

Sen. Sonia Chang-Diaz, Chair
Joint Committee on Education
State House Room, 111
Boston, MA 02133

Rep. Alice Hanlon Peisch, Chair
Joint Committee on Education
State House, Room 473G
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Madame Chairs:

I have no doubt that all of us here today have a common goal. That goal is to make sure the children of Massachusetts receive the best public education possible. But, I believe that somewhere we took a wrong turn on the path to reach that goal. Sadly, over the last several years, the focus and emphasis on the results of standardized test scores has overshadowed our goal. While many people may believe that a test score is an indicator of success or failure, we need to keep in mind test scores are not the only indicator, and often times they are not an accurate indicator.

Educators in Watertown and in Massachusetts face multiple challenges in their classrooms every day. They overcome these challenges with commitment, with creativity and with a fierce dedication to their students, their schools and their communities. These things are not reflected in a test score.

Every day educators perform acts that can never be measured by a test. We do our best to make sure that not only are our students' academic needs met, but we also ensure that their physical, social and emotional needs are met. The physical, social and emotional needs must be a priority or meeting their academic needs becomes a great challenge. Children need to be ready to learn.

The education of the whole child has taken a back seat to a relentless focus on drill and kill instruction. By placing so much emphasis on test scores, we're now dealing with multiple unintended consequences. A few teachers wrote to me to say:

- The pressure and stress PARCC puts on students is something I can't even put into words. I had at least 5 kids cry during both weeks. And these are kids who are good students who do their work & get good grades. This testing just puts them over the edge.
- Another teacher told me that on a day PARCC testing was being given a student left the building in the morning and wasn't found until 8:30 that night. The pressure was too much for him. He said he just didn't have anything more to give.

- An elementary student was so stressed that he became physically ill in class. He went home and didn't return to school until testing was over. His mother reported that there was too much testing and her son had enough.

Days and days of real instruction are lost to test prep and testing. Schedules are disrupted and even students who are not testing lose instructional time. A middle school teacher wrote to tell me:

- There is a problem with the two-week interruption each year for PARCC with special schedules and loss of instructional time. The resultant chaos on the school for those days, even though PARCC is just the morning, basically equates to 8 wasted instruction days. Overall I have lost about 10 to 12 days of instruction and 10 nights of homework that would forward the common core curriculum. I know you can't quantify the lack of focus and results of chaos in the schedule in the school but I would certainly guess that the ripple effect of those 10 to 12 days on both ends would easily equate to another 5 or more days. This would mean that standardized testing affects 10% of the school year, which is crazy.

In addition, the amount of pressure put on educators to increase test scores has led to greatly increased stress levels among them. Many of my colleagues speak of decreased satisfaction with their career and, unfortunately, many have left the profession entirely. That is truly sad in a profession that should be amongst the most rewarding of all occupations.

Although we all have common goals, the overemphasis on student test scores is doing more harm than good in our classrooms. We face a narrowing of the curriculum. Subjects like art and music, science and social studies are no longer given the attention they deserve.

I'm asking you to support H340. Let's slow things down. Let's involve all stakeholders and take a good, hard look at the consequences of too much emphasis on testing on our classrooms and, most importantly, on our kids. Let's find out if the path we're on is the one that's going to help us achieve our common goal: Making sure the students of Massachusetts get the best public education possible. I'm urging you to support this bill so, together, we can achieve that goal.

Sincerely,

Deb King, President Watertown Teachers Association

cc: Joint Committee on Education Members & Staff
Sen. Patricia Jehlen, Vice Chair
Rep. Danielle Gregoire, Vice Chair