

Flawed Massachusetts Teacher Evaluation Proposal Risks Further Damage to Teaching and Learning

Executive Summary

*By the Massachusetts Working Group on Teacher Evaluation
of the National Center for Fair and Open Testing*

The Challenge: To Develop and Support Good Teaching, Keep Good Teachers in Classrooms

Knowledgeable, effective, caring and inspiring teachers are vitally important for high-quality student learning. A healthy education system has well trained, well supported, and properly compensated professionals. In countries with leading public education systems, such as Finland and Singapore, the community as a whole respects teachers. Among the most striking features of nations cited for outstanding academic outcomes are their professional recruitment, development and support practices, as well as the stature accorded teachers. Sadly, this sets them apart from our own country.

Massachusetts, along with the rest of the nation, faces a looming exodus of experienced teachers. In the next 10 years, more than 50% of the nation's 3.2 million public school teachers will become eligible for retirement. Our schools must also cope with a constant turnover of new teachers who leave the profession before they even begin to gain their footing. Nationwide, 46% of teachers quit before their fifth year. About 20% of teachers in urban districts leave every year. While it is common to cite the difficulty of removing ineffective teachers, a larger problem is how to keep promising teachers in classrooms and support them long enough so they become effective.

We see value in efforts to create a more educationally sound, more reliable system for evaluating teachers. However, the new teacher evaluation plan proposed by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education fails to address the real challenges facing our public schools. It threatens to undermine our ability to recruit, retain and develop excellent

teachers, especially in those schools and districts that need them most. (The plan will have a similar impact on principals.) We see five main problems with the proposal:

- **It will require districts to use MCAS results to judge educators.** MCAS tests were not designed for this purpose. Using them to evaluate teachers and principals will intensify teaching to the tests and further narrow and dumb down teaching and learning in our classrooms.
- **It will require districts to evaluate every teacher in every grade and subject with two “assessments” each academic year, forcing districts to make or purchase dozens of new tests.** This will be an enormous and irresponsible expense at a time of teacher layoffs and extensive cutbacks. Most of the tests are likely to be narrow and low quality. This additional testing requirement will create another layer of bureaucracy and red tape. It will eat up time, energy and resources desperately needed to focus on the main task at hand—helping teachers be as effective in the classroom as possible.
- **It incorporates a type of “value-added measurement” (VAM) that is unproven and likely to be counterproductive.** Independent experts in assessment have determined that VAM is so flawed and inaccurate it risks producing unfair and destructive outcomes for professional educators—the opposite of its stated intent.
- **This high-stakes use of MCAS results is likely to rupture essential relationships between teachers and students.** Its use will supplant the

needs of children as individuals with the bureaucratic requirement for data and graphs.

- **Comprehensive, high-quality teacher evaluation systems already exist and are used in many schools and districts.** The problem is not the lack of good models, but the lack of resources, time, training, and focus needed to implement them.

Good teachers do not simply convey information. They identify the diverse needs of their students; they engage student interests and build students' confidence; they help develop team interaction and cooperation; they challenge their students and assist them in overcoming barriers. They listen to students and identify student issues and concerns. They enable students to think and use content knowledge.

The primary goal of teacher evaluation should be to provide assistance where needed, and to recognize talented teachers who can play a leading role among their peers. Where necessary, such a system should play a role in removing teachers who are not effective and do not improve despite the assistance.

We were encouraged by the values that informed the work of the *Massachusetts Task Force Report on the Evaluation of Teachers and Administrators*, including that:

- Student learning, growth and achievement extend beyond academic progress and include other developmental factors – social and emotional well-being, civic learning and engagement.
- Educator expertise is the foundation of educator effectiveness.

- Leadership, school climate and culture are essential elements for supporting the learning and growth of both students and adults.

However, the Department's proposal is fundamentally inconsistent with these values. It threatens to intensify the negative impact of a system already too focused on MCAS tests. Most importantly, it fails to create a system that incorporates comprehensive and multi-faceted measures of learning and well being among our schoolchildren without causing harmful collateral damage.

Brown University Professor Marie Myung-Ok Lee recently wrote a *New York Times* oped about how her high school English teacher, Ms. Leibfried, recognized and coaxed out the latent writer hiding within the shy, socially marginalized schoolgirl. Ms. Leibfried nurtured Lee's self-confidence and helped her to express herself. "If we want to understand how much teachers are worth," Lee wrote, "we should remember how much we were formed by our own schooldays. Good teaching helps make productive and fully realized adults – a result that won't show up in each semester's test scores and statistics."

In the full version of this report (available at <http://fairtest.org/flawed-ma-teacher-evaluation-proposal-report-home>), we provide details and references to support our call for the Department to withdraw its proposal or for the Board to reject it, in order to replace it with a fair, effective and educational beneficially method of educator evaluation.

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