

Good morning members of the Joint Committee on Education. My name is Rob Powers, and I am here today to implore this committee to report favorably on H340 – An Act Relative to a Moratorium on High Stakes Testing and PARCC.

As a social studies teacher at Apponequet Regional High School, I know what it takes to allow my students to be successful. Lesson plans are carefully crafted to be sure that the outcomes are clear and the process is as student-centered as possible. The more authentic the learning, the more meaningful the connections, the more successful my students will become. I'm fortunate to teach a subject where I am not constrained by a standardized test. While my colleagues in Biology devoted their entire class last week to MCAS prep, my World History class pondered the conditions that are necessary to maintain a stable democracy. Earlier this semester, while my freshmen spent time practicing exam questions down the hall, my world cultures class Skyped with an aid worker on a food distribution assignment in Ethiopia to help them develop their own policy proposals regarding immigration and humanitarian assistance. That's not to say that my colleagues will not seek and provide such authentic learning experiences for their own classrooms, but rather that they are extremely limited in what they can present when every student, and now with the new evaluation system, every teacher, must be so focused on making a cut score instead of making a lifelong learning connection.

With these stories in mind, I urge you all to contemplate this simple question: what is a real education, and are we providing that education to all students? You will be hard pressed to find an educator or a student who will reply with anything about high stakes tests.

To be clear, we are not suggesting that we end all testing. We need to know how our students are doing. We need to know their strengths and weaknesses, and we need to know how they are doing compared to their peers. That is, after all, why the MCAS was enacted in the Education Reform Act of 1993. We felt as a Commonwealth that we needed to know that our students could meet basic skills requirements.

But much has changed since 1993. In some ways, for the better: our teaching force is more qualified than ever before, and we are committed to addressing achievement gaps in ways that we never considered before that landmark legislation. As a teacher, I know the value of building upon successes in my own classroom, and we should do the same here in Massachusetts. But as a diligent teacher, I also know that it is absolutely critical that when my students aren't mastering the material, I must stop, reflect, and redesign the lesson until all of my students succeed. It is in the spirit of such sound pedagogy, that we must approach our antiquated accountability system.

The MCAS was never intended to be a measure of teacher effectiveness. It was never meant to be used to label schools as failing. And yet, that is what it has become all about. Equally concerning is our sprint into PARCC. We piloted the MCAS for almost ten years, so why are we sprinting into an unknown exam after less than two? We are off-track and we must pause and reflect. We must make sure that every single assessment and every single policy is bringing us closer to that original mission of the Education Reform Act of 1993: to extend to all children the opportunity to reach their full potential and to lead lives as participants in the political, social, and economic life of the commonwealth.

Thank you for your time and your attention to this critical matter.