

Testimony to the Illinois House Education Reform Committee

December 16, 2010

by Julie Woestehoff  
Executive Director  
Parents United for Responsible Education



Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Julie Woestehoff. I am the executive director for Parents United for Responsible Education, or PURE. We are a 23-year-old **education reform** group based in Chicago.

Over the 23 years we have been working in Chicago, PURE has won many awards including a 2004 Ford Foundation leadership award. We are very proud of our long track record in **education reform**, and as strong advocates for parents in Chicago and across the nation.

I emphasize the words **education reform** because that is the name of your committee, and, strangely enough, also the name of one of the panels that you are hearing from today. When I signed up to speak today, I wanted to be placed on the Education Reform panel, since **education reform** has been PURE's work for 23 years. I was told that the Education Reform Panel was already formed and they were coordinating their testimony.

I was disturbed by that. It suggests that this committee is aligned with one particular side in the discussion of these complex issues, issues that affect parents, teachers, students and the community deeply. It suggests that only one side represents what you consider education reform.

In fact, I have been concerned for a while that some relative newcomers to education reform, those groups funded by Bill Gates, the Broad Foundation, the Walton family, the Steans Foundation, etc., are using their deep pockets to fund what seems more and more like ideological warfare on our public schools and on school communities. In this war, only those that agree with Bill Gates and other corporate so-called reformers are supposed to be pro-child. In this war, all others, even the children's own parents, are characterized as only caring about adults and wanting to maintain the status quo.

In fact, the newspapers have just covered the results of a poll commissioned by Bill Gates that found that adults blame parents the most for what's wrong with the public schools. What they didn't report is that nearly the same percentage also blame state officials, so I guess we're the bad guys together.

I wanted to take a bit of time to say all this in order to challenge you today to have an open mind, not to be pressured by the people with the most money and the slickest propaganda, not to join their war on public education, but to be the responsible people that I know you are, to listen to everyone, to take a close look at the facts, and to make this critical process, these critical decisions, worthy of our precious democratic public education system, and the children who desperately need all of the adults, not just some of them, to work together to improve their education and their chance for future success.

## **PURE Facts**

One of the things that I believe PURE does pretty well is digest critical facts about education and create user-friendly materials that can help parents and the general public to understand better some of the key issues facing our schools. I think even legislators might benefit from this kind of information, and I try to send it out to you from time to time. So, I'm going to try in the next three or four minutes to lay out what we believe are some of the key facts about the topics we are here today to discuss.

1. In general, too many education reform strategies that are currently being promoted by corporate reformers are ***not supported by research***, and are ineffective and in some cases even harmful. This includes proliferation of charter schools, school closings and turnarounds, student retention, and high-stakes testing.

We have ample proof here in Chicago as detailed in the attached PURE Fact Sheet and review of literature by Professor Pauline Lipman regarding local Chicago research. (Handouts 1 and 2). However, this is not just true of Chicago programs – it is true nationwide, as detailed in the report by the National Education Policy Center. (Summary in Handout 3)

The point is that fixing schools is an extremely complicated business, and affects our most vulnerable people, our children. Corporate reformers from Arne Duncan on down are urging you and other policy makers to hurry, hurry hurry to make dramatic changes, to grab onto any buzz-word flavor-of-the-month innovation and force it on the schools. Secretary Duncan even dangled billions of dollars in front of you to get you to do it. But that doesn't make it the responsible choice. Parents are really tired of having our children experimented on. Yes, we need change and improvement, but it's no improvement to swap one failed set of programs for another even if you do it quickly.

2. More specifically, **the idea of linking teacher performance evaluation and jobs to student test scores has no research basis**. In fact, the research on these practices is overwhelmingly negative. (Handout 4)

I'm no expert on assessment, but as a parent who has become very concerned about the overuse and misuse of tests in the Chicago Public Schools, I have learned some important facts about standardized tests. (Handouts 5, 6)

Another thing I have learned is that our current state test is not valid for any use besides school accountability. PURE was told this by an ISBE official last year. A January 27, 2009 e-mail from Judith Steinhauer at ISBE stated, “the purpose of ISAT, its reliability and validity authenticated by a staff of psychometricians, is to calculate school accountability which is reported to the federal government as Adequate Yearly Progress. It is not the intention of the state to use the test for anything else.”

We already know that the SAT-10 section of the ISAT **has** been used for something else – it's being used to retain Chicago Public School students. That inappropriate use is one reason why we just filed a discrimination complaint against the CPS promotion policy with the federal Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights. I've attached our complaint which includes more detail about CPS testing problems (Handout 7).

In addition to the problems with valid test use, there's the question of fairness. The teacher evaluation system has not been created yet, but you seem to be fast tracking legislation on teacher evaluation before the details are ironed out. The quality of the assessment system (including the new state tests that are also currently under development) will have a huge impact on the quality of the evaluation process. It seem unfair to tell teachers to get ready to jump when no one knows what the bar looks like.

Frankly, I have little faith that our state is going to create a high-quality assessment system using true multiple measures and not just a handful of one-shot tests. I hope I'm wrong but I've been down this road before. In fact, several years ago, when the state was developing its annual tests to comply with NCLB, PURE and the Chicago Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law prepared a legislative proposal for a balanced assessment system for Illinois (Handout 8). We suggested, among other things, that the assessment system use a weighted system of multiple measures, with state standardized tests making up only one part of the overall assessment. This is, in fact, how test makers suggest their products be used.

I believe it is only fair and reasonable to create the assessments first, in an open and collaborative way – including parents – and then, in an open and collaborative way, create the teacher evaluation system once we know what our tools will be.

Finally, I urge you to read the two attached reports from the National Education Policy Center. The first one (Handout 9) summarizes the problems in the report of research used to support the federal education initiatives around teacher evaluation. It concludes that “there are serious flaws in the research summary” and “the report lacks sufficient analytical depth, does not present its evidence in a logical manner, makes sweeping claims, and draws conclusions based on weak data.” This does not sound like a good beginning for a “reform” that is supposed to make dramatic improvements in schools.

The second report was written just for you. It's from the same group and is called “Getting Teacher Assessment Right: What Policymakers Can Learn From Research” (Handout 10). I think the title speaks for itself. It includes strong, research based recommendations for a high-quality teacher evaluation system. I urge you to study this report, take it in, listen to teachers, parents and the community, not just big-money so-called reform groups, and then make your decisions responsibly and in the best interests of our children.

Thank you.