



FACTS
Folk Arts - Cultural Treasures
Charter School

To: Pedro Rivera, Secretary of Education
Pennsylvania Department of Education
333 Market Street
Harrisburg, PA 17126

September 14, 2015

To Mr. Pedro Rivera:

I am the Principal at the Folk Arts-Cultural Charter School. It is a high performing K-8 school in Philadelphia. We received a score of 88.4% on Pennsylvania's state-wide School Performance Profile and ranked the top K-8 school in Philadelphia in 2013-14 according to the School District of Philadelphia's School Progress Report. I'm writing to share my observations before, during and after administrating the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) in hopes to open a dialogue for alternative measures.

I absolutely believe in accountability of schools to our families, students, city and state. I am unwavering in providing high academic standards and absolutely believe all students can achieve. I believe data and results from standardized tests do provide pertinent information for schools to help guide decision making in instruction. However, what I observed this year was demoralizing to students and teachers. It completely broke the spirits of students and had teachers questioning their profession.

We were required to test students from third to eighth grades for seven days and an additional two days for our fourth and eighth graders. We tried our best to minimize the testing sessions, but some students were testing for close to four hours. A simple computation would equate to as few as 14 and as high as 34 hours of PSSA testing or lost instructional time for students. This is excessive to say the least.

We covered our walls and halls as standard protocol. Due to the required testing space every hall and floor was covered with butcher paper and cloth to hide the print that we want our students to devour and learn. I had a kindergarten parent ask, "Why is everything covered up?" I simply replied, "We are in testing mode - can't have words." After I uttered those words, I realized it was both comical and sad that in an institution of learning we couldn't have words posted in the halls and in many of our classrooms for weeks.

Teachers were asked to cover test prep as a unit to prepare students on test taking skills and strategies to reduce anxiety during testing. With a new format this year, teachers were scrambling to provide students with what they needed to know to be able to navigate through the language of standardized test-taking. Some teachers threw their hands up in defeat. One teacher asked, "May I go back and continue teaching my kids how to read?" As the instructional leader, I understand why the teacher was frustrated and why there was such a sense of urgency in returning to the routines of the classroom.

On the first day of testing, I had a third grader sent to my office because she broke down. Tears were streaming down her face. When I asked her what was wrong she mumbled, "I can't remember any of this. I'm so tired." She sat in my office with a trance-like gaze. I knew it wasn't because she didn't remember the content. It was that the content was too difficult for her and she was fumbling through words she couldn't read or comprehend. Even if I had offered her an incentive, such as extra recess, there was no way she would have completed the test confidently. It completely broke her spirit. It made her feel so bad about herself that on one of the open-ended responses she drew a picture of herself crying and wrote, "I'm tired. I'm angry." We had an eighth grade student on the last day of the testing window crumble up his paper out of frustration. When asked why he had done this he shared, "I was stressed." A seventh grade student decided to write a poem about her PSSA experience. This is what she wrote:

*This test makes or breaks my high school life
But it's breaking me.
I'm only 13!
Tear this test in two
Standardized test
This test is a black hole
Consuming stars of information
Leaving my galaxy of a brain
Empty
This stress
This stress right here
I never felt this in my
Life...*

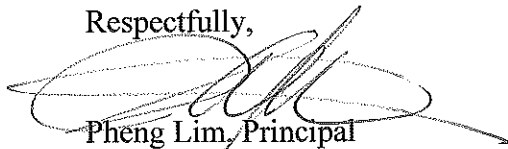
As Principal, my duty is to advocate for students. The excessive time, resources and the high stakes implications tied to standardized tests are making me question if this is the appropriate practice for assessing students. How is so much of this helping our students across the nation become better learners? What is this quantifying? I hope that the U.S. Department of Education and the Pennsylvania Department of Education will reconsider the methods used to hold schools and teachers accountable. Those tears I saw, that crumbled piece of paper and those figurative words expressed are indicators that we may not be doing the right thing. Some suggestions from teachers, staff, and parents at FACTS include:

- Fewer testing days
- Isolate specific grades
- Provide data in a timely manner

- Reduce testing sections
- Reduce onerous nature of institutional implementation
- Consider high stakes and effects on students' future opportunities
- Reinstate PSSA-modified versions for Special Education
- Consider implications for English Language Learners
- Consider high-stakes implications for high school graduation
- Consider anonymizing test results, so it will only be used to assess school performance and not individual students

Additionally, FACTS' Board of Trustees is in full support of disseminating this letter in hopes of opening up dialogue on our current testing practice. Thank you for listening.

Respectfully,



Pheng Lim, Principal
Folk Arts-Cultural Treasures Charter School
1023 Callowhill Street
Philadelphia, PA 19123
215-569-2600 ext. 1040