Testimony of the
Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA)

Public Hearing Regarding
SB 751 and HB 1607

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House Education Committee
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By
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Good morning Chairman Sonney, Chairman Roebuck and members of the House Education Committee. Thank you for allocating a few minutes for me to speak about my experience with the educator evaluation system.

I started my career just before No Child Left Behind and standardized testing became the focus for instruction. I witnessed the steady erosion of creativity and teacher autonomy in classrooms over the past 20 years and I can affirmatively say that the adoption of Act 82 in 2012 heightened that attrition. With that said, I’m not one to complain about a problem without trying to solve it or at least make things better. In addition to teaching and serving as a member of the PSEA Board of Directors, I also participate on test advisory groups for PDE/DRC. I have served on several committees with Data Recognition Corp, the test company which developed Classroom Diagnostic Tools and creates the PSSA. I’ve worked with this organization on assessment scoring, curriculum alignment, and question validation.

In the almost twenty years since intensive standardized testing became the norm for every student in America, we have lost sight of students as individuals. Act 82 caused us to lose sight of teachers as individuals.

I teach “Comprehensive level” Algebra and Geometry to the students who don’t plan to attend a four-year post-secondary institution or maybe they don’t have any plans for post-secondary studies. This is a deliberate decision by my administration, because they often tell me that I can reach these students. I’m proud of the work that I do and of my students, but I know that my rating scores are never going to be as good as my colleagues who teach on the college prep track. My colleagues and I openly discuss this reality. The kids who are in my classes are there because they don’t score as high on PSSAs and Keystone Exams. My colleagues and I never have a hope of achieving a distinguished rating. We can help our students achieve academic growth, but we can never reach enough growth to be considered distinguished. This is largely due to the inclusion of the student performance elements, but particularly weighting student performance at 50 percent.

Greater emphasis or weight on testing elements drives teachers to limit the creativity of their instruction. They can’t explore ideas, concept and history,
because administrators or curriculum supervisors require that teachers must be at a specific point of the curriculum on each day of the school year so kids are prepared for the tests. Additionally, the downside that no one talks about enough is how the evaluation system discourages teachers from working with struggling students or causes some teachers not to collaborate with their colleagues. While some people want to collaborate, there are some that see the rating system as a competition. If the teacher next door to me has an effective instructional strategy, the person might not share it anymore because there is fear that a teacher with a higher rating has slightly better job security in the case of a furlough.

SB 751 and HB 1607 begin to help mitigate these and other problems associated with Act 82. Thank you for the heeding the feedback of educators and administrators over the last 6 years to improve the system. I believe that the changes proposed by bills will make a huge difference and increase the morale of educators across the commonwealth. I’ll be happy to answer any questions.