

## **Laura Wilson Phelan, Ward 1, statement on vote on the accountability plan.**

I would like to share my thinking related to my “yes” vote in support of today’s plan by highlighting three key messages.

1. The purpose of the accountability plan is to understand whether our school system is helping students prepare to live a fulfilling life with 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and knowledge.
2. The plan we will vote on today represents one moment in the process of trying to get this right.
3. Public input on educational approaches in this city cannot end here and must go further than we did through this process.

I’ll now share my thinking on each of these points in greater depth.

First, on purpose. The point of this plan, as I understand it, is to provide a litmus test, a snapshot, in terms of how well our schools are preparing students to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We know that success requires a range of skills, knowledge and dispositions, and that our measures of these elements are imperfect. Recognizing this imperfection, we want to get as close as we can to understanding whether our students are learning and whether our schools are positioning them to succeed longer-term. What we know is that the PARCC test is a decent measure of what students are learning and goes well beyond historical standardized tests in assessing whether students are on a path to college or career because it measures a student’s critical thinking skills. This is not the test I took when I was a student that largely measured rote learning. This is a test I want my kids to take because I want to know what they understand and how they make connections with that understanding. The PARCC, at least in elementary and middle school, is the closest thing we have to measure the outcome of what our schools are teaching. It is a difficult test to “teach to,” without actually teaching critical thinking skills.

All of this said, tests will always be imperfect measures of learning. They correlate closely with socioeconomic status. Coming from a low-income background myself, I, personally, didn’t do well on standardized tests. I would much prefer a competency-based approach to learning that would rely more heavily on things like student portfolios to demonstrate learning. The fact of the matter is, we are

very far away as a city, and in education nationally, from introducing portfolio assessments consistently across all schools such that we could use it as a universal measure of school performance. As a city, the majority of our schools are not yet engaging students in learner-centered, personalized education, which would likely need to precede portfolio assessments. At this moment, the accountability plan is an unlikely way to influence that practice. Demand from parents, educators, nonprofits, and experts in the field to shift how schools are approaching learning would likely yield more influence. The PARCC at least gets us talking about how to best teach critical thinking skills, and I think this is an important start.

Second -- on our point in the process. As has been said many times by OSSE and SBOE, today's vote represents only one point in the process of this plan. It introduces new areas of accountability like reenrollment and attendance that are strong predictors of school environment and student success, and it allows us to pilot new instruments like school climate and exposure to science and social studies in ways our current instruments do not allow. My 20-year career, part of which was spent in government trying to change systems and part of which was spent in classrooms as a teacher, has taught me that piloting new ideas before they are launched, and building buy in for those ideas from those who must implement them (school leaders), is the most responsible, effective approach to new tools. The current plan allows for this, outlining a timeline for doing so that is ambitious but feasible. We'll revisit the plan in December 2018. This might seem far off, but is actually just 3 months after the first publication of the data under the new plan. This timeline seems reasonable, responsible and effective to me.

Similarly, the most critical next step in this process will be to design a state report card that reflects the information that parents want, need, and should know in order to make an informed decision about choosing a school for their child, something that is especially important in a city with robust school choice. These report cards are a valuable way to communicate not only the state's accountability system, but also other information that rounds out the picture of student and school success. I know OSSE is already thinking about how to do this well, and I look forward to the State Board partnering in this effort.

Finally, I want to comment on public input now and on-going. I'm going to be direct and to the point. Our city must get beyond top-down reform. By top-down, I mean that the majority of our public engagement comes from those who are

part of organizations and from upper income households. We've got to find a way for the people most impacted by educational inequity to weigh in on the decisions that impact their children with the highest stakes. This isn't at the exclusion of upper income families, but in addition to them. By and large, we didn't do this in this engagement process. As examples of where we dropped the ball, most public engagement meetings were held at night, which makes it difficult for those working evenings on hourly wages to attend. Our materials were wonky and not universally translated. They were difficult to understand, leading many of us to do the difficult work of correcting misconceptions, which is avoidable if we break things down into ways people can grasp quickly. Finally, our materials were largely distributed electronically or through top-down channels. We're leaving out whole segments of our population when we rely on electronic dissemination practices.

I, too, must do more to understand the priorities and ideas of historically marginalized families.

Over the past few months, I've met with 100s of residents and have tried to reach families traditionally marginalized by the system. This has included conducting meetings in Spanish and meeting with families at times available to them. At one such meeting, one mother, in reflecting on the initial plan that included an 80% weight on academics said, "We support this plan. My children don't get a second chance to try to get to college. I need to know now whether they are on the right pathway, and I need to know if my school is helping them." Her voice rings in my head with this vote. The stakes are high for the majority of families served by our public system. We need to know with measures that have been tested, whether our system is meeting the needs of our children and putting them on the pathway to have opportunity and choice in their future.