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09_12_17 Verbal Testimony in Support of S. 308

I am Dan Monahan, a long-time Cambridge teacher and resident and starting my second year as president of the Cambridge Education Association. I am here to urge you to support S. 308 and will focus on the dangers of over-reliance on high-stakes testing.

Since I entered teaching, the use of assessment data has changed radically in positive and negative ways. Statewide assessments have helped us identify areas of weakness, while district and classroom-based assessments have helped us identify students who need targeted supports. However, the excessive focus on state mandated high stakes test results has come at a tremendous cost.

Massachusetts schools are ranked first in the nation and among the best in the world. Rather than feeling great about our schools, however, educators are constantly bombarded with criticism based primarily on MCAS scores. The reliance on test scores to evaluate students, educators, administrators, schools and districts has created a sense of failure and a loss of focus on the real reasons we have a public education system.

The tests are designed to put students into categories, and in order to do so, they must be very difficult. Interesting fact - a proficient score on the high school Math MCAS test is about 48% correct. Consequently, many students who work hard in school feel terrible about the test, particularly our most vulnerable students. This leads to anxiety and/or disengagement. In this state of mind, students are not in a place to take the risks necessary to learn deeply. They just want to be told what to do so that they do well on the test.

Our students also feel stress through the stress of their teachers. Teachers are compelled to cover all the standards in the frameworks, sacrificing depth for breadth, because they know that any of those standards may appear on the test. They are pressured to make not just every minute, but every second count. In addition, the development of valid and reliable measures of educator impact on students for the educator evaluation system has proven to be unreasonable. In many cases, the requirement to create common assessments mainly to gather data to evaluate teachers is an exercise in compliance, and is not educationally helpful. What is educationally helpful are the other components of the educator evaluation system for the effective **use** of common assessments, not the assessment **results**.

The focus on results in Math and English Language Arts has had a negative effect on how we educate our students. As a science instructional coach, I saw Science relegated to one or two short periods a week, and was usually the first to go if something had to be cut. In addition, many schools and teachers have done away with interdisciplinary projects to focus on just what will be measured on the tests.

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If we want our students to be innovative thinkers and risk-takers when they get out of school, we must do that in school. A 20th century tool cannot measure 21st century skills. The over-reliance on high stakes testing has taken away educators' ability to do that. I strongly urge you to support the 3-year moratorium on high stakes testing, resources to develop assessments better aligned with what we want our students to be able to do and eliminate the requirement for including high stakes test results in educator evaluation so we can design a system that makes sense.

Additional biographical details for Dan Monahan: I have been in Cambridge for 20 years — 9 as a 7th and 8th grade math and science teacher and another 10 as a science instructional coach. I have received National Board Certification in Early Adolescence Math and was in the first cohort of the Teacher Leadership Initiative created by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, the Center for Teaching Quality, the National Education Association and MTA. I have served on the DESE Teacher Advisory Cabinet for two years and have served on many DESE MCAS assessment development committees.

My name is Dan Monahan I live at 229 Lexington Avenue in Cambridge, MA and I am starting my second school year as president of the Cambridge Education Association. I have been in Cambridge for 20 years - 9 as a 7th and 8th grade math and science teacher and another 10 as a science instructional coach. Along the way I have received National Board Certification in Early Adolescence Math, I was in the first cohort of the Teacher Leadership Initiative created by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, the Center for Teaching Quality and the National Education Association and MTA. I have served on the DESE Teacher Advisory Cabinet for 2 years and have served on many DESE MCAS assessment development committees. I am here today to urge you to support S 308. In particular, I will speak about dangers of over-reliance on high stakes testing and a different vision for assessment of students, educators, administrators, schools and districts in Massachusetts.

The use of assessment data has changed radically since I entered the teaching profession, in some very positive and very negative ways. I'll start with the negative, move to the positive and then outline a possible future. We have gone from no state-wide assessments to many hours of state mandated testing in most elementary grades. This has helped us align outcomes across schools and identify areas of weakness. Data driven instruction has gone from a rarity to common practice. We now do a better job at identifying students who are falling behind and providing targeted supports to them. Massachusetts schools are ranked number 1 in the country and among the top countries in the world based on a number of different assessment tools. However, this has come at a tremendous cost.

Rather than feeling great about our schools, educators in Massachusetts are constantly bombarded with criticism based primarily on MCAS scores. Don't get me wrong - our schools still have a long way to go to address achievement gaps that test scores illuminate. However, the message should be "we are doing great, and lets to better." The reliance on test scores to evaluate students, educators, administrators, schools and districts has created a sense of failure on all of those levels, leading to anxiety and a loss of the real reasons why we have a public education system.

The stress our students feel comes partially from their own anxiety about doing well on a difficult test. The tests are designed to put students into categories, and in order to do so, they must be very difficult. For example, a 5 year analysis of proficiency cut scores revealed that a student needed to score about 48% on the 10th grade Mathematics MCAS to be considered proficient. That is a very difficult test that is disheartening to experience for all students, but most especially our struggling students. When students are anxious, they are not in a place to take the risks necessary to learn deeply. They just want to be told what to do so that they do well on the test. While our assessments are getting better at this, we still have a long way to go.

Our students also feel stress through the stress of their teachers. Educators feel pressure to teach all of the standards outlined in the frameworks, yet based on the above example - our students only need to know half of them. There is a clear mismatch between the standards and

the reality in the classroom, yet the expectations of educators is to teach it all. As a result, they are in a constant battle to teach all of the standards.

In addition to the stress that this causes on our schools, it narrows the focus of what we teach. Given that Math and English Language Arts count the most, the curriculum and resources are narrowed so that students are best prepared for the tests. While it is true that Math and ELA are very important, the time and resources dedicated to them is disproportionate because of the tests. A few quick examples - we are lucky to have instructional coaches in Cambridge, but when I was a science coach, we had 2 science coaches to work with the same number of educators and students as 14 math coaches and 14 ELA coaches (and there was only 1 social studies coach). In addition, as a science coach I saw that in elementary schools, science was relegated to at most one or two short periods a week, and was usually the first to go if something had to be cut.

Another implication of this pressure was to compartmentalize the curriculum - many schools and teachers did away with interdisciplinary projects. Each subject had its time and each department had its curriculum than needed to be taught and there was often little connection between them.

Another stress on teachers has been the inclusion of assessment results in the educator evaluation system. The development of a valid reliable measure of educator impact on students has proven to be impossible. This requirement did push educators, schools and districts to improve their practice of using common assessments, but there are very few instances where they created valid and reliable measures. For many, it is now merely an exercise in compliance.

Together, all of this makes me seriously question our state mandated assessment system. What do we really want our students to know and be able to do? I would argue that we do not want to school students in being able to do well on a test - we hear this loud and clear from our high education institutions as well as our businesses. We want our students to be innovative thinkers and risk takers when they get out of school, but we are not training them to do that in school. If we do not take the time to teach students how to make connections across disciplines in school, how can we expect them to do this when they leave school?

In short, we need to think differently about our schools and the direction that high stakes testing is pushing them. I strongly urge you to support the 3 year moratorium on high stakes testing so we can take a step back and really design a system that makes sense. It would allow us to think about the purpose of these assessments so that they are moving our schools in the direction we really want to go, not to create good test takers.

I strongly urge you to support the work developing new assessments that measure what we most care about - deeper thinking. A 20th century tool cannot measure 21st century skills. There is some excellent work happening already and I urge you to support that work.

Finally, I urge you to remove the use of high stakes test results from educator evaluation. The federal government has backed off on this requirement with ESSA because they realized the

folly of that requirement with Race to the Top. Massachusetts should follow suit. To be clear - I am talking about assessment results, not the use of assessments. Our educator rubric already has several places to evaluate educators based on their effective use of assessments, not the assessment results. We need to rely on administrators to ensure that educators are using data driven instruction, but not use the student assessment results to rate our educators.

There is a different way to ensure a strong public education for each and every student in Massachusetts, and I urge you to pass S. 308 to allow schools the opportunity to follow that path.