

## Public Testimony on Massachusetts Teacher Evaluation Proposal

*Massachusetts is getting ready to embark on a new approach to evaluating public school teachers and administrators that could have far-reaching, and negative, effects on teaching and learning in our schools. State education policymakers are seeking public feedback on this new teacher evaluation proposal. Members of the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) voted April 27 to solicit public comment on the plan for 60 days.*

*A group including FairTest Executive Director Monty Neill; Brookline parent and FairTest staffer Lisa Guisbond; Jonathan King, MIT molecular biology professor; Jim Horn, education professor; and retired teachers Ann O'Halloran and Bill Schechter, went to the April 27 BESE meeting to speak in public comment. We believe the proposal is deeply flawed and not ready for prime time, or public comment. Three members of the board—Ruth Kaplan, Harneen Chernow and James McDermott—also expressed significant concerns and did not vote to proceed with the public comment period.*

*Each of us who spoke in public comment addressed different aspects of the proposal's flaws. Here is the text of our respective testimony (in alphabetical order; Neill's written testimony is also on the FairTest website at [http://fairtest.org/files/MN\\_testimony\\_to\\_MA\\_BESE\\_4-27-11.pdf](http://fairtest.org/files/MN_testimony_to_MA_BESE_4-27-11.pdf).*

*You can send your comments to [boe@doe.mass.edu](mailto:boe@doe.mass.edu). BESE's public comment period extends through June 10, 2011. BESE will vote on the proposal on June 28, 2011. The BESE proposal is available at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/boe/docs/0411/default.html> (look for Proposed Regulations on Evaluation of Educators, 603 CMR 35.00).*

April 27, 2011

### **Lisa Guisbond, Brookline parent**

As a parent with two children in public schools, I'm concerned that these teacher evaluation proposals rely on implausible models developed by economists, not educators. I have read critiques of these models and they make me wonder why they are being employed to develop a teacher evaluation system for Massachusetts.

Here's the problem: Expecting good teachers to "routinely impart a year-and-a-half-gain in student achievement" in one year is like expecting the housing bubble to inflate indefinitely. This was impossible for the housing market, and it's impossible for human beings.

The idea that good teachers can do this is based on work by economists William Sanders, Eric Hanushek and others. The notion is that if we populate our schools with teachers who routinely obtain such student gains, achievement gaps will be vanquished in as little as three years.

A critique by Matthew Di Carlo of the Albert Shanker Institute, however, points out that the idea that teachers can do this based on extrapolations from a single year. No one has actually followed a group of students and teachers for 3, 4 or 5 years to see what happens.

One problem is, and educators know this from working with real children, students do not develop and learn on a steady upward curve, no matter how stupendous a teacher they have. My own kids have had some extraordinary (award-winning) teachers and have not even made a year's worth of gain on their watch, based on their developmental timetable and readiness to learn.

In real life, an excellent teacher may lay the foundation for a big leap a year or two later. This may happen on the watch of a lesser teacher, who happened to be around to reap the benefits. Who should get the credit?

In real life, a teacher may be well-trained, may know her material inside and out and may pull out all the stops to reach a struggling student and help her advance. But what if that student's mother dies in February, a month before the MCAS? What if five other students in that amazing teacher's class have parents who lost their jobs that year? If this affects the test scores of a quarter of the teacher's class, who should get the blame?

Economists claim to control for socioeconomic status and disability, etc., but can they control for life? Can they control for each child's developmental timetable and a burst of interest in math or science, or not?

I find it amazing that anyone would listen to the advice of economists on education policy, after their poor track record in their area of expertise, but that's what's happening in education policy circles these days. Economists develop models that claim to quantify the "value added" by good or bad teachers. They claim to be able to account for human and socioeconomic variation but they can't. Humans don't work that way.

I believe that proceeding with a proposal based on such flawed assumptions will be dangerous and destructive.

### ***References***

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## **Jim Horn, Schools Matter**

For the teachers who are growing our future today and can't be here, I speak against this latest plan by the Business Roundtable to further cripple our public schools, to more profoundly objectify our children, to pull apart the teacher-child relationship built on caring and trust.

This new corporate reform represents a well-funded form of bullying at the highest levels, not by elected officials or their appointees, but by unelected oligarchs whose hostile ideology threatens a takeover of public institutions in order to hold steerage of an economy whose jobs they have been shipped abroad, where children who can't read or write work for slave wages to make the goods that Americans once made.

Corporate meddling in schools is nothing new. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, efficiency zealots insisted that schools operate as efficiently as the Henry Ford's new production lines. Bolstered by the new psychometrics, and inspired by eugenics, those scientific managers kicked off the first orgy of tabulation in American schools, replete with scandalous IQ and achievement tests used to drive class wedges into the heart of the common school.

It took an economic depression and a world war to end that testing crusade, but it didn't take long for a similar sorting machine to replace it, and another one after that with a new corporate label—accountability. So for the past 30 years we've devoted enormous energies to more sorting the poor by testing, that **deform** children, debase our ethics, and blow up our public schools, thus leaving urban poor kids more intensely segregated in corporate welfare charter schools built on a chain gang pedagogy that accepts no excuses, not even hunger or homelessness.

Even so, public school teachers of the Commonwealth persist in their noble work of teaching children, and teaching them well despite the unending attacks in the media.

In January, in fact, Governor Patrick announced that our 4<sup>th</sup> graders tied for first, and 8<sup>th</sup> graders tied for second on the most recent NAEP tests, having led the nation since 2005. On the 2007 TIMSS international math and science test, our 4<sup>th</sup> graders ranked second **worldwide** and 8<sup>th</sup> graders tied for **first**. If it weren't for the bottom

quintile of poor kids, in fact, most states' schools would be ranked among the top countries in the world.

So what is the crisis to be averted this time by making test scores even more high stakes? Beneath the threadbare corporate veil of concern for achievement, we find here a transparent attack on teachers, on academic freedom, job security and autonomy, and on the teacher-student bond as teaching and learning give way even more to testing production. To achieve these goals is essential, however, if children and teachers are to be molded to fit a global economy with fewer local options and more dead end jobs.

One teacher recently interviewed spoke facetiously or cynically (it is hard to tell the difference these days) of how students may soon enter her classroom labeled as "pay cut" or "bonus." This is harsh, but the reality is that a model that explicitly ties children's scores to monetary worth creates such an atmosphere. Even effective and empathic teachers will be aware of how individual students may influence their own family's economic security. Tying teacher pay or job security to test scores will not make teachers more accountable for student achievement, but it will have a deadly impact on the now tenuous relationship at the heart of student learning and growth.

This whole business of using value-added testing to evaluate teachers requires much more research before it can ever be done responsibly. I urge you to heed the National Research Council findings instead of parroting papers by the New Teacher Project or Education Trust or NCTQ, whose funders control both sides of the aisle of that same corporate jet fueled by tax credits. Don't turn children into Pay Cut Sally or Bonus Billy based on their socioeconomic status before they ever sit down at a desk. This is bad policy that threatens to finish off the profession and to turn teaching toward a low-level child management occupation of last resort.

When the disgusted Spanish philosopher Unamuno confronted the fascist General Milan Astray in 1936, he said:

You will win because you have more than enough brute force. But you will not convince. For to convince you need to persuade. And in order to persuade you would need what you lack: Reason and Right in the struggle. I consider it futile to exhort you to think of Spain.

I do not think it futile to exhort you to help preserve the teacher-child relationship in Massachusetts. We are not yet a corporate dictatorship. In the meantime, the teachers, parents, and other active citizens of the Commonwealth are not persuaded. Reason and Right are lacking. We shall continue to stand for Reason and Right and to resist all else.

## **Jonathan King, MIT Professor of Molecular Biology**

Good morning Madame Chair and Members of the Board. My name is Jonathan King and I am a long time Professor of Molecular Biology at MIT in Cambridge, where I teach and carry out biomedical research. I have long been involved in general issues of science education and laboratory instruction, nationally and locally. Within the Commonwealth I serve on the Boards of the Massachusetts Academy of Sciences, focused on K-12 education; the Massachusetts Association of Biology Teachers; the Science Advisory Board for UMass Amherst, and the Technology Education Research Center, which provides science and math curriculum for K-12 schools across the nation. I also direct two programs focused on professional development for high school biology teachers, Science of the Eye/Vision in the Classroom supported by the US National Institutes of Health, and the Darwin Project focused on the teaching of evolution. These programs engage hundreds of Massachusetts science teachers.

The US National Academy of Sciences, the American Association for the Advancement of Science and President Obama, have all recently called attention to our nation's need for skilled and talented teachers of science and technology for K-12 schools. These teachers need to be able to engage and excite students and develop their ability to observe and analyze the phenomena of the natural world, to ask critical questions, to pose hypotheses, analyze data, and develop new knowledge. Experienced and effective science teachers accomplish this by providing their students with authentic experiences in designing and carrying out experiments, visiting and observing the diversity of phenomena of the natural and engineered worlds, using instruments, collecting and interpreting data, and working in teams.

These activities of effective science teachers are clearly and explicitly described in publications of the National Academy of Sciences and American Association for the Advancement of Science. Their incorporation into US classrooms after Sputnik – replacing rote learning pedagogy—was the basis for the education of the extraordinarily productive U.S. scientific and technical workforce that has led the world for the past half century.

It was therefore with dismay that many of us read the proposed regulations for evaluation of teachers, including science teachers. Much thought and effort has gone into these documents. However, they make no mention whatsoever of the critical functions science teachers need to perform to develop their students, such as experiments, demonstrations, science projects, participation in science fairs, and field trips.

Though silent on the key contributions of skilled science teachers, the draft regulations do explicitly set out MCAS test scores as a criterion for teacher evaluation. Unfortunately standardized tests have little capacity to assess the ability

of a student in the sciences to observe, design experiments, develop new ideas, and work together as a team.

Though MCAS tests can assess whether students know the names of the parts of the microscope, they cannot determine whether the student can focus the microscope and assimilate the images they observe. Pressure on teachers to have their students perform well on standardized tests sharply reduces the classroom role of experimentation, the design and implementation of projects, field trips, and related encounters with natural processes.

In addition, since students do not repeat science courses, but move on to different subjects, growth model test score coupling is fundamentally flawed.

The use of student science MCAS test scores to evaluate science teachers can only set back science and technology education in the Commonwealth, drive away talented teachers, and in the long run undermine the high technology economy that Massachusetts depends upon. The regulations need to be sent back, to remove the flawed MCAS coupling and to incorporate measures of teacher activities that are correlated with getting students excited and engaged in the sciences, the secret to deeper learning and proficiency.

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## **Monty Neill, Executive Director, FairTest**

Good morning.

My name is Monty Neill, and I am the Executive Director of FairTest, the National Center for Fair & Open Testing.

FairTest believes that high quality teacher evaluation can be a valuable tool for school improvement.

But I have come here today to call on you to reject and send back to the department the draft regulations on teacher evaluation. The regulations posted 10 days ago are too flawed for you to submit to the public for comment.

I understand the department has already made some changes. This provides one more reason the board should take the time to determine if the regulations are yet adequate for public comment.

I have submitted written testimony providing ten reasons why last week's draft is fatally flawed. I hope you will take the time to read that testimony as you consider any proposed regulations. I will send further comments based on the revision if the Board does release it today for public comment.

In brief, here some of the points developed in my written testimony.

First, the draft will require districts to make or purchase dozens of new tests. This expensive undertaking will come at a time of teacher layoffs and extensive cutbacks in schools across the commonwealth.

Many districts lack the capacity to develop high quality assessments to use across classrooms and schools. They are likely to buy commercial products that do not reflect state standards and will tend to reduce teaching and learning to what can be measured by multiple-choice questions focused on rote learning.

This will dumb down the quality of curriculum and instruction, guaranteeing our students will be less prepared for their futures. Numerous studies find that the emphasis on testing reduces intellectual and academic quality in classrooms.

Meanwhile, the regulations largely rule out the use of classroom-based evidence that could reveal higher-order learning.

Second, the draft regulations require the use of the state's Student Growth Percentile (SGP) measure. SGP is a variant on so-called "value-added models" or VAM. A good deal of research has been conducted on VAM which points to the clear conclusion that there are far too many flaws to use these techniques for evaluating individual educators. My written comments analyze VAM in detail, and I ask that you look very carefully at it

and the evidence behind it before authorizing the use of SGP.

Third, the regulations include student learning gains in both professional practice and student learning categories. Revised regulations should simply and solely make student learning one component within professional practice.

Fourth, this proposal will pit teachers against one another. Using the metric of “average,” as the draft does, means that if I help your students score better, I put myself at greater risk of falling below average, teachers will have a disincentive to help each other improve. This norm-referenced approach needs to go.

Fifth, school climate will worsen under intensified testing pressure. This, in turn, will further increase the likelihood that good teachers and administrators will leave the profession.

For these and other flaws, on which I and others can provide strong evidence, the board should reject the draft regulations and require the department to re-write them before the board forwards them for public comment.

Thank you.

Written testimony, with extensive bibliography, is available at [http://fairtest.org/files/MN\\_testimony\\_to\\_MA\\_BESE\\_4-27-11.pdf](http://fairtest.org/files/MN_testimony_to_MA_BESE_4-27-11.pdf).

### **Ann B. O’Halloran, Teacher**

My name is Ann O’Halloran, retired after 30 years teaching. In 2007, the Commonwealth honored me as the Massachusetts History Teacher of the Year.

Today I speak with the voices of educators who will NEVER have the opportunity to speak here.

**Says one** - “ I have a student who lived in a terrible situation of abuse and neglect . . . At four he moved in with a relative, but lives with frightening memories.

An angry, sad child, some days he can barely keep his eyes open. During the ELA/ MCAS in March I had to **wake him up** three times.

There is progress, but it won't show up on a test. Sometimes the victory is that he picks up his pencil and works.

His struggles in school will continue until he feels safe and cared for. He is only one of many children with severe problems originating at home. Where are the services these children need?”

**And another** - "Using MCAS to make high stakes decisions about teachers and students is morally wrong. In the quest for higher scores, we sacrifice many of the most important, immeasurable, factors that give education its humanity.

Imagine a school where students with learning difficulties are considered "liabilities" rather than embraced for who they are.

Imagine schools without art, music, libraries or recess.

Imagine students' creativity and exploration taking a back seat to filling in bubbles.

I would not want my child in a school like that, would you?"

**From a mom and teacher** -

"My son in grade 4, asked me if I would still love him if he didn't do well on MCAS. After hearing this, I decided, as a mom and teacher, that I would make sure my children and students know this test does NOT affect whether I love them or not."

**From a teacher of special needs** - "Teachers may control the security of materials, testing environment, and tools used for MCAS. We cannot control the will of each student to try on the test, school attendance prior to the test, student ability to understand the questions being asked, or the student's home environment.

As teachers we observe students scrawling foul language on open response answer sheets (due to frustration or apathy), or simply creating a pattern with the bubbles. Their anxieties and home environments are of more concern to many than the standardized testing. Shall we now be forced to beg our students to try because our jobs depend upon their scores?"

**And my closing thoughts . . .**

In all my schools this was clear: supportive, collegial faculties were the best - for kids, families and educators. There was plenty of community support for each of us when needed.

The proposed regulations to use student test scores for evaluation endangers that sense of community, of mutual support, which makes a school thrive. Teachers do not enter the profession to fight for the biggest bonus. We are not "of" Wall Street.

Threatened is the understanding that all children in a school belong to us all. In the coming factory-school, everything is in jeopardy.

Remembering John Dewey, we recognize that "Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself."

## **Bill Schechter, History teacher (retired), Lincoln-Sudbury Regional H.S., 1973-2008**

In responding to the deficiencies of some of our public schools, this Board—with apologies to the minority—has rarely thought to use our best public schools as models, whether the issue was curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, or teacher evaluation. And so a false impression has inadvertently been created that our many successful public schools don't exist and the whole system is a failure. Are teacher evaluation procedures in the state uneven? Yes. Do we have observation-based models that work? Yes. Has the Board checked them out? Possibly not. Nor can I recall that this Board—as a Board—has spoken out with indignation about the poverty that handicaps 20% of our—*your*—students in this wealthy nation of ours. Instead, teachers and their unions are blamed for the disgraceful disparities between Dover and Dorchester.

Regrettably, the Board has responded to this distortion with deafening silence. The commissioner has responded with a teacher evaluation proposal based partly on student standardized test scores, which many of you insist—research to the contrary—are scientifically valid measures of student and (now) teacher performance. The initially modest linkage between test scores and teacher evaluation would be but the next logical step in an education reform vision that defies more than logic.

Indeed, the highest price for this proposal will not be paid by teachers, not even those who work in zip codes so disparate they might as well refer to addresses in different solar systems. Nor those teachers within the same school who happen to work with the learning-disabled rather than the Harvard-bound. Nor those who happen to teach MCAS subjects or grades. No, the highest price will be paid by students.

By further tying students and teachers to these standardized exams, in a manner unsupported by research or practical experience, you will be abandoning the belief that that education can be inspirational and broadening. That the test-centered approach is joyless, narrow, and punitive helps explain why reform advocates so often choose private schools for their own kids.

Yes, reformers want their *own* children to experience more than test prep, relentless worksheets, memorization, and regurgitation. They want teachers who aren't bound hand and foot to lifeless state frameworks...who have the time to spark the imagination, pique curiosity, deepen critical thought, cultivate relationships, and inspire interest. They want what our governor received at Milton Academy or what our president seeks for his kids at Sidwell Friends or even what our education secretary has found in the Arlington, Virginia, schools. Ideas! Discussions! Art! Music! Experiential learning! Field Trips! Not test bubbles to fill in.

Let's listen to an official at Sidwell Friends: "We don't tie teacher pay to test scores because we don't believe them to be a reliable indicator of teacher effectiveness." Or to Michelle Obama: "If my future were determined by my performance on standardized tests I wouldn't be here."

Do we need to rigorously evaluate teachers? Absolutely. But doing it right takes time. "No shortcuts" as we say to the kids. Come into our classrooms. See what we do. Come as often and whenever you like. But please do what the word *evaluate* calls upon you to do: to "find the value of" ...that is, to find the value of teachers in promoting the growth and development of children. That's a heck of a lot different than an MCAS score.