

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 the opportunity to speak to you today.

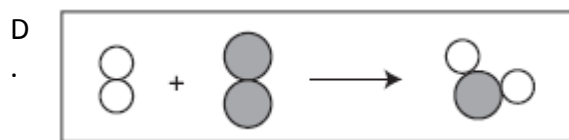
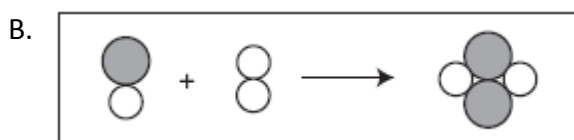
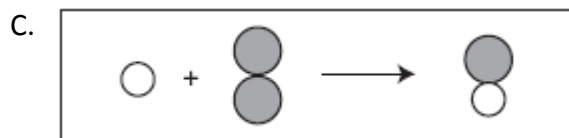
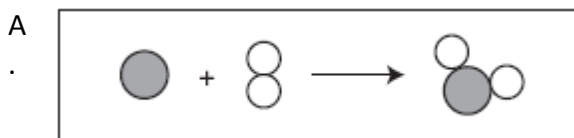
I am a 17-year veteran teacher of Massachusetts schools and currently work in Cohasset teaching 8th grade science. I have been teaching since the implementation of the MCAS and have borne witness to how the quality of public education has changed for the worse in our public schools as a result. I am here to testify 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.

Now, I realize that Cohasset does not seem to be a community that would have concerns about standardized tests and their uses. Over the history of the MCAS tests, we have scored in the higher percentiles in most areas. A majority of our students come from homes with comfortable incomes and opportunities that expand and enrich their lives and consequently our schools as a result. Cohasset will not likely feel the pressure from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to put our schools into receivership like was just done to the schools of Holyoke a few months ago. But the fact is our students none the less are feeling the negative effects that are caused by the high stakes nature of these tests.

As an 8th grade science teacher, I preside over the Science and Technology MCAS exam that covers the 6-8th grade curriculum standards. Since my students routinely score well on the test, I spend little direct instruction in preparation for the exam. What time I do take is used to show the inconsistencies in the how the question gauge their understanding in an effort to teach my students that more often than not, the way a question is asked is the most important factor in whether or not they are successful. I do this because I have learned that they come away from these tests disheartened and dejected about their abilities. I stress to my students that the results of these tests have little or no bearing on themselves as they are just a snapshot of 3 dozen or so arbitrary questions which cannot conceivably show their true abilities as a student.

Below are two questions that test the students understanding of the concept of conservation of mass.

1. The law of conservation of mass can be demonstrated by a chemical reaction. Which of the following models of a chemical reaction best represents the law of conservation of mass?



2. The picture below shows a demonstration of water changing from the liquid phase to the gas phase as it boils in a beaker.

Which of the following statements explains why this demonstration cannot be used to prove that matter is conserved during a change of phase?

- A. The change of phase is incomplete.
- B. Water is changing both phase and temperature.
- C. Water in the gas phase is lighter than liquid water.
- D. The change of phase is taking place in an open system.



The first question more than $\frac{3}{4}$ of my students are able to answer correctly while the second barely $\frac{1}{3}$ of them answer correctly. But either question would supposedly show how well they have mastered that concept. The correct answers are A and D respectively. This example shows how vagaries in the way questions are phrased has more of an effect student scores than other factors.

Yet these questions are going to be used to decide whether or not my students are competent? Whether or not I am an effective teacher? Whether or not my school is “failing?” The basic flawed nature of standardized tests to accurately gauge individual learning makes it a horrible tool to try and measure individual achievement. The fact that they are continued to be used to make high stakes judgements about real people’s lives is an absolute tragedy made even worse by the proposal to double down on this failing system of accountability by making it national through the adoption of Common Core and its PARCC assessment.

But more concerning is the effect that the testing emphasis has on the students themselves.

In my high school we have juniors who, each year, go down to the elementary schools to work with the younger kids. When they return they tell us they do not even recognize the classrooms they were in just a few years ago. The joy of learning that they remember, the activities and projects, have been replaced by the stress and anxiety in the quest for ever-improving scores as even the youngest kids fall prey to the high stakes atmosphere permeating the schools. Even the youngest feel as if their lives are going to be decided by the scores they receive on these tests.

Have any of you been into the classroom recently to see what the climate of learning is like now? Not just as a fly by to read a book or have a photo op. Have you honestly spoken to the teachers and the children about what is now valued by the schools as they strive to keep their scores high enough to ward off the bad publicity or the heavy hand of state interference? These are not the schools you and I went to years ago. The “extras” like arts, music, and language have been pared back if not cut altogether to use the time and money for test preparation.

Supposedly our society values the unique innovator that is always pushing against the tide, establishing their independence from artificial mental restraints, forging new and productive ways of thinking. Yet what we test can't be any farther from that ideal. We mandate that students must fit into a standard mold of thought and test that in an unimaginative and mind numbing process. Is it any wonder that the students I see coming into my classroom over the past ten years have seemingly lost the ability to take academic risk? They have learned the lesson well that there is a single answer that will show that they are a smart and valuable and anything less will cause them to be labeled as “needs improvement” or god-forbid, “failing.” Would you stick your neck out in that classroom? Would you want to send your kids into that classroom?

With all of the problems in standardized test quality, their illegitimate use to assess individual success, and their negative effect on the health and welfare of our children, I don't see how you can, in good conscience; do anything but recommend this bill to be sent to the house floor. The voters of Massachusetts deserve to have a full debate on what is undeniably the most valuable commodity our commonwealth possesses, the future of our children.

Sincerely,

Bob Erlandsen, 8th Grade Science Teacher
Cohasset Teacher's Association

cc: Joint Committee on Education Members & Staff
Sen. Patricia Jehlen, Vice Chair
Rep. Danielle Gregoire, Vice Chair