

Smizik Comments on H.504 Relative to the MCAS

June 23, 2009

Good afternoon Mr. Chairman, Madame Chairlady. I am testifying today principally on behalf of House Bill 504, but also in support of House Bills 502, 505, and 3660.

I am here today to question where we have gone and where we are headed with education reform. The problem is that I believe that the high-stakes requirement of the MCAS test has placed too much emphasis on standardized testing with the result that schools have a narrower curriculum and are more focused on having children learn how to take standardized test. As a result, they do not receive a broad education that promotes critical thinking. Education reform, as implemented, promotes the general proposition that all children learn in the same way. This legislation, House Bill 504, would end the use of one single test to determine whether students would graduate from high school.

There is no standardized test that can determine whether a child is a good learner or will be a successful college student, because analyzing those skills is very complicated. There is not only one correct way of learning and answering, but that is what the use of high stakes tests presumes. For instance, a critic can watch a movie and get an entirely different message from a movie than another critic. A child can read a book and get a different message than another child. There is not only one answer. Learning comes from having those children communicate their views, defend them, listening to others, and learning from that process.

The same is true in math and science – one answer is not the only goal, but rather it is the analysis of how a student got that answer that matters, and whether that student will have the tools to analyze a math problem or scientific problem in order to solve it.

Education should be a positive experience, not a frightening one. When a student fails the MCAS they cannot get a degree, they cannot attend state colleges, and they cannot receive a state scholarship. In other words, their lives are harmed. No wonder so many

children are frightened to death about passing MCAS. Why are we punishing children despite the fact that they go to every class and meet all of their school's requirements?

We must also ask why there is an achievement gap in testing. Children with families who have higher incomes, higher educational backgrounds, and who speak English as a first language all do better on standardized tests including MCAS. The introduction of high-stakes testing was supposed to narrow the achievement gap. You will hear from others that recent studies show that it has not done so and will not do so.

Teachers who are trained and work with children everyday are best able to determine whether a child has the necessary skills to succeed and become a productive citizen. These teachers are now under tremendous pressure to teach these students how to take a mostly multiple-choice test. Teachers should be teaching critical thinking, and the state should be focusing on smaller class size, up-to-date textbooks, quality libraries, and quality teaching. In short, we should support a rich and varied curriculum, even though the initial cost is higher.

Massachusetts has a highly skilled workforce, and a highly educated population. Testing is not the reason that our students score higher on standardized tests than students from other states. In fact, those score results were reflective of our excellence long before our emphasis on high-stakes testing.

Let's really close the achievement gap by providing equal resources, so that all schools will be able to provide a high-quality education to our students. That will truly be education reform.