

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:

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 it be reported out of committee favorably as soon as possible.

I am an educator of over 25 years and I work as the Literacy Specialist in the Newton Public Schools. I have administered the MCAS tests as a teacher, have been the building coordinator for the MCAS for many years, and this year I have been the PARCC coordinator for my building. I feel compelled to speak out about this test after my experiences this year. After watching our 3rd-, 4th- and 5th-graders take the PARCC I am convinced that it is a flawed test and that data collected from it are not reliable.

In our data-driven world, the results of standardized tests carry a great deal of weight — they are used to evaluate students, teachers, schools and school systems. The results even affect property values. We need to be sure that the instruments used are effective and reliable. The PARCC test is not an effective instrument because of serious flaws in the test.

The reading level of the passages is too high. Analyses done of the passages in this test show that many are a year or two above grade level. For an 8-year-old, reading a passage that would be right for a 10-year-old is quite challenging. Anecdotally, we hear that some fifth-graders had to use information from a John F. Kennedy speech on the Peace Corps — and we know that although he was an inspiring orator, he was not speaking to an audience of 10-year-olds! We hear that some eighth-graders had a passage from James Joyce — usually read by literature majors in college!

Not only are the passages too difficult, the questions are phrased in ways that are confusing and difficult to understand. This would seem to defy one of the first principles of effective test design. We know the questions are too hard because we have found repeatedly that adults (parents and teachers) find the questions, on the only practice test provided by PARCC, difficult to understand. This affected not only the English Language Arts test, but also the Math test, where the problems are set up, and questions asked in language and ways that stymied children and adults. When an adult with a Ph.D. is confused by questions, surely the problem is with the test and not with the person reading the test.

The technology interface of the computer-based test was not user-friendly even if the end user was an adult, let alone an 8-year-old. It would be difficult to determine if a student got something wrong because the technology was faulty. Often students could not figure out where the question was on a page because of the use of multiple windows and poor design. An example of the is poor design is that 8-, 9- and 10-year-olds are asked to read up to three passages in a window on their computer that is about 4" X 4". They are asked to write essays in a window that is 1 1/4" X 4" - they can never see the entire text they are composing. If we had to read and write anything of importance with such technological constraints, we

would find it frustrating. Why do this to young children?

The paper test was equally flawed. Problems would be set up on one page, questions on the next page; Part A of a question would be on a different page from Part B. In addition, the qualitative experience of taking the paper- versus the computer-based test was so different that it has to skew the data derived from the two different forms of the test.

There are major equity issues that surround the use of computerized tests in general. Many students across Massachusetts have limited access to computers. I don't need to tell you that more affluent students have an unfair advantage over less affluent students.

This brings me to a major problem with standardized tests in general: they only reinforce the "ZIP-code effect". We already know which ZIP codes will do better than other ZIP codes, we don't need to administer these tests in grade after grade to find this out. The many tests that our children are subjected to only confirm unequal opportunity in our society. Decades of data from SAT scores tell us that the strongest correlation that can be made is between parental income and test scores. "On every test section, moving up an income category (\$20,000) was associated with an average score boost of over 12 points." (<http://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/08/27/sat-scores-and-family-income/>) These tests rarely tell us more than which students are better test takers.

A troubling issue about the PARCC test is that it is being administered by a private, for-profit company that has a checkered past. This year Pearson administered 5 million tests over several states. Are parents comfortable with important data about their children, including demographic data, being in the hands of a for-profit company? Who will guarantee that this information will be used in ethical and responsible ways and not used to boost the earnings of the largest publisher in the world?

I urge lawmakers to try out the PARCC practice test for themselves. It is an eye-opening experience! Try out a test at say, the fourth-grade level, and see how you do on it. Then think about whether you want this test to be used to evaluate your child, or grandchild, your niece or nephew. Think about whether you want a child you care about to be reduced to a test score by this flawed instrument.

Sincerely,

Kalpana Guttman,
Newton Teachers Association

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