



Testimony of Merrie Najimy, President of the Massachusetts Teachers Association, on behalf of the MTA in support of S.2814, *An Act responding to the COVID-19 emergency by instituting a moratorium of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System*

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The world has changed dramatically in the past six months. The COVID-19 pandemic has upended our lives in ways unimaginable in February, challenging our ability to knit together routines that feel safe, nurturing, and stable. During the worst economic crisis in 80 years, cracks in our social fabric have allowed long-suppressed voices to demand immediate change to eliminate systemic racism and structural inequality. The Massachusetts Legislature has been a leading voice in responding to this demand for justice, and it should be again.

A year ago, the Legislature rose to this challenge by passing the *Student Opportunity Act* — a generational investment in public education that takes one step toward dismantling systemic inequality and racism. This summer, the House and Senate took major steps to pass police reform legislation to eliminate police brutality and dismantle structural racism in our criminal justice system. Now is the time to pass S.2814 and put a moratorium on administration of the MCAS, allowing the educational community to join with you to rethink high-stakes testing, school quality measures, and student assessment.

It is absolutely clear that the MCAS tests should not be administered during this academic year or over the next few years. As you know, school districts across the state are struggling to determine the safest and best way to engage students in learning this fall. This process is tumultuous and uneven across school districts in Massachusetts — and the country. Children’s lives have been disrupted, and once again the trauma is most acute in communities of color, among low-income families and among people directly affected by COVID-19. Administering the MCAS will undermine our best efforts to tend to the social and emotional wellness of our students and truly meet their academic needs, as it will force us back into lockstep teaching to prepare for the test. The results of the MCAS exams will be meaningless. The damage done through administration of the tests, however, will be very real.

Realistically, this school year is at risk of being deeply chaotic. We are demanding a great deal of our entire educational community — students, educators and other staff, administrators, and parents and guardians. They are being asked to keep conditions safe, adjust to changes, support one another emotionally, and teach and learn. In recent discussions about the new school year, every single educational leader in the state has focused on the need to support the mental health and social and emotional well-being of students. We all agree that is of the utmost importance. Meeting this challenge — which we must — is incompatible with weeks of prepping and administration of a high-stakes test. Doing so will provoke anxiety in students, reduce time on learning, and waste the energy of the entire school community.

As you know, the MTA has long advocated for changes in school quality measures, student assessment, and curriculum so that they affirm and uplift the complex identities of our students. These are some of the very demands of the Black Lives Matter in Schools movement, which the MTA Board of Directors has voted to support. Many of our arguments against MCAS have focused on not only *what* but *who* gets left out of the curriculum when we prioritize testing.

When I was in elementary school, my basal reader was *Dick and Jane*. As an Arab-American child, I was angry at the book, since the characters and plot had absolutely no resemblance to my family and my life. I made faces at the characters and scribbled on the pages to the point of tearing them. I never understood the root of my rage with Dick and Jane until I became an educator in 1990, when the multicultural education movement was reaching its peak. It was only then that I understood that my feelings for Dick and Jane, and throughout school in general, were feelings of alienation from and marginalization by the curriculum. It was then that I understood the **direct** connection between self-affirming curriculum and instructional practices — or lack thereof — and student performance. My experience with a whitewashed curriculum from which I disengaged led me to accept my own mediocrity as a student. I quite frankly did not care about school because I did not see myself and my culture represented there.

MCAS stifled the multicultural education movement — which gave students the self-affirmation that I missed when I was in school. MCAS took us back to curriculum and standards that have erased the histories and culture of our multiracial, multiethnic student body. MCAS is directly responsible for “lowering student performance.”

To this end, now is the time for change. This pandemic is deeply challenging to us all. But it is also creating opportunities for us as a community to reassess and rethink our priorities. If we are serious about raising student performance, then this is our time to shift away from MCAS and toward transforming teaching pedagogy, practice, and curriculum to align with the demands of the Black Lives Matter movement.

We have also argued that standardized test results reflect existing inequities in our education system and society and then exacerbate them by unjustly ranking students, schools, and districts by their scores — and then forcing them into antidemocratic and improperly prescriptive reform measures. This is the right time to rethink this approach.

To address this challenge, the MTA supports S.2814, which establishes a four-year moratorium on the administration of the MCAS tests and on using any standardized tests to make high-stakes decisions about students, educators, schools, and districts. The legislation also requires that the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education request a waiver from the U.S. Department of Education of the requirements for statewide assessment, accountability, and reporting requirements established in the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

A moratorium on the administration of the MCAS and the high-stakes graduation requirement would reduce time spent on test preparation and focus schools on the crucial need to help students recover socially and emotionally and engage in learning. Educators assess student learning and development throughout the year, and the MCAS moratorium will have no negative effect on the ability of school districts to identify the needs of students. However, the moratorium will serve as an overdue opportunity to assess the impact of the state's testing and school and district evaluation systems on education and engage in conversations about what we want for our students and our schools — and to decide how best to achieve those goals.

The proposed legislation also calls for the establishment of a commission to review the state's experience with its current systems of school and district visioning, goal setting, evaluation, and accountability. The commission would be charged with hearing from educators, parents, students, and school districts about how best to center racial and social justice and incorporate elements of the social, emotional, and physical health of students and staff — as well as opportunities for instruction in civics, arts and creative expression, communication, and social skills — into the core mission of all public schools. To inform its work, the commission would establish a grant program supporting school districts across the state in piloting locally derived school and district evaluation models. The result would be, we hope, legislation that forges a consensus on a new approach that brings together the best thinking and experience of our educational community.

We have seen you listen, respond, and lead on the most critical issues facing our society during this pandemic. We support your efforts to dismantle institutional racism and engage in difficult conversations about the urgent need for justice and change. We believe deeply that this year is the time to embrace further justice and change in our schools. We ask you to support and pass *S.2814, An Act responding to the COVID-19 emergency by instituting a moratorium of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System.*