

INVITED TESTIMONY BEFORE THE
IOWA HOUSE EDUCATION SUBCOMMITTEE

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Good morning. My name is Jane Robbins, and I'm with the American Principles Project. APP is an organization devoted to restoring our nation's founding principles. I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you today.

As you know, Iowa is currently a governing state in the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium. The bill you're considering would withdraw the state from Smarter Balanced and go in a different direction for assessments. Other witnesses will address particular problems with Smarter Balanced. I will touch briefly on six problems.

- **First, Smarter Balanced is being illegally funded, and perhaps illegally controlled, by the federal government.** The U.S. Department of Education has poured \$175 million¹ into the consortium so that it can develop assessments and instructional modules.² Through this funding, the federal department is violating not only a federal statute prohibiting its involvement with creating assessments,³ but also three federal statutes prohibiting its involvement in curriculum matters.⁴

Even more troubling is the fact that the federal government is actively engaged in the "item design" of the Smarter Balanced test.⁵ This means that there is at least some federal oversight of the actual test questions. Iowans should be greatly concerned that their students might end up taking what is, in essence, a federal test.

- **Second, Smarter Balanced embraces progressive testing fads that have failed in practice.** Smarter Balance intends to replace multiple-choice tests (which are seen as outmoded) with cutting-edge assessments employing open-response and

¹ <http://www.smarterbalanced.org/resources-events/faqs/>

² <http://pioneerinstitute.org/download/controlling-education-from-the-top/>, p. 13.

³ 20 U.S.C. 7909

⁴ <http://pioneerinstitute.org/download/controlling-education-from-the-top/>, p. 13.

⁵ <http://www.cato.org/blog/saying-common-core-not-federal-joke-jokes-us>

“performance” items (*i.e.*, items that require students to write out responses or complete projects, either individually or in a group).⁶ This, in fact, like so much else in the Common Core and its assessment scheme, isn’t a new idea but rather is a recycled failure.

One of the best examples comes from Kentucky’s experience in the 1990s. Kentucky implemented a test that embodied most of the progressive ideas of Smarter Balanced, especially with respect to design of test items. For many reasons, including lack of efficiency, problems with scoring subjective test responses, etc., the Kentucky experiment was abandoned as a resounding failure.⁷ But now Smarter Balanced intends to try it all over again.

I won’t mention the difficulty, and the costs, of scoring all the open-response and performance tasks. Another witness will discuss those issues.

- **Third, because Smarter Balanced requires sophisticated technology that many local school systems don’t have in sufficient quantities, the testing will have to be spread out over a long period of time. This will create problems of both test security and fairness.** Acknowledging the technology deficiencies, Smarter Balanced recommends that testing be completed over a 12-week window so that large groups of students can use a smaller number of computers.⁸ Think about what that means. Students who take the test during the first week of the window will have almost three months’ less instructional time than those who take it during the last week. If teachers’ evaluations are at some point tied to test scores, as the federal government dearly wants, might there be some complaints from the teachers of the first group of students? And how would it be possible to keep students from discussing the test questions for 12 weeks? Whoever came up with this idea obviously didn’t think it through.

Some school systems may be considering avoiding this problem by buying iPads or other devices for students and having them take the Smarter Balanced tests that way. I’m not an expert on the practicality of using such devices for the computer-adaptive testing, but I would call your attention to the recent experience of the Los Angeles Unified

⁶ <http://www.smarterbalanced.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/TaskItemSpecifications/ItemSpecifications/GeneralItemSpecifications.pdf>

⁷ <http://www.freedomkentucky.org/images/d/d4/KERARreport.pdf>, pp. 12-24.

⁸ <http://www.smarterbalanced.org/smarter-balanced-assessments/test-administration/>

School District.⁹ That district launched the first phase of a \$1 billion program to purchase iPads for K-12 students but had to withdraw thousands of the devices after only a couple of weeks. The reason was that the tech-savvy students quickly figured out how to bypass the security features and access sites that supposedly were off-limits to them. This is not something you want to happen on test day.

■ **Fourth, the actual piloting of the Smarter Balanced assessments has uncovered myriad problems that cast doubt on whether this assessment system will ever work.**

In the Smarter Balanced piloting that was done in California last year, here are some of the problems that were revealed:

- Student confusion caused by inconsistent phrasing of instructions
- Interface glitches, such as the disappearance of a student's responses if he takes too long a break, or problems with scrolling up or down a page
- Problems created by installing the secure browsers
- Slow Internet connections and incompatible hardware¹⁰

In New Hampshire, teachers in the Nashua school district took the Smarter Balanced test themselves and were scathing in their evaluation. Here are a few of their comments:

- If you leave the screen for a short period of time, the information on the screen will be gone when you return.
- I feel sad for the students who have to take this test – not many will be successful.
- I tried the sixth-grade math – it was humbling. It was scary.
- I had technology problems. If kids have these problems they'll just quit.
- This was more of a test on computer skills than on the math concepts. If I were a student I would just pick out an answer and move on.
- Kids won't even get past the computer directions.
- I am concerned that the math test is not necessarily testing students' math abilities since there is so much reading. This test seems to assess how well the students read the math questions more than their math skills.
- Frustration level builds as you take the test, creating mental despair – students will shut down.

The Nashua principal described these commenters as "successful, dedicated veteran

⁹http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304500404579129812858526576?mod=WSJ_hps_MIDDLENexttoWhatsNewsThird

¹⁰<http://www.centerdigitaled.com/news/Common-Core-Pilot-Tests.html>

teachers.” If this is the experience of our best teachers, what will happen to the Iowa students?

- **Fifth, through the Smarter Balanced assessments, Iowa students’ personal data will be shared with the federal government.** The federal government suggests collecting over 400 data points on each child, including health care history, disciplinary history, religious affiliation, etc.¹¹ Some of that data (we don’t know how much yet, because that information hasn’t been released) will go to the Smarter Balanced consortium. Smarter Balanced has an agreement with the U. S. Department of Education that requires the consortium to give the federal government ongoing access to that *student-level* data.¹² So the bottom line is that any data on Iowa students that goes to Smarter Balanced will also go straight to the federal government.

This is disturbing on many levels, not least of which is that the Obama Administration has gutted federal student privacy law. Under the new regulations, any data that either the U. S. Department or the Iowa department of education gets can be shared with literally anyone in the world, as long as the right words are used to justify the disclosure.¹³ Parents won’t have the opportunity to object; indeed, they won’t even know the disclosure is happening.

- **Sixth, the identities of the Smarter Balanced leadership should suggest second thoughts about investing in these assessments.** One of the key figures in the consortium¹⁴ is Linda Darling-Hammond, a Stanford University education professor who is well known for her progressive education philosophies.¹⁵ In fact, Darling-Hammond was the recommendation of terrorist Bill Ayers to be President Obama’s Secretary of Education. She didn’t get that job, but she got another influential position at Smarter Balanced as director of content specifications.

Darling-Hammond’s track record in actually educating, as opposed to writing about education, is not good. A school she started in California, at which she was able to try out her progressive theories primarily on low-income black and Hispanic students, made

¹¹ <http://nces.ed.gov/forum/datamodel/>

¹² <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop-assessment/sbac-cooperative-agreement.pdf>, pp. 3, 10.

¹³ http://www.nacua.org/documents/FERPA_AACRAOLetterMay2011.pdf

¹⁴ <http://www.smarterbalanced.org/about/advisory-committees/>

¹⁵ <http://www.aim.org/special-report/terrorist-professor-bill-ayers-and-obamas-federal-school-curriculum/>

the list of California's lowest-achieving five percent and is no longer in operation.¹⁶ This may not be the woman you want in charge of testing Iowa students.

There are many troubling features of the Common Core scheme. One of the worst is the connection to the national testing, including Smarter Balanced. Iowa would be wise to take the lead in stepping back from its involvement in this massive centralized contraption and to reclaim control over the education of its students.

¹⁶ *Id.*