

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:

Testing mania hinders teaching

It's time for DESE to stop implementing the ESEA with an accountability system that is more about shame, blame and punish than study, learn and support. I still refuse to call the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) No Child Left Behind because it leaves far too many children behind.

First, here in Massachusetts, the MCAS or PARCC are crooked yardsticks. They are criterion-referenced tests: fixed targets that do not measure the individual child's growth which is the true measure of the work we do with our students. Second, the MCAS growth measurement is anything but a growth model because it compares all students across the state with the same score one year to their score the next year and plots these results on a bell curve guaranteeing that no matter how much an individual student has grown in a year, 40% of them will be labeled as having poor growth.

Third, presently some students have taken MCAS and some have taken PARCC and there has been no analysis as to the comparability of these different assessments. It took several years of administration of MCAS before DESE felt it was reliable enough to use in the manner it's currently being used. It would be irresponsible to use the data to make high-stakes decisions about students, teachers, schools and school districts with two different assessments and no analysis of their comparability and validity.

Fourth, far too many children in cities like Springfield and Holyoke face tremendous challenges such as abject poverty, unemployment and underemployment. Far too many children who are in foster care or who are homeless, immigrants, refugees, special needs students or non-English speaking are adjudicated into the juvenile justice system and far too many children live in families and neighborhoods that have been ravaged by the opiate epidemic and the underground economy that supports it.

In my 43 years as an educator in Springfield, I know firsthand that children facing such challenges are resilient and, given the support they need, can overcome these challenges. But ESEA (NCLB) and its testing mania has kept us from educating the whole child. If it is not tested, it is not valued. Classes like Art, Music, Shops, Home and Career and others have been severely limited. Every child needs a chance to shine during the school day. Courses like these are a pathway to reading, writing, math and science for students who are interested in them.

Finally, there is no longer time to build relationships with challenged children and teach them the skills needed to follow through with tasks that are difficult as well as the skills to be able to work collaboratively and respectfully with their classmates. The social, emotional, behavioral, spiritual and physical growth is every bit as important as academic growth. These are the things children need in order to become good citizens, good parents, good neighbors and productive, positive human beings.

I truly believe we need to fight so our schools can once again educate the whole child. There is a whole lot more involved in human growth than can be measured on any standardized test.

A moratorium is needed so that an in-depth study of the impact of testing situation in the commonwealth schools can be done and adjustments made.

We, in Massachusetts, hold our students to the highest standards in the nation. No teacher is opposed to high standards, but if we do not provide the resources so that all children excel – especially those facing the challenges I mentioned – it is tantamount to child abuse.

Sincerely,

Timothy Collins, President of the Springfield Education Association

cc: Joint Committee on Education Members & Staff

Sen. Patricia Jehlen, Vice Chair

Rep. Danielle Gregoire, Vice Chair