

**Testimony in Support of House Bill No. 3660:  
An Act To Improve Assessment And Accountability  
To Ensure Students Acquire 21st Century Skills**

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Respectfully submitted by

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Sixteen years ago, Massachusetts reformed its public school system. Today, we have a more equitable system for funding school districts, a rigorous curriculum, clear standards, a highly talented corps of teachers, and the highest test scores in the nation. These are impressive accomplishments. However, all reform efforts, no matter how carefully conceived and no matter how consistently implemented, have flaws. Uncorrected defects have the insidious effect of eventually undermining and overshadowing our accomplishments. The Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 is no exception.

Chief among the Reform Act's defects is the overreliance on a single type of paper and pencil test, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), to determine a student's eligibility for a high school diploma. The MCAS and similar high stakes tests were implemented for two principal reasons: to reverse the supposed rising tide of mediocrity in our public schools, and to close the achievement gap between socioeconomic and racial groups. Sixteen years ago, the effectiveness of high stakes tests was unknown. Today, we have good evidence that these tests do not accomplish their intended aims and have a deleterious impact on some children's lives. Within the last year, two of the best studies on high stakes tests were published in scholarly journals (Grotsky, Warren, & Kalogrides, 2009; Lee, 2008). Both studies

found no statistically significant relationship between the use of these tests and high school students' academic achievement. Furthermore, both studies also found that high stakes testing does nothing to close the achievement gap. Massachusetts is a prime example of the latter finding. We have one of the largest achievement gaps between socioeconomic groups on the National Assessment of Education Progress of any state in the nation (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007). Therefore, based on the most recent, high quality research findings, there is no justification for the practice of using the results on a single test to withhold a high school diploma.

We also have evidence that the MCAS graduation requirement is disproportionately denying diplomas to the group that educational reform was intended to help. In the 2007 graduating class alone, for example, more than 2,000 students with disabilities failed to pass at least one of the high school MCAS exams, and didn't graduate on time. Furthermore, failing the MCAS increases the likelihood that a student will prematurely leave high school. Twenty-nine percent of the students who fail the MCAS in high school subsequently drop out, whereas only 2% of students who pass the MCAS drop out (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2009). If high stakes tests, such as the MCAS, were pharmaceuticals, the FDA would ban their use. They do not have the intended effects on academic achievement, and they have serious side effects on at-risk students.

I support House Bill No. 3660, *An Act To Improve Assessment And Accountability To Ensure Students Acquire 21st Century Skills*, because it is consistent with the best available research, best practices in assessment, and ethical conduct in using assessment instruments. One of the most important aspects of the Bill is the proposal to use multiple measures, including statewide end-of-course exams, to determine a student's eligibility for a high school diploma.

The opponents of multiple assessments fear that this approach will dilute the impact of high standards and undo the achievement gains of the last several years. They view the potential denial of a high school diploma as a powerful motivating force for administrators, teachers and students. Research does not support their theory. Public policy should not be based on illusory correlations, supposition, intuition, anecdote, and simple nostrums, such as equating high standards with high stakes tests. Public policy must have research on its side, and the research is not on the side of high stakes tests, such as the MCAS. Massachusetts with its illustrious history of public education should be in the vanguard of improving the use of these tests. House Bill No. 3660 will advance that noble goal. Nothing less than the welfare of our most vulnerable children hangs in the balance.

### References

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