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**Testimony Before the Commission to
Review Maryland's Use of Assessments
and Testing in Public Schools
February 8, 2016**

The following comments on the Maryland State Student Assessments are submitted on behalf of Maryland Congress of Parents and Teachers ("PTA").

Good morning Chairman Berry and members of the Commission. My name is Elizabeth Ysla Leight. I am a volunteer who serves as President of the Maryland Congress of Parents and Teachers (PTA), and I appear before you today on behalf of the more than 170,000 parents, teachers, students, administrators and education advocates in more than 947 schools across the State of Maryland who together fulfill the mission of advocating on behalf of children and youth in the schools, in the community, before government bodies and all organizations that make decisions impacting children. Maryland PTA is a nonprofit association committed to the advancement of the educational excellence for all students across the State. Maryland PTA's members volunteer thousands of hours every day to ensure that all students reach their full potential to be college and career ready. Maryland PTA also provides countless hours of training to families to enable them to become fully-engaged at their students' schools and in their student's educational success every day. As the state's oldest and largest child advocacy organization, PTA is a powerful voice for all children, a relevant resource for families, schools and communities and a strong advocate for public education.

On behalf of Maryland PTA, I appreciate the opportunity to provide insight from parents and to share our thoughts about the significant challenges facing students and families today in the area of assessments and testing. Maryland PTA brings together education stakeholders to represent the interest and education of all children in Maryland. Clearly, our members have significant interest in this matter.

The Importance of Assessments

Your task is a very important one. It will define the education system in the state for years. As the oldest and largest child advocacy organization in the state just celebrating its 100th year, we stand ready to assist in any way to help bring to you the concerns and opinions of parents and teachers across the state.

The promotion of assessments for every student in Maryland is of paramount importance and is for PTA a family-based concern. Maryland PTA believes it is in the best interest of students in the state to continue using assessments, however we also believe that balance is necessary so that assessments can be accomplished without taking away in-class time.

Maryland PTA, as well as National PTA, our chartering organization, support annual state assessments for students. Assessment programs provide valuable information to parents, teachers and school leaders

about growth and achievement of students. Employers also benefit when students graduate ready to join the workforce. However, we strongly believe that assessments should be viewed as a process of gathering formation to guide educational decisions. They are just one tool that can be used to evaluate and assess student growth and learning.

Maryland PTA joins National PTA in our belief that one test, or single data point, should not be the sole determinant of a student's academic or work future, such as graduation, admission or retention.

We support the use of annual state assessments in math and reading for students in grades 3 through 8, one test for students in high school as well as grade span testing in science.

Maryland PTA believes that having annual data on the performance of students helps to identify achievement gaps among groups of students within a school and school district. To that end, we believe that assessments are essential to help guide instruction to better meet the needs of students and to ensure that all students receive a high-quality education. These assessments also serve as a guide to ensure that students and schools receive the necessary resources and supports to help students reach their full potential.

Together, Maryland PTA and National PTA support a state assessment system that is appropriately aligned with the state's academic standards. Therefore, to have a comprehensive assessment system, it should include multiple measures of student growth and achievement that reflect the depth and breadth of knowledge and skills that students are expected to acquire, as well as their capacity to perform critical competencies. We believe that when used appropriately, these diagnostic and summative assessments will provide critical data to help teachers inform and align their instruction; support student learning and readiness for post-secondary education and training; and will guide professional development and help to target evidence-based interventions for students who need them.

State assessments are designed to improve teaching and learning, and for that reason, Maryland PTA does not support policies that allow students to opt-out of state assessments. While we recognize and respect a parents' right to make decisions on behalf of their children, Maryland PTA believes the consequences of non-participation in state assessments can have a detrimental impact on students and on schools. A policy to allow students to opt-out of assessments can directly impact much needed funding. It diminishes resources and data that can provide meaningful interventions for student subgroups, which would have a disparate impact on minorities and students with special needs. We believe that such a policy would widen the achievement gap and have the effect of inhibiting the monitoring and improvement of programs, instructional strategies and exams.

We ask that you support tests that measures academic knowledge as well as skills like writing, critical thinking, problem solving and analysis, which are all skills that students need in the real world. In addition, we support taking computer-based tests because they are more interactive for students, allow for greater accommodations of students with special needs, and are more efficient in providing results to improve instruction. Assessments are valuable for teachers to better understand what students know and where there are gaps in learning that need to be addressed.

We firmly believe that educators and parents need multiple ways to know how their student is doing. Parents understand the value of assessments, and they understand that students benefit from the emphasis on promoting results that are actionable and which address problems before the problems

become more serious and threaten a student's ability to graduate on schedule. They know that assessments are needed to measure student knowledge, but it is just one measure. Assessments are only one additional source to better understand how well a student is mastering grade-level learning goals compared to their peers in their school and in their district. The results from state-wide tests combined with report card grades, class work, and assignments, can all be used to determine whether a student is succeeding.

Parent Input Is Needed

Throughout the Fall, Maryland PTA spent time holding school-based programs to inform over 700 parents about how to interpret the results of the PARCC assessment. We did so through in-person meetings, through media events and in a state-wide Webinar. During our discussions, one of the primary questions we received from parents was regard to overall testing in schools. This is the reason why we are so pleased that this Commission was formed and is tasked to find much needed answers for parents.

After studying this issue in depth, I trust that you will find a way to allay concerns parents have regarding testing. They seek your assurances that their students' need for assessments will be balanced with critical learning time in the classroom. Parents have relayed to us stories, of students not having the materials necessary to complete an assessment. Parents of students with learning disabilities reported additional stress on their student when they were told that their child would take tests under different circumstances due to technology and accommodation restrictions.

The biggest concern we heard was to the loss of in-class learning time due to the weeks of test-prep that was engaged in by school districts because of the perceived fear associated with high-stakes consequences of the state-mandated tests.

We support realistic standards for testing, however, too much in-class learning time has been taken for all standardized testing. We realize the necessity for Federal mandated testing, and believe that unit tests are helpful to focus instruction. We don't want to eliminate those, but benchmark tests, and pre-or-post tests should be reassessed, and recommend a focus on one or the other.

Parents also reported to us that in many jurisdictions, teachers in all areas of study were required to give assessments, including in classes such as fine arts, gym and music along the same way as core classes like English, Math, Science, and Social Studies. We question the necessity to create tests in all areas to show students were progressing. The current measures, report cards and class work assignment grades should be sufficient.

We know that we need to have state and local testing. These tests are important to ensure that the student is at the appropriate class level. We strongly believe that we must also be mindful that our students are not subjected to additional stress when they, or their teachers, are pulled out of the classroom for pre-testing or assessments.

Some parents reported that their child's school closed the computer labs and media centers to the student body except for those taking the assessments. Not only are test impacting in-class learning time for those students taking the test, but now it also takes away resources from those not taking the test. Other parents reported that their child's teacher was moved from the classroom for weeks at a time to serve as

a proctor of an assessment, thereby limiting instruction time from students who were not taking the assessment. This disrupts the class work of students not associated with the testing.

We ask the Commission to review school resources lost during testing time to include computer labs, the library or media room, intervention groups, and small group instruction for students with learning disabilities. These important services make up an important part of a student's quality of learning. These lost services, to our knowledge, are not reflected in any of the reports. In addition, classes important in the daily lives of students in non-tested subjects like world languages, music, art, and physical education are lost because teachers are assigned to proctor testing or test-prep.

Some parents attending our information programs said that they estimated their child spent upwards of 30 hours during the school year taking locally required standardized tests. They expressed concern the time spent on assessments and preparation for assessments disrupted the school day for every student. For example, if a locality asks a gym teacher to proctor all of the assessments in the elementary school, that meant potentially every child in that school won't have P.E. for five or six weeks. In some counties, parents reported that technology and system problems required students to re-start their test from the beginning because their work was lost. Every one of us has experienced, the "lost" documents scenario, but losing internet connections and tests is more than a nuisance, it can be overly stressful to students. Imagine the trauma once the State Board of Education says it will apply to graduation. We understand that computer assessments are more efficient and cheaper to grade, but how can you assure parents that the technology will be working properly? We must address systemic problems existing across the state. This not only impacts students, it affects the quality of the testing measures you receive from these standardized tests.

Let's take a fresh look at what we are doing for our students. Some of our children already have many stresses in their lives, from homelessness, hunger and family pressures. The net effect of ill-administered tests in schools puts students and parents over the top to cope with these pressures. What is the cost to students' in terms of motivation to learn; what is the cost to teacher morale and the cost to parent's confidence in the system? These costs are detrimental to students and do not produce a good learning environment for our children.

Maryland PTA recommends:

- The Commission review how many tests are provided every year, so that we can determine what make sense for our students.
- Establish an accountability system for multiple measures of student growth and achievement that is aligned with academic standards and supports college and career readiness. The state should encourage state-wide audits of their assessment system to reduce low-quality, misaligned, unnecessary and redundant exams.
- Create a Task Force to clearly articulate to parents the assessments and the accountability system in place at their child's school. Parents should be notified through multiple communication resources of required assessments, their purpose, and when they will occur as well as when the results will be available. Additionally, families should be notified on how the administration will use assessment data and how parents can use the information to support their child's academic growth.
- Provide clear and easily accessible information to parents, educators, school districts and the

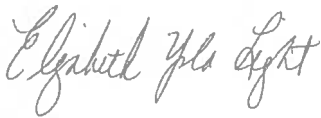
community regarding nonparticipation in state assessments and the consequences it may have on students, schools and educators. The state should collect data on the number and frequency of students who opt-out of state assessments and report on the impact to instructional practices and school accountability measures.

- Provide adequate professional development to teachers and principals to ensure assessment data is used appropriately to guide instruction and support evidence-based interventions for identified students, subgroups of students and school improvements.
- School districts should work with schools to design the assessment calendar to guarantee minimal disruption to in-classroom learning opportunities as well as disruption to those students not taking assessments.

As you make your recommendations, we hope you will include seeking input from parents and families so that parents can be meaningfully engaged in two-way communication regarding assessments, including how schools and families can work to use assessment data to support student growth and learning.

Thank you for providing us with this opportunity to testify. Maryland PTA stands ready to assist in any way possible to help you in this very important task.

Respectfully Submitted,



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POSITION STATEMENT

ASSESSMENT

National PTA believes that high-quality assessments provide valuable information to parents, teachers and school leaders about the growth and achievement of their students. Assessment is a process of gathering information to guide educational decisions. A test is one tool that can be used in a comprehensive assessment system to evaluate and assess student growth and learning. National PTA also believes that neither one test, nor a single data point should ever be the sole determinant of a student's academic or work future, such as graduation, admission, retention or tracking.

National PTA supports annual state assessments for students in math and reading for grades 3-8, once in high school, as well as grade span testing in science. Having annual data on the performance of students helps inform teaching and learning, and identifies achievement gaps among groups of students within a school and school district. National PTA believes assessments are essential to ensure all students receive a high-quality education and help guide instruction to better meet the needs of students. The information gathered from assessments can also help to make sure students and schools are receiving the necessary resources and supports in order to reach their full potential.

National PTA supports a state assessment system that is appropriately aligned with each state's academic standards. A sound and comprehensive assessment system should include multiple measures of student growth and achievement that reflect the depth and breadth of knowledge and skills that students are expected to acquire, as well as their capacity to perform critical competencies. When used appropriately, diagnostic, formative and summative assessments provide critical data to help teachers inform and align their instruction, support student learning and readiness for postsecondary education and training, guide professional development and target evidenced-based interventions to students and schools.

National PTA does not support state and district policies that allow students to opt-out of state assessments that are designed to improve teaching and learning. While we recognize that parents are a child's first teacher and respect the rights of parents to make decisions on behalf of their children, the association believes the consequences of nonparticipation in state assessments can have detrimental impacts on students and schools. Nonparticipation can result in a loss of funding, diminished resources and meaningful interventions for student subgroups, which would have a disparate impact on minorities and students with special needs and widen the achievement gap. Opting out also stalls innovation by inhibiting effective monitoring and improvement of programs, instructional strategies and exams, and could thwart transparency by providing incomplete data sets for states and schools.



National PTA recognizes that federal, state and local policymakers, and all education stakeholders—including parents and families must be stewards of effective assessment systems. All students should participate in high-quality and comprehensive assessment systems that measure their growth and achievement so all children have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

National PTA recommends that:

- Federal policy maintain the requirement that states annually assess students in grades 3 – 8 in reading and math and once in high school. Students should also be assessed in science once in grades 3-5, 6-8 and 10-12.
- State-determined accountability systems provide for multiple measures of student growth and achievement.
- The federal government incentivize states and school districts to conduct audits of their assessment systems to reduce low-quality, misaligned and redundant exams.
- States develop a strategic assessment system to eliminate unnecessary exams, in consultation with district leaders, educators and parents that is aligned with academic standards and supports college and career readiness.
- States obtain the necessary resources and have appropriate policies and procedures in place to develop, validate and implement high-quality assessments with fidelity.
- States and school districts clearly articulate to parents the assessment and accountability system in place at their child’s school. Parents must be notified through multiple communication efforts of required assessments, their purpose, when they will occur, and when results will be available. Additionally, families shall be notified on how educators will use assessment data and how parents can use the information to support their child’s academic growth and achievement.
- States ensure assessment results are delivered to parents and educators in a timely, actionable and understandable manner.
- States provide clear and easily accessible information to parents, educators, school districts and the community regarding nonparticipation in state assessments and the consequences it may have on students, schools and educators. States should also collect data on the number and frequency of students who opt-out of state assessments and report on the impact to instructional practices, teacher and principal evaluations and school accountability measures.
- States and districts annually evaluate and review assessment systems to certify it accurately and fairly measures student achievement towards college and career standards and provides valuable data to parents, teachers and school leaders.



- States and school districts deliver professional development to teachers and principals to ensure assessment data is used appropriately to guide instruction and support evidenced-based interventions for identified students, subgroups of students and school improvement.
- School districts should work collaboratively with schools to design the assessment calendar to guarantee minimal disruption to classroom learning opportunities.
- Schools and families meaningfully engage in two-way communication regarding assessments, including how schools and families can work together to use assessment data to support student growth and learning.

Adopted by 2016 Board of Directors