

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:

High stakes testing – the using of standardized testing to evaluate students, teachers and schools – is a pervasive and destructive force in education. It erodes the ability of educators to teach effectively and the ability of students to learn skills and information critical for success in modern society.

We teach in an affluent and progressive district. Despite the advantages we enjoy in Brookline, we see the corrosive effects of high stakes testing on a daily basis. We can no longer stand by quietly simply hoping this all goes away. It is time to call publicly for a moratorium on any high stakes use of assessments in Massachusetts. We are asking our school and district administrators to join us in publicly supporting the legislation that will do this. We also hope to engage in an open and honest dialogue about better approaches to student assessment and how teachers can use their time more effectively than preparing for and administering standardized tests.

High stakes testing has created a culture of anxiety among teachers and students in our schools. Looming over the administration of these tests is the constant fear that a teacher will be rated poorly or penalized in other ways (or possibly even fired) for poor student performance. Because there are so many factors which can influence a student's performance other than the degree to which a teacher prepared him/her for the test, the statistical validity of these tests is poor at best. Yet none of the myriad variables affecting student readiness to perform (aside from teacher preparation) are taken into account. A score becomes the sole measure of a student's abilities. This emphasis on narrow student performance adds enormous stress for teachers and students and takes time away from creative and enriching educational experiences.

Students have become physically ill because of anxiety over these tests. Many of our students report headaches, nausea and other symptoms on the day of the test. They and their parents report that they attribute these symptoms directly to the pressure they feel about doing well on these standardized tests. We have had students literally vomit on their test as a symptom of this anxiety. Is this the kind of emotional stress we want to promote among our elementary students? Does this foster a love of learning?

Rather than encourage a growth mindset, standardized tests reinforce the idea that success or failure is determined narrowly by the performance on a single test on a single day. It is a chilling message to say that there is only one measure of success. High stakes testing takes time away

from creative and critical thinking habits that are vital to success in today's postindustrial world. Our district's mission statement includes the following sentence: "Students are encouraged to question and challenge ideas and participate as active citizens." Standardized test preparation does the opposite; it is formulaic and promotes rote learning.

Hands-on activities are replaced in favor of pencil and paper worksheets (or the equivalent computer-based multiple guess activities). Teachers must take weeks of time on test preparation, not to mention the many days of actual testing. In the early grades, Science and Social Studies have been pushed aside to make room for test preparation in math and literacy. What used to be daily explorations in science have now been reduced to a couple of 40-minute periods per week. Do we really think this limited preparation will help our children become creative members of our society, inventing and collaborating on solutions to tomorrow's problems?

High stakes testing takes time away from effective supervision and mentoring. Administrators in our district must spend weeks of their time preparing for and administering the test. They are forced to take time to make sure that the administration of the tests follows the rigid security protocols outlined by state policies. These hours take time away from administrators' ability to visit classrooms and discuss educational practices with their staff. During the weeks of standardized testing, our administrators are reduced to glorified test proctors and test "police." Do we really want to squander our administrators' time in this way, rather than freeing them to effectively run our schools?

The legitimacy of the data collected by standardized tests has been challenged by many sources. Within small schools like those in Brookline, the statistical validity is minimal. Yet we are forced to review this data as if it had value. A small percentage drop in scores from year to year provokes alarm when this is, in fact, nothing but noise in a flat signal. District efforts to improve instruction and create meaningful assessments have been thrust aside as we are forced to analyze data collected from poorly designed test questions. Some argue that teachers should spend even more time comparing the test results between students of different teachers, as if a correct or incorrect answer mirrors an educator or department's teaching ability. That is an illusion and it narrows our intellectual scope. It's a poor use of educators' time.

In our years as public school teachers in Brookline we have observed the destructive effects of high stakes tests and it is past time to speak out. We seek to put an end to the practice of high stakes standardized testing and we call on our legislators to support a moratorium in Massachusetts. We call on our school and district administrators to join us in this effort, and to engage with us in meaningful discussions about effective classroom based assessments to improve education in Brookline.

Sincerely,

Jessica Wender-Shubow, Brookline President

cc: Joint Committee on Education Members & Staff

Sen. Patricia Jehlen, Vice Chair

Rep. Danielle Gregoire, Vice Chair