

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:

My name is Russell Brandwein, and I teach social studies, including History and various kinds of Psychology, including Child and Abnormal Psychology, at Saugus High School. I have worked there for fifteen years, and what I really try to teach is critical thinking and self-confidence, or belief in a student's ability to learn and grow — intellectually, morally, and socially. High-stakes standardized testing does neither of these things.

In Child Psychology I teach about Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, the idea that we all possess in various degrees a variety of abilities, including kinesthetic or physical intelligence, intrapersonal intelligence and many others. MCAS and PARCC completely ignore these. While I spend my time trying to build up students' self-confidence with daily opportunities to master subject matter and make intellectual connections, days of testing that reward a narrow range of mastery and punish students who suffer from test anxiety break down what I build up. Yes, most students pass these exams, but we all know that students from poor families suffer disproportionately from the disastrous consequences of high-stakes testing.

I ask you this rhetorical question: When will the students in Lawrence, where I once lived, match the students in Newton, where I currently live, in MCAS test results? They never have and they never will. Public education should uplift vulnerable students, not punish them.

A couple of days ago I was speaking with one of the math teachers on my wing. Teaching to a specific test does not develop critical thinking, and we were complaining to each other about the daft notion that essays must follow a certain format. Whenever she or I assign an essay, students ask us whether it has to be five paragraphs long, due to MCAS training. When I assign an essay describing the symptoms and characteristics of schizophrenia, I have to explain that bulleted points are not only acceptable, they might be desirable, and that answering the question completely is truly important, but format is not.

During MCAS weeks my entire schedule is disrupted, and precious teaching time is lost. This year I have a number of sophomores in my classes, so during MCAS I could not give tests or homework, and many students had difficulty focusing during class time. This happens every year, and negatively affects three weeks of teaching.

Saddest of all are the human consequences of passing MCAS as a requirement for graduation.

I have had struggling students drop out because they feel hopeless and stupid after failing MCAS. I sometimes beg them to stay in school, but vulnerable students can be overwhelmed. About ten years ago one of my homeroom students dropped out around Christmas time, completely discouraged by his MCAS failure. I saw him two years later, and he admitted that dropping out had been a self-destructive action with extremely negative consequences, but he saw no light at the end of the tunnel when he made his decision. He was working a menial job and was bitter about the whole experience.

The director of Special Needs in my school asked me to speak for her.

When IEP students take tests during the regular school year, they often go into a small-group environment where they receive specially designed instruction, which is different from simple accommodations. No matter what the claims are, in practice there is little to no interaction between IEP students and MCAS proctors, so while the letter of the law is followed, special needs students are deprived of the legitimate supports they receive during the rest of their educational experience, which is inherently unfair.

Finally, I would just like to say that the anxiety and sadness of many of my students is palpable in my classroom following MCAS testing. I remember asking one class last year how they were holding up. One student said that she was upset because she felt she did poorly. Another student, thoughtless and blunt, blurted out, "but that test was so easy!" If MCAS was truly meant to identify students who need help, it would not be a requirement for graduation.

Russell Brandwein

cc: Joint Committee on Education Members & Staff

Sen. Patricia Jehlen, Vice Chair

Rep. Danielle Gregoire, Vice Chair