

DUDLEY-CHARLTON REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

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June 19, 2015

Commissioner Mitchell Chester
Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
75 Pleasant Street
Malden, MA 02148-4906

Dear Commissioner Chester:

The Dudley-Charlton School Committee and the Dudley-Charlton Teachers' Association have unanimously and enthusiastically voted to approve this letter in support of H 340, An Act Relative to a Moratorium on High-Stakes Testing and PARCC.

We take very seriously our commitment to the nearly 4,000 children of our district. We believe it is our responsibility to provide the best possible education to our students in order to prepare them for life beyond high school. We also believe it is our duty to make decisions based solely upon the best interests of our students. We have come to the point where we do not believe that high-stakes testing or PARCC serve either to enhance our students' educational experience or to improve their long-term best interests. Rather, we believe they have become a barrier.

We believe this because high-stakes testing:

1. Reduces time on true teaching and learning. While it may not have been intentional, the "punishments" for school districts and now individual teachers based on test scores have forced otherwise reasonable people to focus too much classroom time on testing and the corresponding preparation leading up to it. This has taken away from important learning opportunities such as the arts, physical education, history and many experiential courses related to the sciences. Perhaps inadvertently, a testing system originally designed to improve the quality of education has done the opposite because of the high-stakes attached to it. Our teachers are simultaneously both artists and scientists. We need to let them have the freedom to do that which they are passionate about doing and to tailor instruction to the unique needs of each individual child.
2. Works counter to the promise made by the Education Reform Act of 1993. The Education Reform Act cites as its major goal the intent "...to provide a public education of sufficient quality that all children will have the opportunity to reach their full potential and to lead lives as participants in the political, social and economic life of the commonwealth,..." Yet, as an indirect consequence of high stakes math and English / language arts testing, many schools have been forced to over emphasize the subjects tested while cutting back and, in some sad and severe cases, eliminating, some of the history, civics and economics courses and programs that are likely to create the types of citizens Education Reform intended.
3. Increases stress and anxiety at a time when mental health is a critical focus in education and society. High-stakes testing has taken much of the joy out of learning and teaching. Students and teachers are experiencing a high level of anxiety around testing and the subsequent labels attached to the results (ie: Warning, Needs Improvement, etc.). Students sense the anxiety prevalent in their teachers and school leaders – anxiety born of test scores being used in evaluations and labeling of individual educators, schools and districts. Life is short, and childhood is shorter – our kids should be learning in positive, vibrant environments and developing a "can-do" attitude to take into their futures.
4. Misuses already scarce educational funding. It is counterproductive to continue to spend tens of millions of dollars paying corporations to create tests that have proven to be ineffective in improving schools when that money could be going to such established school improvements as reducing class sizes, diversifying curriculum and increasing student support services. This year alone, our district cut nearly \$2 million dollars from our original budget proposal which would have enabled us to move forward in our already modest strategic plan. The money spent on MCAS and PARCC would have served our students far better in the hands of educators rather than corporations.

And we believe this because PARCC would mean the following for our district:

"...to advance the knowledge and well-being of our children and our communities."

1. Significant losses of time and money. Our limited computing capacity – limited due to outdated infrastructure and inadequate funding (For example, to update our high school's 43 year old infrastructure will cost over \$500,000) - already poses a challenge in providing the needed technology to our students in support of their modern educational needs. In order for us to go from where we are now to the 1:2 ratio that the State recommends, we would have to more than double our testing device inventory at a cost of nearly \$300,000. We fear that PARCC testing, and the computer mandates that will ultimately accompany it, will further divide the "haves and have nots," and our kids could be on the wrong side of that. Because our district has only been able to afford enough test capable devices for a 1:5 device to student ratio, we would essentially have to assign every device in our district to PARCC testing for nearly an entire month. This is an entire month (More than 10% of the school year) that our students would not have any technology with which to learn. This is a serious affront to any attempts to instill 21st Century skills in our students.
2. A drain on human resources. Administration of PARCC will require administrative, technology and teaching staff to be dedicated almost exclusively to testing for the better part of a month.
3. Discouraged Students. Many students, even some of the most diligent, will struggle with the new type of testing that PARCC represents. Among the specific problems we experienced on field tests were:
 - a. Little opportunity to practice the content or technology aspect.
 - b. Lack of technical abilities posed a serious disadvantage for some students and could be confused with an achievement gap.
 - c. Students who needed more time and who were not allowed accommodations may have actually failed even if they knew the material.
 - d. Students who experience test anxiety ran out of time and their confidence declined even further.
4. Unrealized preparedness for college and careers. Teachers are burdened with teaching requirements that force them to "plow" through material that the children will be tested on. The creativity, ability to expose children to a wider array of educational experiences, energy and allowing teachers to teach in ways that inspire students is being removed from our teachers' and children's grasps.
5. Inaccurate comparisons across states. Since each state sets its own range for what is considered advanced, proficient, needs improvement and warning, it is impossible to validly compare scores from state to state.

Test Scores Up, Important Skills Down

Over the past 15 years, our students' MCAS scores have increased dramatically. However, over the same span of time, colleges and businesses are reporting decreases in the preparedness of those same students. Obviously, high-stakes testing is not the answer. Rather than allocating so much time and money for testing, our children would be better served by utilizing those resources for enhancing skills in areas such as STEM, innovation, creativity, problem solving, critical thinking, collaboration and communication that are in such high demand in college and the workplace.

Massachusetts – Shepherd, not Sheep

The adoption of the Common Core Standards followed by the addition of PARCC is, for Massachusetts, a move away from local control of our education system. In light of Massachusetts' strong reputation across the country, we must ask ourselves if it is really a good idea to give that control to the Federal Government and/or any corporate entity.

Additionally, given Massachusetts' track record as the highest performing state in the nation on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which is the only nationally representative assessment of what students know and can do in various subjects, why would we support a move in the direction of walking in step with states whose standards are lower? If H 340 becomes law, placing a three year moratorium on high stakes testing, and our students continue to lead the nation on NAEP, definitive proof will have been realized that the testing movement has not served our children well.

Let's Put Our Students First

The Dudley-Charlton Regional School Committee and the Dudley-Charlton Teachers' Association stand firm and united in the hope that the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and the State Legislature will take action that will enable our 4,000 students and their classmates across the Commonwealth to spend their seven hours per school day engaged in an education that will truly make them college and career ready.

Yours truly,

The Dudley-Charlton Regional School Committee and the Dudley-Charlton Teachers' Association

"...to advance the knowledge and well-being of our children and our communities."