

Sen. Sonia R. 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 Madam Chairs:

My name is Carol DiAnna and I am a Special Educator at Morse Pond School, which is a 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> grade school in Falmouth, MA. I started teaching right out of college, but after a few years I left to pursue a career in Social Work. In 1996 I moved to Cape Cod and since there were no jobs in the human service field available, I started substitute teaching and got a permanent job at Morse Pond School in 1998. Getting that job was the best thing that has ever happened to me. I am 67 years old and I want to keep teaching for as long as I feel I can help all my students learn and help them to become productive citizens. Unfortunately, I am finding that task to be more challenging as the job is becoming more about teaching students to pass high stakes tests and less about really educating our students to be well-rounded and productive individuals.

I am here today in support of H340, An Act relative to a moratorium on high stakes testing and PARCC, filed by Rep. Marjorie Decker. I support this bill because I am finding that there is less and less time to really teach what matters and what is most important because more and more time is being devoted to preparing students for high stakes tests and actually taking the tests. Some people believe that what is being measured on high stakes tests is in fact measuring what makes a good student. I strongly disagree. A flood of recent research has supported the idea that creative problem solving, oral and written communication skills and critical thinking, plus social and emotional factors including motivation and the ability to collaborate are just as important in determining success as traditional academics. All of these are largely outside of the scope of most standardized tests, including the PARCC.

Here is an example of how the recent PARCC testing has interfered with what I believe is valuable learning. Every year in April, which is Poetry month, the general education teacher (with whom I work) and I devote time to teaching the students about the different types of poetry and then have them write their own poems in which they have to use a variety of literary devices. The general education teacher and I work in small groups to help students “tease out” their ideas and then formulate them into poems. This is an incredibly creative process that requires conversation and consultation which each child because writing is a contemplative process. At the end of the unit, we create a book of poetry for each child to have as a keepsake. Every year we end with an Author’s Tea. This is an event where tea and scones are served and each student chooses 2 poems to read aloud from her/his collection. This year we were unable to have the “Author’s Tea” because

so much time was spent on practice PARCC tests and on the actual undertaking of PARCC tests. Now some of you may think that an “Author’s Tea” is really not very important. Well, if so, I disagree because you would only have to be in the room to witness these students’ pride and confidence as they get up before their peers and invited guests and read their poems. To me – and I know to the children I teach – being part of an activity such as this is worth so much more than just going home with a book of poems.

This year at Morse Pond School we have had a service learning initiative called Project Generation On. One period during our 6-day cycle, students have worked on various community oriented projects. It has been shown that service-learning can promote a sense of connectedness to the school and the community. A sense of connectedness includes feeling valued by community members; feeling responsible for the welfare of the community; having pride in one’s community; and a high tendency to take action for the benefit of the community.

Also, service-learning can promote social-emotional skills. Researchers have found a statistically significant impact of service-learning programs on multiple outcomes, including improved social skills; lower levels of problem and delinquent behavior; better cooperation skills in the classroom; improved psychological well-being; and a better ability to set goals and adjust behavior to reach these goals. This year the culminating activity was an “ordinary heroes” project. Students in every class brainstormed the names of Falmouth residents who they felt were people who, in the words of one of the recipients, “do what has to be done to help the community.” Each class interviewed their chosen hero and wrote a short biography of that person. There was an “Ordinary Heroes” breakfast where each recipient was acknowledged and awarded a plaque. I think everyone would agree that these are qualities that we want our children to learn and put into practice. Unfortunately, this initiative is being jeopardized due to the fact that many teachers are worried about the outcomes of high stakes testing and they feel that we need to use this time for more practice and drill. Our educational system is truly in a sad state when “The Race to the Top” is based only on scores on high stakes tests to the detriment of pursuits such as these.

Another concern of mine is that these tests do not fairly deal with students with learning disabilities. As a special educator, I work with students who have Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorders, Anxiety Disorders, Specific Learning Disabilities and some who are on the Autism Spectrum (Aspergers). These students are quirky and loveable and most are very hardworking and want to do well in school...and most do well with the supports provided to them. However, high stakes tests do not test the grit and determination that I see in these students. I can recall one student with ADHD that I worked with. Of course, he found it challenging to sit still and focus but he was a hard-working child who liked to work in small groups and would stay after school to get help with his homework not because he was incapable of doing the work but because he needed someone next to him to help him focus. Making a child, such as this one, sit through hours of high stakes testing is, in my eyes, cruel and unusual punishment.

Over the last few years, I have seen an increase of children with anxiety disorders. Of course, I cannot state for certain why this increase is occurring. But what I can say is that

the increased pressure to perform proficiently on high stakes tests and using it as a graduation requirement does negatively affect these children. During our recent PARCC testing, I had one student dissolve into tears because he did not know how to solve a math problem on the test. And this is a student who does very well in math class and who has scored proficient on previous MCAS math tests. He is also an avid reader and always has a book handy to read.

This leads me another concern, which is that the reading level of the passages in the PARCC test are above the cognitive level of the children being tested. The stated purpose of the Common Core State Standards and the aligned PARCC test was to "raise the bar" based on the notion that in order to be "college and career ready" students needed to be reading more complex text starting in their earliest school years. The PARCC sample tests show that they have certainly raised the bar when it comes to making reading comprehension passages quite difficult at every grade level.

Russ Walsh scrutinized reading passages from PARCC. Russ Walsh is currently the Director of Human Resources and Staff Development in a New Jersey school district. Over the past 30 years he has been a reading specialist, Director of Language Arts for a K-12 district and adjunct professor at Rider and St. Joseph's Universities. His results show that the passages chosen for grades 6 through 8 are about two grade levels above the readability for the grade and age of the children by measures other than the Lexile level. The results of testing children on these passages seems to be quite predictable. Students will score lower on the tests than on previous tests. My question is why are we asking our children to read material that is above their age and grade level? Just because tests are harder doesn't prove that they align well with what students need to know to be college and career ready.

Anya Kamentz, an education writer and researcher states, "There is no evidence that the effects of high stakes tests – more teaching to the test, more closing of schools and firing of teachers –will indeed prepare more students to succeed in college. In fact, we can be pretty sure it won't because that's what we've been trying with little success since No Child Left Behind was passed twelve years ago."

I believe it is time to re-think how we can better evaluate our students and teachers and our schools because using high stakes tests for this purpose is clearly not the best solution. This I why I support House bill 340. Eliminating high stakes tests and eliminating them as a requirement for graduation and teacher evaluations should be an opportunity to develop new ways to improve our schools and provide our children with a well rounded education. And this I am convinced is something we all want and it is what our students, teachers and schools deserve.

Sincerely,

Carol DiAnna  
Falmouth Educator's Association