

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:

We, members of the Framingham Teachers Association, are writing in support of H340, an Act Relative to a Moratorium on High- Stakes Testing filed by Rep. Marjorie Decker (D-Cambridge). We request the committee report it out favorably as soon as possible.

This year, third-eighth graders in Framingham Public Schools took the test known as PARCC.

We cannot stay silent as PARCC makes its way into our classrooms. In the words of Soujourner Truth at the 1851 Women’s Convention, “Where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter.” Nationally, we’re hearing a racket about the problem of standardized tests driving instruction, knocking the process of education clearly out of kilter. Here are a few reasons why:

1. Test Prep takes time away from REAL Reading, Writing and Math Instruction.

For example, leading up to the PARCC exam, regular instruction is suspended in reading and writing classes in order to prepare our students for the kind of passages and questions they will encounter. On average we will cancel six weeks of reading and writing instruction to prepare for the tests. The time for independent reading, read-alouds and word study is replaced with repeated practice answering multiple choice questions and writing multi-paragraph essays in less time than they will ever be asked to do in high school or college. This does not even account for the instruction time lost to actually taking the PARCC tests. This year students will lose seven additional learning days in grade three, eight days in grade four and nine days in grade five while the children take the PARCC exam (in addition to science MCAS in fifth grade). Some say that because students will only be allowed 75 minutes to complete the test, there will still be plenty of time for regular instruction. However, it will take at least an additional 40 minutes to get students appropriately seated, hand out the materials and read the lengthy directions. This also does not account for the fact that some students are allowed up to the entire school day to complete the tests – we cannot introduce new concepts with part of the class still testing. Furthermore,

PARCC is only one of many state and district mandated tests that our children have to take each year, such as MAP, ACCESS, MCAS-ALT.

2. Test Prep Negatively Affects Children's Love of Learning

We became elementary school teachers because we wanted to help foster a love of learning. We teach our students that reading can bring joy and that math is magical. But that message is nullified when we start to prepare our students for standardized tests. We tell our students that they can no longer talk with their friends to puzzle out a math solution, or consult the word wall to help them understand unfamiliar words. We tell our students that they need to read quickly because on testing days they will have a mere 75 minutes to read two or three stories, answer multiple choice questions and write an essay. As we completely undermine what we have spent so much time building, our students begin to lose their passion for reading and math. If we extinguish the passion to learn at such a young age, how are we preparing them for “college and careers?”

3. Standardized Tests Punish English Language Learners, Students with Special Needs and Students with Anxiety

As teachers, we constantly strive to meet the individual needs of our students by differentiating instruction so that everyone can access the curriculum. But that is not the message during testing time. For the first time in the school year, all students are expected to read independently at their given grade level. Russ Walsh, a literacy expert, recently determined that the majority of passages and questions on the sample PARCC tests are actually two years beyond the expected reading level for the grade. He summarized his findings by saying that the tests will provide very limited information for parents and teachers, and a tremendous amount of frustration for children. Students with special needs and those whose first language is not English are likely to struggle. Every year, children who are anxious about school freeze up, become ill, and/or are reduced to tears by these types of tests.

4. PARCC= Failing our Teachers and Students

The results of the PARCC tests will no doubt feed into the education reform mantra that our kids, teachers and schools are failing. Each year, there are wholesale changes to curriculum because the goal of education has become “passing the test.” We have to scramble to create lesson plans for these constantly changing expectations. How can we do our best work if we are not properly trained in the curriculum? A new lesson requires time for teachers to understand the concept deeply and determine how best to present it. It requires time to think about how to engage students in the lesson, how to accommodate for individual student needs, and to gather the necessary materials. We need time to create visual supports, and to consider how to assess students' understanding of what is taught. Multiply that time by four or more subjects in a day in

elementary school, and you can see how it becomes impossible for teachers to be effective when curriculum is changed every year to fit a test.

Excellent teaching is aligned to the individual learning needs of students, and it is out of kilter to have to teach to the expectations of a standardized test. These sterile tests and the accompanying weeks of artificial test-prep stand in stark contrast to the rich and varied learning experiences we strive for in the classroom. By way of this testing, we see the curriculum narrowing, a false definition of educational success expanding, and the appreciation of school and life-long learning vanishing.

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