

September 20, 2021

Chairman Jason M. Lewis
Chairwoman Alice Hanlon Peisch
Committee Members
Joint Committee on Education
Massachusetts State House
24 Beacon Street
Boston, MA 02133

Opposition to proposed legislation to alter the use of common assessment for transparency and accountability

Chair Lewis, Chair Peisch, and Members of the Committee:

We, the undersigned business leaders and organizations, are writing to express our concern with legislative attempts to amend, suspend, or eliminate the use of MCAS or other statewide common assessment as part of Massachusetts' continuing effort to ensure a high-quality education for all. We respectfully ask you not to support any proposed legislation that would alter the use of a valuable tool for identifying gaps and measuring outcomes, particularly given its heightened value in helping us understand the effects that the recent pandemic has had on student learning.

The Commonwealth should be proud of its constitutional commitment to providing equity of educational opportunity for every public school student. The information that MCAS provides is integral to understanding if we are serving students in the way that the constitution, the Student Opportunity Act, and the moment require. As long as we are committed to a state responsibility to assure an excellent and equitable public education, we will need a tool to understand how well we are doing.

Despite the unprecedented challenges posed by the pandemic, this moment is fundamentally a hopeful one for education. For the first time, through the Student Opportunity Act, the state has committed to closing opportunity gaps based on race, socio-economic status, and disability. The state and federal government are providing new money that can make this happen. The disruptions of the past year have forced longstanding failures to meet the full suite of students' needs front and center in public discourse and have renewed public urgency to correct these injustices. These disruptions have also forced innovation, making previously unattainable student-centered changes possible.

Massachusetts currently has no other tool to understand if, from elementary school to high school, we are closing academic opportunity gaps among students. No district-administered assessment can provide a statewide picture. Seeking less information about statewide achievement gaps by undermining the annual MCAS assessment would be tantamount to closing our eyes to inequities made worse during the pandemic. A failure to measure gaps may reduce their prominence in public discourse, but not to the students whose needs we currently do not meet. As such, we believe strongly that we must maintain a statewide common

assessment that allows us to understand the gaps that persist and the impact that certain educational programs and school models can have in closing those gaps.

While MCAS, as one tool, cannot measure everything that matters for future opportunity, recent changes to the test have greatly improved its predictive ability to assess college and career readiness. A recent DESE analysis, conducted in partnership with Brown University, establishes a connection between MCAS results and future earnings, even holding student characteristics constant. That said, we are not opposed to a collaborative process of continued improvement and evolution of MCAS or any common statewide assessment system.

We know that factors like poverty and racism affect academic achievement. The pernicious impact of these factors show up in MCAS results. Indeed, our knowledge of Massachusetts yawning achievement gaps and the need to do more to advance equity of opportunity would not have been possible without MCAS or some form of statewide common assessment.

We also know that many students who face unconscionable disadvantage nonetheless flourish academically. The success of students in overcoming barriers to opportunity, often with significant support from schools, shows up in MCAS results. We all want more of this in Massachusetts, and MCAS is a tool that lets us know if the decisions that adults are making are helping students achieve it.

With the passage of the Student Opportunity Act, the legislature rightly determined that the significant infusion of state money to districts requires an accompanying process of setting targets to be achieved and measuring progress in achieving those outcomes. Abandoning the commitment to do that, by altering, suspending or eliminating MCAS and its use to determine progress and an adherence to high standards would be an abrogation of our collective responsibility to ensure quality and equity.

We hope that you will stay firm on the issue of using data and measuring results through a statewide assessment, across districts and schools, that provides invaluable information at a time when it is most needed. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

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