

More Than A Score

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January 24, 2014

Barbara Byrd-Bennett
Chief Executive Officer
125 South Clark Street, 5th Floor
Chicago, Illinois 60603

sent by facsimile

Ms. Byrd-Bennett:

We were very disappointed to read your December 20, 2013, letter to parents on the Chicago Public School's (CPS) promotion policy and the Northwest Evaluation Association exam, especially after having had what we thought was a productive meeting with CPS assessment and accountability officials the prior week.

We appreciate your acknowledgement of parents' right to opt their children out of testing, but find it very disturbing that you threaten the future of children whose parents might exercise that right by opting them out of the NWEA.

This threat simply magnifies one of the major concerns we raised at our December 12, 2013, meeting at CPS: that the promotion policy is overly and improperly reliant on one high-stakes test.

The memo you sent to principals along with the parent letter simply confirms this fact – you stated that “Without scores from the NWEA exam, students will not meet the necessary criteria for grade promotion and could be required to attend summer school before being allowed to move to their next grade.” This makes it very clear that the NWEA, like the ISAT/SAT 10 and the ITBS before it, is not used as “one of the tools” used to determine grade promotion, as you state in your letter, but is the principal focus of the policy.

In fact, as we pointed out in our December meeting at CPS, the October 2013 promotion policy merely switches the test used for making high-stakes decisions. The deep flaws in a policy that uses nationally norm-referenced tests to make high-stakes choices for individual students were identified when the policy began in 1996 and remain under your administration. National percentile ranks are still decisive for promotion, regardless of grades.

We know that testing professionals warn against using single test scores as the sole or primary factor in high-stakes decisions. We are also aware of the research showing that grade retention does not help students and too often harms them. Despite some cut-backs in testing this year, we continue to believe that our students take far too many tests and that they lose too much valuable learning time preparing for and taking tests.

These are just some of the reasons parents object to the misuse and overuse of tests in CPS, and why More than a Score is proud of our work informing and supporting parents who seek to advocate for their children against such harmful policies.

Mr. Barker extended an invitation to a follow-up meeting in late January 2014, although we have not yet been contacted about setting that meeting date, nor have we received a response to a 1-20-14 e-mail to Mr. Barker requesting a time and date for this follow-up meeting. Our discussion on December 12, 2013, with John Barker, Annette Gurley, Didi Swartz, and other CPS staff covered the following:

- 1) promotion procedures for students whose parents had opted them out of the MAP prior to CPS's announcement of a new promotion policy relying on the MAP;
- 2) how selective enrollment acceptance procedures would be affected by absence of the SAT-10 from the 2014 ISAT;
- 3) the actual number of externally designed standardized tests that are required under your test reduction initiative, given the introduction of the Common Core quarterly benchmark assessments;
- 4) an alternative promotion policy focused on grades rather than externally designed standardized tests.

We remain interested in continuing these conversations with your senior staff, but hope that future discussions will help us find more areas of agreement than your letter would suggest we have at present.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Julie Woestehoff
on behalf of More than a Score

Reply to: pure@pureparents.org