

Thank you, Senator Shapiro and Representative Eissler for the opportunity to come before you today. My name is Melina Elhard and I am a teacher in Edinburg.

High stakes tests are the foundation of education policy and the accepted “truth” is that they show what children know. However, the idea that high stakes testing leads to higher standards and improved academic achievement is a fallacy. In today’s culture of measurement, one test is treated as a comprehensive indicator of student achievement and school quality. Reflecting small samples of knowledge, they are neither reliable nor valid. Reliability, or consistency, is lacking in that if a student is classified as proficient or not based on one test score, there is a probability that the student would have to be reclassified if given the test a second time. Tests are not valid or invalid, rather, the *inferences* made based on scores are valid or not. Teachers and students are punished and rewarded for inferences based on scores that can be severely inflated due to test preparation. As scores show improvement, dropout rates are soaring and teacher attrition rates are on the rise.

Standardized testing means that *all* students face the *same* tasks, administered the *same* way, and scored in the *same* way. The most glaring problem is that *not all of our students are the same*. The current model of high stakes testing and “one size fits all” curriculum makes aspects of learning inaccessible to underprivileged students, actually punishing them for not belonging to middle class mainstream culture.

I want to tell you about Alejandra, a student of mine who was under immense pressure to pass the TAKS test. Alejandra was extremely bright, enthusiastic about learning, and hoped to become a doctor one day. But there was one problem; Alejandra spoke English as a second language, and if she did not pass, not only would she not go to high school, but her family would send her back to Mexico. I saw Alejandra transform from an outgoing and friendly girl to someone who rarely smiled and was afraid to participate in class. I entered the field of education to help students, in particular students of the community that raised me. Seeing Alejandra’s metamorphosis, among others, has made me seriously question my involvement in a system that methodically damages the self-esteem of children based on nothing more than language and socio-economic status.

Testing is an integral part of education, but we need to stop placing emphasis on “performance standards,” which have spawned bad incentives, distorted views of performance, and misinterpretation by the community. In the book *Measuring Up*, Daniel Koretz states that, “educational testing is much like a powerful medication. If used carefully, it can be immensely informative, and it can be a very powerful tool for changing education for the better. Used indiscriminately, it poses a risk of various and severe side effects. Unlike powerful medications, however, tests are used with little independent oversight. Let the buyer beware.”