

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 a retiree of the Malden Public Schools where I worked for over 31 years as a speech/language therapist. And I am not a fan of high-stakes testing. Thus, I am not a fan of MCAS or of Common Core and its high-stakes tests, PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers).

I believe I first heard Common Core being discussed under the initiative entitled "Race to the Top." To be honest I didn't pay much attention to it initially because the subject first came up during the school year, at the end of which I was going to retire from the Malden Public Schools.

Now I don't claim to be the ultimate expert, but I have looked into this matter a bit. And I'd like to share with you what I've learned. This just might be a different take on the subject for you. And I thank you for this opportunity to do so.

I'm going to discuss Common Core along with the PARCC tests because PARCC drives the curriculum that is being taught in schools across the country. Common Core (a nationwide education initiative, officially known as the Common Core State Standards Initiative) is the product of three private organizations. It is a set of national education standards, initially adopted by more than 40 states. Through the "Race to the Top" initiative, the Obama administration told cities and towns that they could receive lots of money if they, the cities and towns, would agree to adopt the Common Core standards. So, essentially, the states were bribed to accept Common Core via the "Race to the Top" initiative. Bribing the states to accept the standards was an under-the-radar sneaky move that has nationalized American education, just like any other socialist nation's educational system. But the last time I looked, our fair land was not yet completely socialist even though there are those who are desperately trying to push it in that direction. The taxpayers were/are funding the schools but they ... we ... were not consulted on this massive change.

Common Core is everywhere. You might have heard that it was created by educators, but it was not. It was created by bureaucrats and big business. The standards for Common Core were created by private organizations in D.C. without input from teachers or parents and without any kind of study or pilot test to prove their effectiveness. This was never tested anywhere so that means current students are the guinea pigs. If your kids are currently students most places in this country, then chances are they're being affected by Common Core, and, unfortunately, they can be counted among the guinea pigs.

Common Core has created strange bedfellows. Many in our political world have come together in their stance against Common Core: the Liberals and Conservatives, the Democrats and Republicans, also Independents and Libertarians. The left and the right have come together on this. It has erroneously been reported that opposition to Common Core is a GOP, or Republican, issue or that any and all opposition is due to political reasons but, in all actuality, opposition to Common Core has nothing to do with politics ... both sides are opposed to it. This is not a partisan issue.

Common Core was not passed by Congress. No, it was never voted on by Congress, the Department of Education, or by state or local governments. You might have heard that it came from the states, but it did not. Common Core was contrived by a group of test executives with two academic content specialists in Math and ELA (or English Language Arts), and I heard that neither of these two content specialists approved the final standards. The standards have been copyrighted and they cannot be changed and this is resulting in a loss of local and state control. Before Common Core, we used to determine standards locally, not top-down from Washington. Individual communities hired teachers, chose the curriculum, and managed their own schools. Decisions about education were made as close to the students themselves as possible. Bureaucrats in Washington and from corporations didn't dictate test questions or decide which textbooks were best for kids; the leadership of individual schools made those decisions. If parents didn't like what their kids were learning, they knew exactly to whom they could talk.

Through Common Core, teachers are required to "teach to the test" and this takes all individuality out of teaching. The same thing happened with MCAS. Common Core, MCAS, and any high-stakes testing take the joy out of the profession that teachers love ... or should I say, "that teachers used to love?" Teachers are now required to teach the curriculum word for word. The standards drive the instruction. Teachers are feeling like robots. Lessons are little more than data-dispensing sessions that require the use of scripts. This is not a curriculum but instead it's actually a set of standardized tests. The establishment of a national standard is simply a backdoor way of nationalizing curriculum. Most of the problem is that standards drive testing and then this testing, in turn, drives the curriculum.

Teachers are not able to do beloved and time-tested projects with their students anymore because there is so much other stuff to do that is based on the Common Core. Teachers are limited in the amount of creativity they can give to their students. There is no more time for the creative, enriching, educational, and fun lessons/activities/projects that teachers have shared with their students for years. The fun is being taken out of teaching for the teachers and, to me, it seems like the fun is being taken out of learning for the students.

The supposedly rigorous standards in Common Core claim to adequately prepare youth for higher education, but it actually seems to be dumbing down schools across the country. For example, one thing the standards fail to teach is how to write in cursive. How will students eventually be able to read original historical documents or sign their names without knowing cursive writing? And I know that cursive writing happens to be easier for some students (and for some adults) to use than is printing (or non-cursive writing).

Since retiring I've heard more and more about Common Core. I began to hear mostly negative reports about it so I decided to learn more. As I was doing my research, I was reminded of one particular experience I'd had at school in the years leading up to my retirement. I had come up with an idea for a possible program for one or maybe more than one of my school's Early Release Days. I made my proposal, which ended up not being adopted, but one of the reasons it was not even considered was that all the Professional Development Days for the remainder of that school year (and I think for the upcoming school year as well) had already been scheduled and were going to be taken up with such and such an educational publishing company coming to the school and "training" our teachers how to use this company's educational publishing materials. This just didn't make sense to me. It kind of blew my mind. I mean, if I understood this correctly, a company (a business) was going to come in to the school and instruct our teachers how they must teach their students using these specific educational publishing materials? Non-teachers training our teachers and making demands of them? Who died and made them the bosses? Our teachers were being trained to use the materials exactly, and only exactly, as they were being instructed to use them. They were expected to make no changes, to not veer one iota from the script given them in the materials, and to not use their creativity or imagination to make a published lesson or activity more fun and exciting. I wondered, "Do these companies have the right to do that?" And why would professional educators require year-long professional development to learn how to use educational materials? Teachers are already trained, experienced, professional educators. They know how to use educational books and other educational materials. They are intelligent. They are creative. They can figure this out. Why does a company have to come in and dictate to them how to do their jobs? I didn't understand. I still don't understand. But, then again, there's much in this world I do not understand ...

In the few years prior to my retirement I observed big changes taking place in the schools. I noticed how teachers were suddenly strictly bound to these "educational books and materials." I actually saw these strictly regulated scripts in action. Those teachers who did veer, and who perhaps spent 13 minutes instead of 10 minutes on a particular concept/idea/lesson, were later reprimanded. I know this sounds ridiculous. I hope it sounds ridiculous. But I kid you not. This was happening and it is probably still happening ... and maybe it's even worse now. I began to spend time in other teachers' classrooms and I saw how all students were expected to be able to grasp concepts within a certain amount of minutes because, once those minutes had passed, the teacher was required to then move on to the next concept or activity ... or, if not, there were consequences ... for the teacher.

Look, not all students are the same. Not all students learn the same way or at the same rate. Not all teachers teach the same way. Members of the School Committee, you know this! Students have their own learning styles and teachers have their own teaching styles. I watched as some of the students were completely lost in the classroom but ... oh, well ... time was a-wastin' and it was time to move on to the next scripted, prescribed lesson ... or else. I'm not saying that no good stuff is happening in the schools because I happen to be well aware of the resourcefulness of teachers, highly trained professionals who are fully capable of figuring out a way to somehow supplement their lessons with bits and pieces of interesting, fun, and educational stuff. But it's difficult for them to do so ... very difficult indeed.

Many kids become stressed out about high-stakes tests, which tend to linger for weeks and months ... a few days here ... a day or two there. It's hard to describe to non-school staff the atmosphere that permeates a school when high-stakes testing is being administered. The stress level goes up several notches.

One thing about kids and tests is that some kids (some adults even) simply do not test well. Such kids might be plenty bright but they tend not to do well in a testing situation. So those kids probably aren't going to do well on high-stakes testing, are they? And what about the kids who are just beginning to learn English or who might've been in the country only a few years? And what about the kids who might take a little longer to learn? Or kids who need to be taught in a specific way or might need to have questions expressed with particular wording in order to understand them? We used to account for the learning differences in kids by addressing these learning differences and teaching students the best ways they could learn. Not so anymore. It is dictated that kids need to learn within a prescribed amount of time the concepts that are being taught in the way they are required to be taught ... and this is dictated by companies. It doesn't matter whether or not these kids need longer periods of time to learn or whether or not these kids need to be taught via different methods.

You may have heard about the confusing math problems in Common Core, problems that are leaving kids in tears over their Math homework and confusing many parents, even those who work professionally with math, such as engineers. Some Math experts say this marks the end of improvement in education. I remember some years ago ... the good old days, per se ... when English classes involved words and language and Math classes involved numbers, except maybe for word problems, my personal nemesis. This difference allowed kids who were good in English and not so good in Math to at least excel in English, and it allowed kids who were good in Math and not so good in English to at least excel in Math. But years ago suddenly Math became riddled with words ... and not just in word problems. And what happened was that the kids who used to at least excel in Math could no longer do so because the words / the English / the language had taken over Math, and, understandably, caused them difficulty. That never seemed right to me. Well, being a speech/language therapist who worked with kids, and who still sometimes works with kids, who have issues with speech, with understanding language, with expressing themselves verbally, etc., throwing more and more words and language into Math caused my students who used to be good at Math to then have difficulty not only in English classes but to also have difficulty in Math. The added words, the added language, complicated things for many of my students and for other students as well.

Common Core Math doesn't make sense ... well, it doesn't make sense to me and to countless others. In the real world, simplification is valued over complication ... not so with Common Core Math. The Common Core standards teach math in such a way that allows for $3 \times 4 = 11$, which is not considered to be a wrong answer, according to Common Core ... it's considered to be correct, as long as you know how you arrived at this answer. Y'see, if students are able to explain their reasoning and how they came up with their answer in words, in oral explanation, in pictures, but they just got the final number wrong, then their "incorrect" answer is marked as correct. One Illinois school official stated, "We're really focusing on the "how." And that's all well and good, but what about focusing on the right answer, the correct answer? It's more important that the students can explain how they arrived at the

final answer than getting it right? It matters less if they answer 3 X 4 incorrectly as long as they can explain how they arrived at their final answer?

Now I know there are some folks who argue that Common Core Math is helpful to them and that the Common Core Math method is the way they, these particular folks, understand Math. Well, to those folks, I say, "That's terrific that you have found a way that enables Math to make sense to you!" And maybe Math can be taught the Common Core way to students who seem unable to learn Math through more conventional methods. But for the vast majority of students, please, please do not subject them to such lengthy, complicated, roundabout Math lessons. If a student is experiencing difficulty with the usual methods of teaching Math, then try other methods, one of the methods possibly being the Common Core method but maybe leaving out the silly politically correct language that has somehow found its way into some of the lessons and probably test questions. The Common Core method of teaching Math is clearly not for everyone.

Regarding ELA (or English Language Arts) ... David Coleman is the lead architect for the ELA portion of Common Core. He is not an educator. He is a businessman. He has been quoted as saying, "Teachers will teach towards the test," and that seems to be just fine with him. My problem with this exists on several levels but one main issue I have is this ... the person/persons who control the test seem to be able to control the curriculum. And it appears to me that those who control the curriculum can then control the students and how they think.

So what's curious is that this Coleman guy has no interest in narrative writing and he is no fan of classic literature, so he slashed most classic literature from the education most kids in America will know. What did Coleman do to ELA? He mandated that dreary informational texts ... not beautiful, classic literature ... but dreary informational text is to be the main emphasis in English classes, incrementally worsening as kids get older. Now what is informational text, you may ask? Well, it includes page-turning thrillers such as insulation installation manuals, presidential executive orders, environmental programming, and Federal Reserve documents. These, and more exciting tales, are actually on the recommended reading list. Now I ask you ... who in their right mind wants to read government handbooks? Your children? And what kid will learn a love of reading from reading any government handbook? According to the English content specialist in the group, "These standards left students with an empty skill set lacking literary knowledge." Common Core standards de-emphasize literary works like Huck Finn in favor of dull and boring informational texts. Kids will actually be less informed and less educated.

I've also heard that in Advanced Placement American History at the high school level, much of our history will now be left out, including much about our founding fathers, Hitler, the Holocaust ... but there's plenty about what we, as Americans, have done wrong in the world ... but none of the good. In other words, our students are being taught a watered-down version of American history and a slanted viewpoint as well, thus leading to a rewriting of our history. On the Advanced Placement test none of these things (our founding fathers, the Holocaust, etc.) will be included. If a teacher feels it's important for the students to know this omitted stuff (and it is important!) then it's up to her to teach it on her own but ... she is told she will do so at the risk of her students because teaching the omitted

history will take time away from teaching the content that will actually be on the test. So we'll end up with kids who don't actually know their country's history, and who only know a slanted view of our country's history, and then they become adults and teach a probably even more watered-down and slanted version of history to their kids, and so on, and so on.

Can you tell I am not a big fan?

And something that's really sweet ... **NOT** ... is that data is being gathered on students through the PARCC test data collection ... doesn't **that** sound scary? The data that is being collected includes not only how your kids are doing in reading and Math but also interesting private tidbits like family income range, religious affiliation, how much work kids are doing on the weekend, etc. Some of this collected data has nothing to do with schools, nothing to do with how your kid is reading but has everything to do with providing specific, very sensitive information to people who will then turn around and market products to those kids. Whew ...

A big thing about MCAS and its sister high-stakes tests in other states ... and a big thing about Common Core ... is money and the companies that have been making lots of money and that continue to make lots of money. These companies make even more money when students fail and have to take high-stakes tests over again. Then school systems have to buy more tests for the students to retake the tests. So, unfortunately, there's a real incentive for these companies to have kids fail the tests. The amount of profits generated from these tests is huge but these tests don't truly measure kids' abilities. And you might be denied a diploma if you don't pass the PARCC tests, but, of course, MCAS already did that. So, y'see, this is all about money, and generating data, and the government and corporations figuring out what's going on with our kids. There's big money in Common Core, and the educational companies are reaping their rewards. It's just wrong.

And, in an effort to hide the fact that a school system is using Common Core and its associated tests, some school systems are opting not to use the name Common Core ... they change the name ... so parents don't realize that their kids are actually being taught a Common Core curriculum ... and they also change the name of the high-stakes tests associated with Common Core, again called the PARCC tests. For example, in Florida, the name Common Core has been changed to "The Sunshine State Standards" or "The Florida Standards," but it's the same thing. The Florida standards are really Common Core standards perhaps with a few minor changes. The state of Texas is using something named C-SCOPE but I understand it's just as bad.

And the Common Core standards were written behind closed doors. There's something very secretive about curriculum adoption and the whole process of choosing companies to write the tests. No one in society is allowed in to see it. It's very secretive. This is not something **we** all decided to do. So what's up with that?

Common Core happens to be funded, at least in part, with money from Bill Gates. But, in response to much growing opposition to Common Core, Gates himself has since called for a delay in the use of Common Core-linked tests. So ... the rolling out of Common Core has been a disaster. Several states

have efforts underway to repeal participation in Common Core. Some states have already opted out and many more have begun to opt out.

What can parents do? Some in the country have managed to say NO to Common Core in their school systems and in their states. Some in the country have managed to turn things around and they've gotten rid of Common Core even though it had initially been adopted in their school systems and states. There is a very specific way to defeat this. The tests are what fuel Common Core and PARCC ... a way to stop Common Core and PARCC is to refuse the tests. Parents can refuse to allow their children to take the tests. This has happened in New York and Georgia and all over the country. And an added bonus to refusing the test is that they won't get all that data on one's child if s/he doesn't take the test.

A new SAT is coming out and we don't know what will be on it, but we know some things that are not on it. And these new SATs are, unfortunately, being developed by our old buddy, Coleman. The SATs are now being centered on teaching the Civil War without any mention of Lincoln being assassinated or the Gettysburg Address.

There *are* folks who actually like Common Core. Proponents claim that individual states are free to teach the standards any way they choose ... but that's not true. In reality, Common Core amounts to a national curriculum because all the new standardized testing, the PARCC, is based on Common Core. Proponents also say the standards are rigorous but actually these standards are not as rigorous as they're claimed to be. The standards are just different, designed for an industrial model of school. And one teacher I heard of who claimed to have had a positive Common Core experience has stated that Common Core brings a critical thinking and cognitive awareness component that will ensure kids are not like robots. Hmmm. Everything I've read, everything I've heard, discounts this.

Look, this is a factory line type of model. Kids are looked at as if they are all the same. Kids become test-taking drones. They learn to take the test. They learn to answer the right question on the multiple-choice test. They can't figure out what to do beyond the test. There is no true authentic learning taking place. It's disheartening to see kids go through the factory line. You either make it or you don't. You either fall off the line or you keep going. There's something wrong with listening to corporations that are collecting data on our kids and that are telling us to train our kids to do this or that, because that's the kind of worker that they happen to need. That's like Communist China stuff, manipulating kids to achieve the ends of these big corporations.

Every child is unique. Every child has something to offer. These tests don't measure any of that.

My husband and I are relieved that our own kids are now grown and not being affected by this. But we have a grandchild so this does greatly concern us. The conversation about Common Core and PARCC needs to continue. Hopefully, some enlightened souls have already begun this conversation in our fair state. And this conversation needs to involve parents, teachers, and administrators ... NOT companies.

I heard of a TN high school student who spoke at his local school board meeting. He stated the following: "Standards-based education is ruining the way we teach and learn. The task of teaching is never quantifiable. If everything I've learned in high school is a measurable objective I haven't learned

anything. Haven't we gone too far with data?" He was told that this is just how things work and that he should just accept that this is how things are, but that response didn't sit well with him, and he responded, " Things work this way due to bureaucratic convenience."

According to our founding fathers, we teach to free minds, to inspire, to equip ... the careers will come naturally. These standards reflect a mistrust of teachers. There will never be a system by which teaching can be accurately measured. Creativity, appreciation, inquisitiveness are the purpose of education. They're impossible to scale or to measure.

I'm sickened/disheartened by this.

Members of the Committee, I have hope that you, in your wisdom, will do something about this. I'm begging of you that you do your own research into Common Core and that you decide for yourselves what is in the best interest of the students of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Please look at both sides of the argument, not just the rosy picture being painted by the government and the educational corporations. I respectfully request that you please reconsider using Common Core and the PARCC tests and anything resembling them but with a different name.

Thus, 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).

I hope you will forgive me for taking up so much of your time. As you can tell, I feel passionately about this subject and I have a lot to say.

Thank you very much for your attention. I wish you all well.

Sincerely,

Louise London-Choate

Malden Education 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