

TO: Members of the House Education Committee,
House Appropriations: K-12 Education Subcommittee
Senate Education Committee
Senate Appropriations: K-12, School Aid, Education Subcommittee

FROM: AFT Michigan and Michigan Education Association

RE: Educational Assessment Programs aligned with the Common Core State Standards

DATE: January 15, 2014

AFT Michigan and the Michigan Education Association have supported and advocated for the Common Core State Standards. We did so because we have always advocated for high academic standards that reflect knowledge and competencies students should possess to be able to compete in a global economy, including critical thinking and problem solving. The standards were developed by experts, grounded in evidence, internationally benchmarked, and provide a coherent framework to prepare students for college and careers. We believe in holding our students to high expectations.

We do, however, have a number of concerns about implementation and assessment. If not implemented correctly and fairly with the resources necessary the goal of the Common Core State Standards will not be reached and students and educators will be harmed.

AFT Michigan and MEA urge legislators and the Michigan Department of Education to allow for full implementation of the Common Core State Standards and the chosen assessment program before attaching high stakes to any new standardized testing. To be clear, we are not opposed to testing or holding schools, educators, and students accountable for high standards. However, it is essential that the assessment data only be used for the purposes for which it is intended and for which it is a valid measure.

Implementing the Common Core State Standards and developing and utilizing assessments for these standards raise several questions. We urge legislators to consider the reason we assess in the first place: assessment helps teachers determine learning progress so instructional practices can be modified accordingly to help students learn. Assessment can't just be about comparing kids in Detroit to kids in Arkansas.

Assessments must be used for diagnostic reasons. To achieve this there must be multiple measures of student growth, and all measurers must enhance our students' education rather than narrow it. Every application of standardized test data beyond diagnosing student abilities jeopardizes the validity of the test and the entire educational process.

There is historical cause for concern that assessment results will be used for high stakes decision making, and ultimately, concern that tying decisions to testing will change the purpose of assessing from diagnosing learning to other purposes.

AFT Michigan and MEA strongly urge legislators, the Michigan Department of Education and the State Board to place a minimum of a three-year moratorium on the use of assessment results to make these decisions. It must be certain that the standards, assessments, and curricula are aligned. Educators must have time to be trained and to work with new standards.

We are concerned that using these assessments as the determining factor for high stakes decision making at any time. For example, what will be the response to these assessments being used to determine which are Priority Schools and which are Focus Schools? Furthermore, pending legislation on the subjects of school accountability, third grade reading performance, and educator evaluation all rely on high-stakes standardized testing. Expanding the consequences for standardized testing will likely exacerbate the problem of "teaching to the test" which narrows the focus from achievement standards, thus limiting the expanse of a student's education and damaging the ability to use these assessments as diagnostic tools.

AFT Michigan and MEA urge the legislators to pursue high expectations for students through quality instruction. Attaching high stakes to standardized testing before the Common Core State Standards and the yet to be determined assessment program are fully implemented risks the validity of assessment and threatens the quality of education.