

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:

I am a special education teacher at White Brook Middle School in Easthampton, Massachusetts. I have worked at White Brook for eight years. White Brook is a public middle school for grades five through eight, with approximately 800 students. Before teaching at White Brook, I was a special education teacher for six years at Valley West Day School in Chicopee. Valley West is a private school for students with emotional and behavioral struggles, with approximately 100 students in grades three through twelve. These two teaching positions represent fourteen years with special education students in inclusion, pull-out, and self-contained classrooms.

My first MCAS experience was fourteen years ago with a middle school boy named James. James could not read. He could not locate and identify sounds for any words more than one syllable. He was a student who lived in various foster homes, and then a group home when there wasn't a foster placement. He liked to store his personal items - deodorant, hair gel, toothpaste - in the bottom drawer of my file cabinet because otherwise kids in the group home would steal them. As a first-time MCAS proctor, I was given the test and a separate room for James to complete it. I read the script, handed him the test, and pointed to the start page.

"I can't read the words," he said.

I looked back at my instruction sheet for a description of the type of support I was allowed to provide: read directions. "I can't help you with the words," I said. "Just try your best."

He groaned, flipped the pages, put his head down, and then picked it back up when I said his name. "I don't know this," he said. He again asked me to read him the words on the test. I told him again that I couldn't. He then filled in the first bubble, then next, and all remaining bubbles until a straight line of bubbles ran down the answer form.

"There," he said and pushed the test back across the desk to me.

I've continued to proctor MCAS every year since that first experience. During the last several years, I've read the tests aloud to the very few students whose reading disabilities meet the state's qualifications for an adult to read the test.

Last month I spent 20 days reading tests aloud. For four weeks I proctored PARCC and MCAS tests for different grade levels on rotating days: 3 days of PARCC Grade 6 ELA PBA; 3 days of

PARCC Grade 8 ELA PBA; 2 days of PARCC Grade 6 Math PBA; 2 days of PARCC Grade 8 Math PBA; 2 days of MCAS Grade 5 Science; 2 days of PARCC Grade 6 ELA EOY; 2 days of PARCC Grade 8 ELA EOY; 2 days of PARCC Grade 6 Math EOY; 2 days of PARCC Grade 8 Math EOY.

On the first testing day – PARCC Grade 6 ELA PBA – three students sat around a circular table with colored folders blocking their tests. They followed along as I read the text aloud to them and slowed my pace to avoid mispronouncing multisyllabic words layered within an awkward dialect within the text. One student immediately filled in the bubbles after I read a multi-part question that would've required returning to text and reviewing multiple quotes within the passages. Another student asked for the question to be repeated. The third student looked up, shrugged his shoulders, and said "I have no idea." Within this same testing session, after reading multi-part questions requiring analyzing of quotations from the passage and interpreting an author's purpose, students were then asked to write an essay analyzing multiple passages and themes within the texts.

On the second testing day – PARCC Grade 6 ELA PBA – I flipped through the test book thinking there'd been an error because there wasn't a STOP sign after twenty pages, then twenty-five, then thirty. I found the Stop sign on page 34 and looked quickly back at the Test Administrator's guide for the estimated time for this test: 60 minutes. I slowed my reading pace again to ensure I didn't mispronounce or overemphasize words within lengthy sentences. The content was again rote and monotonous with multi-part questions requiring numerous references to text to verify context. One student immediately filled bubbles. Another asked for questions repeated. The third shrugged and said "I don't know." The test session included another essay task for analyzing passages and themes.

I bit my lip and breathed deep to hide from the students my anger at being required to give them this test. I wanted to tell them that if I could've refused to give them this test, I would've, that the test was unfair, that it required too much in one sitting, and that the multi-part questions and long quotes from the passages were written as if they were meant to confuse them, not measure their knowledge. I wanted to tell them that in real life, a writer does not write a perfect essay in one sitting, and a writer definitely isn't measured and assessed based on their first draft.

I wanted to tell them that when analyzing a text, a writer takes time to carefully read the question, then each text. A writer returns to the question and texts while jotting notes about ideas, which takes time and often a break from working. I wanted to tell them that writing can be so difficult and so interesting at the same time. That following our brains through the thought process from thinking to writing is a time-consuming process that can bring out our biggest feelings of frustration and our largest feelings of satisfaction. I wanted to tell them that this test was dumb.

Instead of saying all of this, I bit my lip and each time a student asked me to explain a question or define a word, I said: "I'm sorry. I can't tell you. Try your best."

I'm not allowed to talk specifically about the passages I've seen on the tests, yet I am expected to accept it when the tests negatively label students who I know to be successful in class. I am expected to remain silent when I read aloud poorly written test content created by a company

making profits off the fees charged to school districts to pay for each test. I'm expected not to scream out and express disgust and shock when asked to "bag and save" any test that has been vomited on.

High stakes tests invalidate the process of accepting and supporting each student as an individual learner. A student's strengths and struggles exist regardless of whether they can score well on a standardized test. A teacher's job is to find student strengths and struggles and support the process of recognizing one while working on the other.

Today a student who for months has refused to talk and has only nodded yes and no to direct questions, spoke to me in complete sentences explaining why she added a second row to a one digit multiplication problem.

Today a student who has struggled with absenteeism and daily stomachaches ate lunch with peers in the lunchroom, after months of eating alone in the classroom.

Today three struggling readers who use avoidance behaviors such as asking to use the bathroom or get a drink from the fountain whenever there is a reading assignment used laptops to locate recipes for our class cookbook project and read the ingredients list aloud to me as I jotted their list of needed items. When I asked each one of them to read the recipe instructions to me so that we could determine which kitchen supplies were needed, they didn't once ask to leave the class to take a walk for a drink at the fountain. They read.

When a student is accepted as an individual and given the time (and support) needed to acquire new knowledge, use existing knowledge, and process all the information, learning will occur. When a student is expected to perform well on one set of tests with mixed content and a limited time frame, learning will stop. Assessing students, measuring schools, and evaluating teachers based on one set of tests is an illogical practice that ignores all aspects of true learning and real growth.

When I explained to students that I was going to be absent from school today because I was going to Boston to meet with legislators and express my opinion and experience with MCAS and PARCC, one student said "ask them what the point is."

Today is the first of what I hope will be many days where teachers like me will be allowed to begin speaking publicly about our experiences. I ask that you support H340 and join teachers and students in taking the next three years to review and assess the point of testing.

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,

Carrie Foley
Special Education Teacher
Easthampton Education Association

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