

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 Madam Chairs:

I am in support of H340, An Act relative to a moratorium on high stakes testing and PARCC, filed by Rep. Marjorie Decker (D-Cambridge), and request the committee report it favorably from committee as soon as possible.

In addition to the oral testimony that I presented in person at the hearing, I would like to share with you testimony I have gathered from my colleagues at Newton North High School. These are their comments:

- An issue regarding English Language Learners is that they must also take ACCESS, a mandated multi-day test that covers reading, writing, listening and speaking. It seems that standardized tests can be mandated in Massachusetts without there being an overall testing plan controlled by the state. The state should support students and teachers by demanding the best, most effective learning environments for our students.
- I teach a very high-risk group of students — ELLs with interrupted or inadequate formal education. With intensive instruction in all content areas and two hours of English a day for two years, my highly motivated students have been able to pass the MCAS because they remain working on the test long past the allotted time. If the PARCC is put in place, they'll have no chance of passing or graduating from HS. Imagine how this would limit their futures? In the past, all the students who remained in the program passed the MCAS. A number of these students have gone on to community colleges, employment in a day care center, a restaurant, etc. These students come from the most terrible of circumstances and experienced severe trauma: civil unrest that makes attending school impossible, extreme poverty, fear of the drug cartels that have overtaken their countries. They understand they have been given a special opportunity and they work so hard — why would the State of Mass. make a policy that would doom these students to a life of poverty in the U.S.?
- For me, the greatest loss I see is in creativity and traditions. At my child's school, beloved traditions are being threatened by the time required for standardized testing and commonalities between elementary schools. Although we held onto it for this year, an exceptional, inclusive gymnastics unit (co-led by

students from our very own inclusion program) and a beloved Fitness for Life program were both almost lost ... and well may be if the movement to more standardization and time in testing continues. The experiences that kids remember and learn the most from are being lost. In my high school classroom, I have less time for performances, less time for creative writing, less flexibility for field trips and in short, less opportunity to push the limits and creativity of our students. As a parent and a teacher, I hope we can stop and think about what we loved about school as children and what we remember best.... It seems that would be an important marker for what we should value. Let's find a way to cherish experiential learning and creativity better.

- I have proctored, just for this year, three days of ELA MCAS, two days of Math MCAS, two days of Physics MCAS, and have spent over 20 hours preparing competency and non-competency portfolios for students due to the requirements of testing this year. I'm exhausted and emotionally spent and I didn't take the tests. I see students with sleep issues prior to the tests, parents who are stressing about how this will harm their student's future and teachers panicking that we cover everything that will be tested, not the items we think are important. I had one student, who is battling depression right now, go home yesterday after the MCAS, emotionally and physically exhausted. I had another student, who is struggling with behavioral and emotional issues and who had made good strides, end up acting out after MCAS, taking steps backwards in what we want for him. I'm sitting with a student right now that is so anxious about this test that I need to be with her so she can make it to the end of the test sometime later in the day.
- As a social worker who has proctored in the Extra Time Room many times, I continue to worry about those students who painstakingly take hours (sometimes until the end of the school day) to complete the MCAS exams. Many of our ELL students find them very difficult as they struggle with the English language. On the other end of the spectrum, I am concerned about those who finish accurately and quickly and then must spend downtime waiting until they can read or go to a class. Our son is a freshman and Bedford gave the Physics MCAS last week. He still had to work on other projects and papers and did not get the early restful sleep we had encouraged. There is stress throughout the continuum and certainly we, as a state, are not employing best practices in helping our students learn.
- My son Dante enjoys school. He is a fifth-grader in a school where there is much to enjoy. There have been only two times he had trouble sleeping the night before school. The first time was when he had to take MCAS for the first time as a third-grader. The second time was the night before he took PARCC this year. He was not clear about what to expect from either test, despite the excellent

preparation he received. He was crystal clear, and worried, because he understood the high-stakes nature of the test for himself, his teachers and his school.

I wish I had used a quote from my son's teachers when I proctored MCAS for a small group this year. One student repeatedly asked me for help and I wish I had thought to tell her "I am in robot mode". Instead I simply told her, "I can't help you." It was not my finest moment.

My daughter Mia is taking the Physics MCAS today and we struggled about getting to bed on time last night because she also has major assessments in her regular classes, today and tomorrow, right after MCAS. She wanted to spend time studying for her classes instead of getting the sleep she needs to do her best on trying to meet her first High School graduation requirement.

- I have personal experience with standardized testing issues with 2 of 3 children. My middle son is in the 5th grade. The night before the first exam of the year I needed to sleep with him because he was so upset about the test. He was crying and wanted me to rub his back as he fell asleep. He is on an IEP but is above benchmark in all areas ... because of test anxiety he has failed MCAS the last 2 times. I don't think they call it fail in elementary school but he did very poorly. We never told him his score when he asked. I said he did fine. He just seems to freeze and second-guess himself during exams. He is a leader in school, a leader on the playing field. Something about these standardized test just defeats him, and on the testing days he is not the same kid. It is like his ego is being punished. My happy-go-lucky kid is suddenly solemn and grumpy, not wanting to do the things he enjoys most —playing outside with friends, drawing or practicing his clarinet. The last few years I have tried different things a few days before the test, such as having him talk about his feelings towards the exam. The next year I tried not talking about the exam, but we always get the same results. We have tried one-on-one testing, small-group testing and, this year, classroom testing. I feel as if I am sending my son into the lion's den without protecting on testing days. I wish I could just keep him home on testing days but as an educator I know that is not going to help my child. Thankfully, I have an MA in SPED and I am on the MCAS team here at North, so I am fully aware of the accommodations my child could use. But none of that helps with his anxiety on test days.

As parents we want to do everything we can to help our children feel successful, loved, protected and encouraged. These exams and my son's reaction to them make me feel as if I am failing as a parent.

- Because of the many layers of testing, our English Language Learning students spend many non-learning hours. For our neediest learners, the students who have interrupted or limited formal education before coming to Massachusetts, each hour not spent on learning is a terrible waste of time. Our ELL students must all have ACCESS testing every year. This happens over the course of several days. In addition, the MCAS testing that is done requires us teachers to proctor not only during the English and Math 10<sup>th</sup>-grade tests, but also during some of the November makeup testing times for both English and math. In addition, all of our students must pass the science MCAS in the spring, so we proctor during the Intro Physics test (most of our kids take this) in June. During testing, we are proctoring, not teaching. Because of the proctoring demands on teachers, students receive fewer instructional hours, even when they are available and not taking tests. We are getting buried under tests, and would like more time to be creative and productive in our classrooms.
- My daughter already doesn't listen to me, so when I try to explain to her that this is merely one test that isn't really about you and that she has many wonderful characteristics and strengths (like the ability to write a poem about silly putty), she measures my words against the fact that this test is all her teachers and principal are talking about, and the fact that they have spent four weeks on this test, and she of course decides (yet again) that dad doesn't know what he's talking about.

I have two concerns: one, that the result of this test will be to turn her off from school as she learns that she is not "good at school;" and two, that she will adapt to taking this test and decide that these other qualities of hers are not worth nurturing.

As a body politic we have bought into the business model narrative: schools must prepare our students to compete in the global market and to ensure this happens, high-stakes tests are needed to adequately measure their readiness. Questions abound as to whether or not this test is able to do this.

But there is also the question of whether or not we should use this model: the long-term effect is that kids learn that competition = losers; kids know what is at stake with this test; therefore, when they struggle, and struggle they will, they equate themselves with being a "loser" in the competition, and therefore a "loser" in school.

After PARCC, my daughter expressed feelings of frustration at not understanding the directions in some cases, and the question itself in others, and in the teachers' inability to then help them; she nearly broke into tears when telling us that she left a short-answer question blank because of her failure to understand the question.

Sincerely,

Karen Tokos  
Newton Teachers Association