests. The previous school report card, the School Performance Profile, ranked schools in a way that led to a variety of unintended consequences such as creating unhealthy competition, masking underperformance in student subgroups and feeding the culture of test performance preparation and pressure. However, the dashboard approach employed by the Future Ready PA Index provides a holistic view of school performance by emphasizing student growth measures that are less sensitive to out of school factors; eliminating the unequal weighting of content areas from previous school report cards; measuring English language acquisition among English Learners, not simply performance on a test of grade-level English language arts (ELA) standards; and measuring chronic absenteeism (regular attendance).

That's not to say academic achievement isn't an important accountability tool; however, assessment results alone should not be used to judge an entire school system. In recent years, the Administration and General Assembly have pivoted from focusing on point in time measurements of achievement as the primary measure of success toward a more holistic vision of education. This approach – with a commitment to equity, innovation and transparency – is evident in the Future Ready PA Index and Pennsylvania's school improvement efforts as well as the enactment of Act 158 of 2018, that broadens the statewide graduation requirement.

A key aspect of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is a focus on using evidence-based approaches and continuous improvement to drive better outcomes for schools for all students. For many years, school improvement in Pennsylvania – and nationwide – revolved around sweeping labels of failure based on limited data and one-size-fits-all interventions that failed to consider local context or community input. Pennsylvania's current school improvement plan recognizes that no two schools are alike and allows schools and communities to select the interventions that best meet their needs and priorities. SB 751 and HB 1607 incorporate graduation rate and regular attendance in the educator evaluation system, aligning to key indicators of student success included in the PA State Plan.

In 2016 PDE convened four stakeholder work groups charged with developing recommendations to inform the ESSA State Consolidated Plan. As a local superintendent, I served on the Educator Evaluation work group. Like the proposals before you, the workgroup recommended increasing the weight of the professional practice (observation) measure. The work group concluded that the current system “gives too much weight to student growth and achievement measures that may lie outside of an educator's immediate control.”

The effects of poverty are among those factors outside of the immediate control of an educator. Yet, so many of our educators go above and beyond each day by addressing these effects while simultaneously maintaining an excellent record of teaching and leading. Still, it is unfair to hold educators accountable for the effects of poverty. Therefore, the Department appreciates the

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.education.pa.gov/Pages/Future-Ready-PA.aspx>

proposals' recognition of the need to "take into account the challenges that poverty can have on a teacher's ability to teach and the overall school environment."

Against a backdrop of declining enrollments in our preparation programs, as well as significant turnover rates among teachers and principals – we simply cannot denigrate the profession by imposing unrealistic expectations and unfair evaluation practices.

Education scholar, David Labaree, reminds us that teaching is a unique and complex job. Ultimately, we expect educators to motivate "cognitive, moral, and behavioral change in a group of involuntary and frequently resistant clients." It is a noble and challenging profession. The 120,000 educators that get up each day to affect change in the lives of Pennsylvania's students deserve an evaluation system that is fair and meaningful. We need a system that not only helps us to identify our strongest educators, regardless of the school system they serve in, – so that we can reward and learn from them – but also one that helps us to identify where more resources are necessary to augment teaching and learning.

Thank you for engaging in a serious discussion on this important topic. I hope the comments offered here today will prove helpful to the committee as it considers the merits of SB 751 and HB 1607. I am happy to field any questions you may have.

