

To: North Carolina Senator  
From: Donald Earl Collins, PhD  
Date: January 15, 2014  
Subject: K-12 Standards and Assessments Recommendations

Over the past decade and a half, you have been a key advocate of public education reform. You have helped pave the way for the adoption of Common Core Standards and a series of comprehensive assessments for students across the state. You have also served on committees that have urged the implementation of new measures for teacher effectiveness, measures based in no small part on the resulting scores that students and schools obtain on the new comprehensive assessments. Your rationale and that of your colleagues has been to cite the need to close the achievement gap between low-income students and students of color on the one hand, and high-income and White students on the other. Although this goal remains laudable, the means that you have advocated and the state of North Carolina has adopted will do more harm than good on the path toward educational equity and the nurturing of high academic achievement regardless of race and socioeconomic status.

There is mounting evidence across the state – indeed, across the country – that more and more comprehensive testing and assessments have failed to achieve the desired result of closing the achievement gap. Teachers and principals have noted that the time devoted to testing and to preparing students for testing has grown to the point where they have time for little else in terms of student learning. Recent surveys of students have shown that student motivation for learning has declined as the amount of testing has increased. And the most undeniable statistic is that nearly half of the state's veteran teachers (i.e., teachers who have been in the profession for more than five years) have resigned or retired since we began introducing new state standards and assessments a little more than a decade ago.

This isn't to suggest that we go back in time to the period before the rise of new state standards and assessments in the late-1990s. Rather, this is a time in which we should reflect on the deficiencies of the current model and take the following steps to ensure that our standards and assessments actually encourage student learning and thus a closing of the achievement gap. Below is a list of recommendations before continuing to move forward with Common Core State Standards and school district/statewide testing regimen:

- 1. Reconsider the Common Core, or at the very least, disconnect the relationship between it and the state assessments.** States all over the country, including North Carolina, have reported problems in taking these standards and using them to develop appropriate curricula for their students. The use of these standards, developed in less than a decade, with little input from teachers, administrators, in some cases including administrators in Raleigh, has meant little to no ability for teachers on the ground to match up the standards with the curriculum or the needs of their students. It is simply a too big, one-size-fits-all approach to teaching and learning that results in neither teaching nor learning. The effect has been to reduce our classrooms to laboratories, where our teachers serve as principal investigators, and our students as lab rats. We should have standards, but ones that better fit our state and the needs of our students. Not to mention ones that allow for teacher adaptations to encourage learning.

**2. Revise the number, frequency and kinds of assessments that we are doing for our students.** As it stands now, we are doing entirely too many assessments too early and too often for students in the state. Assessments start as early as the second grade, with school district and state level assessments occurring throughout the year, approximately once every six weeks. For students, the psychological effect has been to turn education into a torturous and boring chore, rather than a fun and imaginative process of learning and development. Nearly every study that nonpartisan groups have conducted in the past seven years has shown this to be true. To be sure, we need to do assessments, but not two or more levels of assessment six or seven times a year, especially in the elementary grades. Rather, we should be doing one set of diagnostic assessments twice a year at the elementary school level, and once a year at the middle and high school levels, so that the students in greatest need of academic help can get that help. In practical terms, the money the state legislature currently has devoted to testing and the testing companies for our regimen of assessments could be better spent on diagnostic testing and additional tutoring for students in need of it.

**3. Resist the need to tie teacher evaluations to assessment scores.** This is simply the wrong way to go about determining a teacher's ability to reach their students. Even the best researchers in the field on teacher effectiveness have shown that the best teachers can only improve a classroom's performance on any given assessment regimen by about two (2) percent. From poverty to eating a healthy breakfast and getting a good night's sleep, there are plenty of factors in assessment scores in which individual teachers have no control. Yet the irony is that because the state has adopted this form of teacher evaluation, it has all but eliminated the ability of teachers to be teachers – to think independently and to act with enough autonomy to best determine how to reach their students. This kind of teacher evaluation process has encouraged every teacher in the state to “teach to the test.” This has significantly reduced the amount of time teachers devote to such tasks as independent reading, geography, social studies and other subjects that, ironically, stimulate student learning. We certainly need better trained teachers. What this means, though, is that the state needs to create a process by which the standards for entering the profession are higher. This could include the use of National Board for Professional Teaching Standards assessments of teacher excellence early on, as well as consistent mentoring and professional development as early as their first day in the classroom.

In summary, the best way to move forward in terms of standards and assessments is for our state not to rely on them as a substitute for actual teachers and actual teaching as the means for improving student performance. What we have in terms of standards and assessments is cost-ineffective, and it actually defeats the goal of closing the achievement gap, the very goal we in this state are all after.