

Testimony in favor of House 340, An Act Relative to a Three-Year Moratorium on High-Stakes Testing and PARCC

It is with proud memories of my 36-year career in elementary teaching in Newton, MA, as well as the influence of the Newton Public Schools on my own education as a student, that I reflect on what is happening today with public education. I can emphatically state that it was the projects, the special events, the plays, and the creative curriculum opportunities that reinforced learning, provided motivation, and made school exciting and memorable — vivid to this very day. It certainly was not the bubble-filling tests that inspired me to become a teacher.

Sadly, the major issue facing public education today is the excessive amount of standardized testing that is consuming the public schools.

The pressure of “high stakes testing” imposed on children, teachers, and administrators is changing the character of education — from creative curriculum and critical thinking to test preparation and fear.

The current testing craze is undermining public education. This is a wrong direction for education and certainly a wrong approach when teaching young children. It is applying high stakes consequences for students (and now for teachers!) instead of concentrating on support services, creative curriculum, and adequate resources. Instead of building up a testing bureaucracy, it would be far more effective to raise standards and motivate students by using those dollars to provide needed materials, resources, and programs for the public schools. Testing that is done should be used diagnostically to offer solutions for learning, rather than as punishment for children and teachers.

Anyone who has spent time in a public school classroom has learned that the business of education is not a business. It is a craft that is developed and nurtured, a craft with a multitude of dimensions, not all of which can be measured in mathematical terms. A good teacher makes a qualitative difference in the lives of students as much as a quantitative difference in standard measures of learning. Furthermore, without the emotional/motivational/inspirational component, learning does not take place. We must value all the dimensions of teaching and learning, not just reward one and turn teachers into calculating, data-driven automatons.

Education is not a race. It is not a sprint. It is a long-distance journey that requires preparation, training, persistence, dedication, and skill. The real winners are those who go the distance and develop their potential — both academically and emotionally. The seeds planted in one grade may not sprout during the course of that year... but may provide sustenance for a spurt of growth in subsequent years. Teachers work collaboratively toward this goal.

These are not simplistic issues, and the complexities will take time to sort out. In the meantime, we need to stop, reassess, listen to the people on the front lines of education (the teachers) and come up with some better and far more appropriate

approaches to the challenges that face us. When things are spinning out of control, a moratorium is certainly in order.

Nancy Swidler

Nancy J. Swidler
Teacher (36 years) Ret.