

To the Families of the Children in our Classrooms,

First of all, we want to thank you for the opportunity to work with your children. We understand that it is difficult to drop your most precious belongings off in the hands of someone else. We understand that you are trusting us to use the best practices in teaching in order to ensure the most success for your child. Our number one goal in teaching is to keep the best interest of your child at the heart of all we do. We hope our passion, education, and dedication is evident daily.

Quickly, we want to take a moment and talk about ourselves. While we don't want our bios to be the focus, we do want our parents and the community to have an understanding of our behind-the-scenes work and passion that we put into our jobs. We want you to know about our accomplishments, research, and experiences in order for you to have an understanding of our background and professionalism.

My name is Karen Hendren and I am currently a 1st grade teacher at Skelly Elementary. I graduated from Oklahoma State University with a degree in Elementary Education. I have teaching experience at Educare, Sand Springs Early Childhood Center, and overseas at Feltwell Elementary in England on the military base. I was assigned the Lead teacher position for First Grade. The District has entrusted me to teach Professional Development over both Reading and Math. My evaluations have always shown me to be an effective teacher.

My name is Nikki Jones and I am also a first grade teacher at Skelly Elementary. In addition to first grade, I have taught Pre-K and K for the district. I graduated from the University of Oklahoma with a degree in Early Childhood Education. Recently, I was recognized on the cover of NAEYC's magazine, *The Young Child*, as the feature teacher. Last spring, I was utilized by TPS as a model for Early Childhood in an NPR story airing over Tulsa success in implementing Early Childhood Programs. Most recently, I received the national award for Outstanding Classroom Practitioner by the organization, NAECTE, and Cengage Publishing. I serve as the State Rep for UOO as an advocate for children and their families in diminishing the High Stakes Testing monster. All of my evaluations have shown me to be an effective teacher. Both Karen and I continually pursue knowledge and understanding and have been trusted by the district to lead and represent multiple aspects of Early Childhood Education throughout our years of service.

Unfortunately, In the recent years, the mandates have gradually squelched the creativity and learning from our classrooms. The problem is that we are having to spend WAY too much time won formal assessments. All of the testing is required and some of it is classified as High Stakes Testing (HST). A **high-stakes test** is any test used to make important decisions about students, educators, schools, or districts, most commonly for the purpose of accountability—i.e., the attempt by federal, state, or local government agencies and school administrators to ensure that students are enrolled in effective schools and being taught by effective teachers. In general, “high stakes” means that test scores are used to determine punishments (such as sanctions, penalties, funding reductions, negative publicity), accolades (awards, public celebration, positive publicity), advancement (grade promotion or graduation for students), or compensation (salary increases or bonuses for administrators and teachers). (Glossary of Education Reform, 2014)

This year, in first grade, your child is being asked to participate in the following assessments:

Literacy First Assessment: This takes anywhere from 40 minutes to over an hour per student to administer. This is a one-on-one assessment that is to be conducted quarterly or more for progress monitoring.

"Where to Start Word List": This assessment correlating to the F&P screening. The purpose of this screening is to level each child and ensure they are given reading instruction on their level. After going through the word lists, then the child is screened using a book on the assigned level. This assessment is done quarterly or as needed to progress monitor. It takes 20-30 minutes per child is also a one-on-one assessment.

Eureka Math: Children are to be given a whole group, 60 minute math lesson that has an "exit ticket" assessment at the end of each lesson. Yes, they want first graders testing daily over the lessons. This exit ticket is not long, but it still takes time. It equilibrates to daily testing for 6 and 7 year old children. This math curriculum also had a mid-module assessment and end of unit assessment.

iRead: iRead is a software program that the district requires children to be on for 20 minutes a day. It comes with an abundance of software issues and frustrations. The district has been working diligently on trying to get this programming to run successfully, but so far, to no avail. Part of this computer based program is a literacy screener. This screening takes place at the beginning of the year, and last 30-45 minutes per child.

MAP: Map is a computer based test that was designed as a tool for progress monitoring students in both math and literacy. This is the **High Stakes Test** that the district also utilizes for our teacher evaluations. It is completely developmentally inappropriate and does not provide valid data in the early childhood domain.

All of these tests, plus assessments that we utilize to document their understanding of certain content, are going on in your child's first grade classroom. I believe you are getting the point... assessments, assessments, assessments! In our classrooms the children spend, on average, 1,510 minutes (25 hours) completing assessments. 720 minutes of those assessments are one-on-one. That means that we are tied up assessing students for at least 17, 280 minutes a school year. Your children are losing 288 hours of time with their teacher because of mandated testing. When you break down our days and count for specials, lunch, and recess, we end up with about 4 hours of instruction time. So, 288 instructional hours, or 72 days... yes, 72 days of our school year we, as teachers, are tied up assessing students with the mandated assessments. Why are our schools failing? Why are children not learning how to read? We think the numbers above answer those questions.

We understand the need for assessments. We want to progress monitor our students in order to meet their differentiated teaching needs. We value data. However, we went to college for an understanding on how to do this. We both build in-depth, all-encompassing portfolios that are a TRUE picture of the growth of our students. These portfolios do not just show math and literacy, they also show growth in cognitive development, writing, understandings of every state standard, art, identity of self, science, social studies, social-emotional development, and more. We do these portfolios so that we can have an accurate measure of each child across every domain. We have authentic assessments, off-the-shelf scholarly assessments, summative assessments, and formative assessments; all of which are paired with some sort of work

sample or media documentation. Believe us, we know where our students are.

We want to share with you 4 experiences of children in our classroom during the implementation of **MAP** testing. The names and descriptions of these children have been changed to uphold their rights to privacy. They will all be referred to in the masculine form, but not necessarily male. The reference is strictly utilized for the flow of speech.

Student 1: This is one of the sweetest students a teacher could ask for. This student is gentle, calm, and collected. This student is learning English, but does not yet have any academic English. The student sat in front of the computer screen and tried his very best. We watched his eyes well up with tears. We watched the student nervously pull at his hair. Eventually, the student scratched red marks down his face in distress over the test. He is the oldest of the siblings. He can cook, clean, and take care of a baby better than some adults. The student knows all of his alphabet and the letter sounds in English now. This student loves writing books and can dance like no other. He is now comfortable enough to get up in front of the class and perform a talent or recite a poem. This student scored in the 1% range.

Student 2: This student has special needs and should be allowed accommodations. He looked around the room and noticed everyone clicking away even though he was still on question 6. He raised his hand and said "Why am I counting apples and he has math with lots of numbers?" He then stood up and threw his chair. I have NEVER seen this child upset to a point of acting out in this manner. This student likes Minecraft because he loves to build and is a problem solver. This student can tell you descriptive details about all characters in a story. His comprehension is far above grade level. If I give him a project over something of interest, he produces the work and utilizes problem solving skills across all content areas. He can fold paper into anything. This student scored in the 1% range.

Student 3: This student struggles with confidence in himself and because of this, is a pleaser. This student is smart; but, the test is smarter. The test is designed to adjust with the learner to meet their zone of proximal development (ZPD). However, it increasingly gets harder and harder until eventually, the student cannot answer the questions. The test is designed to reach a failing point for each child. This particular student quickly noticed that each question he answered correctly generated a more challenging question. Once out of his ZPD, the student laid his/her head down in tears and clicked through the test randomly selecting an answer, then clicking the arrow to proceed. We are talking about a student that is funny and happy. He can tell us jokes all day long. He takes care of the classroom and is in tune with peoples feelings. This student knows when he is respected and when he is not. He loves having his own personal whiteboard. He writes on it almost all day long. In doing so, he recently took what we had taught him about numbers and addition and figured out multiplication all on his own. He constructed his own knowledge of numbers to go beyond the standards. He is wise beyond his years. I believe he scored in the 11% range.

Student 4: This is a child that could be considered gifted and talented. He is reading above grade level. He does not care about a test on the computer screen. He is six years old. Ask him about nocturnal animals. Ask him about the elements in the Earth. Ask him about outer space. Ask him about anything interesting to him. Do not grade him on one test. Do not track him on one test. He takes care of all the pets in our classroom. (Rat, birds, turtle, and fish) He

researches their needs and meets them on a daily basis. He teaches other students about how to care for them. He can teach over us in the content of certain animals, no doubt. He scored in the teens percentile range.

Over 85% of our students failed the MAP test. We had to meet with most of you to discuss your child's "at risk" path and the retention they will face in third grade if they do not begin to show higher test scores. Was that a constructive meeting? No. Here is why we feel that way. The data is not valid in an early childhood setting, especially with the demographics of our community school. The test is 55 questions long in both math and reading. Our state and district want your child to be able to sit through a 55 question test that is designed to be frustrating. They make no accommodations for language or IEP's. How can they say the data is valid when they are not even tested in the language they speak? How can they say the data is valid when they ignore what the research says about early childhood developmental capabilities? Is the data provided from MAP ever going to surpass the data that we collect, as the professionals, in our classrooms? Should we allow a child to scratch their face, throw a chair, pee their pants, lay their heads down in defeat... all over taking a test that is designed to make them fail? Nobody feels successful after taking this test because of the nature of it. Should the results of that test be an evaluating measure for how effective we are as teachers?

Then, there are the student surveys we recently were told to administer. We switched classrooms with each other and spent 2 and 1/2 hours proctoring student surveys. That looks like reading every single question aloud to every single student and instructing them on to complete a bubble sheet. There are SEVERAL questions that are unreasonable and irrational. One of the student survey questions that really got to me was "are you sleepy at school". Yes, some of our students have erratic home lives. It's not your fault, as parents. We are all doing the best we can do. But, life happens and sometimes children come to school after a rough night and are sleepy. The children have no time for daily naps or opportunities to rest and their bodies are growing and tired. So, what are the supposed implications of this question about being tired? Then, the surveys have an entire back page that appears to be for data collection purposes only and violates the privacy of your family.

Parents, you deserve a say in whether or not your children take the surveys. Well, its actually your right as a parent under HB 1384 and COPPA. The surveys are disrespectful to the student-teacher relationship. We don't want our students to question our relationship or dedication to them. Putting them on the grading side does just that. It trivializes our interactions into three narrow categories: yes, no, and sometimes. How did that child feel right then in the moment? That's what those are taking a gauge of. A "precise estimate" in the words of MAP testing. Well, a precise estimate doesn't carry much clout with us. We know extensively what happens in our rooms, and we trust our administrators (the ones who hired us) to do the job they are trained to do and tell us if we are doing well or not. Why doesn't the system trust the administrators? Why are we doing Student Surveys in 1st grade? Why do we feel these surveys are valid and not a complete waste of time with negative implications on the teacher-child relationship? Why are parents not informed of the private questions their child will be asked to answer?

We have so many unanswered questions about WHY we are forced to utilize MAP and Student Surveys. Last week, in search of some clarification, we submitted a letter to Dr. Ballard. He never responded personally; but, we do appreciate that he sent someone to meet with us about

our concerns. However, the resolution was that we really work together to study MAP deeper. The suggestion was that we teach the test to the students. The advice was that in order to make the test less stressful for the students, we should run them through practice tests and mini computer based MAP lessons that will aid them in being more successful in taking the MAP. We are not sure how in doing so we would have a true picture of the students growth. But, moving on, basically, the districts answer was to take away more high-level learning experience and replace us, the professionals, with a computer program. The district did not address our concerns with the surveys at all.

So, families, here we are. We want you to know that we whole-heartedly love your children. We value and respect them. Your children are more than a number to us. They deserve more time in a rich learning environment, interacting with others, and growing deeper across academic and developmental domains. They do not deserve to be plugged into computers like robots.

We, in keeping with best practices, are unable to administer the MAP and student surveys to your children. They simply deserve a better educational experience than what either of those elements bring to the table. We informed the district of our decision last week. However, we felt like you had the right to know as well.

Education is about finding the deeper meaning. Education is about acting upon curiosity and utilizing creative attributes to figure something out. Education is about highlighting multiple intelligences and valuing uniqueness. Education is not squelching. Education is not standardization. We realize that we are just two teachers in a sea of many. In being conscientious objectors to these two items, we realize we are a number, just like the students in our classroom where the SDE is concerned. We realize that we are jeopardizing our jobs. But, if keeping our jobs means harming children and squelching them during a prime developmental span, then we want no part. When we walked across the stage and accepted our diplomas, when we received certifications from the state to teach, when we signed contracts with TPS, when we represented the model for early childhood education for the nation, when we accepted awards and recognition, we simultaneously accepted responsibility to uphold ethical practices and do what is in the best interest of children. The SDE has robbed us of our ethics. They are robbing children of their educational liberties.

Thank you for the opportunity to work with your children. Thank you for trusting us and valuing us a professionals. This is about what is in the best interest of the child. When education steps away from the child, all purpose is lost. It saddens us to put these experiences into words. It is with a heavy heart that we address our families in this way. However, we are hopeful that the district will understand the concerns and look at the research on standardized, high stakes testing in early childhood. We are hopeful that the district will stand with us in doing what is best for your children.

Sincerely,

Miss Karen Hendren

Mrs. Nikki Jones

