

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:

Thank you for letting me talk about an issue that goes straight to the heart of democracy. Public education is and always has been the royal road to the middle class and every democracy worthy of the name has seen public education as the way to lift its children out of poverty.

Public education in this country has always been rooted in community and a common notion of the public good, shaped across the generations.

This has been the case for a very long time. My father, for instance, was born in a three-decker in Worcester. He was educated at the Harlow Street School and North High. He was the first member of his family to attend college. He went to Holy Cross, a private Jesuit college, and for his Irish Catholic family going to Holy Cross was the height of achievement. But without the solid public education he received from the public schools in Worcester, this poor boy from the wrong side of the tracks could never have dreamed of attending Holy Cross and from there going onto medical school to become an orthopedic surgeon.

He did this without PARCC or MCAS. He did it without his teachers being threatened with losing their jobs over his performance on high-stakes tests.

The difference between now and then was that Worcester was a city with a strong industrial base that provided jobs. His father, who never went beyond the eighth grade, worked at American Steel and Wire, one of many manufacturing companies in Worcester that provided work that supported families, many of whom lived in the three-deckers that still dot the hillsides of Worcester.

Those jobs are gone. Inequality has increased exponentially and with it the destruction of families at the low end of the wage scale. Many of my students in Everett, where I teach history to high school juniors and seniors, come from precarious economic backgrounds. Many are recently arrived and have difficulty mastering the language. Many come from

homes where there are few books, where parents work two jobs to make ends meet. Well over half of my students work jobs themselves to supplement family income.

Those same students will soon be subjected to the rigors of the Common Core and the PARCC tests for which they are currently unprepared both academically and developmentally. Many will fail, and in failing they will be unable to get a high school diploma and thus will be consigned to low wage jobs and driven off the royal road to upward social mobility. It is ironic that a curriculum and a testing regime that purports to make students college and career ready will have the opposite effect of denying them both.

Leaving aside the merits of Common Core as presently constituted, and leaving aside the merits of the PARCC test as currently designed, and leaving aside the question of the statistical validity of VAM as a way to judge the effectiveness of teachers in instructing students, I ask you to consider at least giving both students and teachers the time to learn be trained in these new methods.

If our students are to succeed on these tests, more time is needed to professionally train the teachers who will be teaching in the new ways that the Common Core requires. Otherwise our students will fail at an increasing rate.

But more importantly, we as a Commonwealth need time to re-examine the content and approach of these tests and the philosophy behind them.

It sometimes seems as though public education is under assault from an alliance of scolds who see tests as punitive weapons to whip children into shape and teachers in line, and of companies who have moved with lightening like speed to profit to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars annually from public taxpayer money developing these tests, textbooks, curricula.

What we are seeing now all across the Commonwealth is the reduction of schools to testing mills, and the reduction of students – and sometimes very young students – to test-taking automatons, all meant to satisfy the quantitative criteria that are currently driving education policy here and in other states.

But children are not widgets coming off an assembly line and teachers are not quality control managers who can readily discard deficient products of that assembly line process.

The result of the enormous pressure placed on districts to teach to the test and get scores up has been to narrow the curriculum, and it is leading to the elimination of those subjects and activities that are not tested. Art, music, theater, and the like are being replaced, or soon will be if current trends continue, by extra prep classes in math and science.

Is this really what we want? And the most vulnerable targets of this austere new order in education are students who live in districts like the one I teach in.

One of my proudest moments as a teacher at Everett High occurred when members of the Massachusetts Senate came to our school on the recent Commonwealth Conversation tours. As they entered the beautiful culinary dining room where our students had prepared an exquisite several course lunch, the Senators were able to listen to the classical music played by our school's string ensemble. I saw several of my students playing violin, cello and other string accompaniments to the light chatter and clinking of glasses (filled with soft drinks, of course....) that preceded the speeches and presentations that made up the bulk of the afternoon's activities.

I ask the Senators who were in attendance to remember the quality of the musicianship and of the food that day, and the warm feelings they had when they saw what was possible to students in a public school who were given the chance to develop talents whose expression cannot be measured on a bubble sheet.

Ask yourself, given our current testing mania, will such a scene be possible in the near future?

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.

Sincerely,  
Peter Lahey, Everett