



# The Backpack

An Independent Voice for Public Education in Massachusetts  
A publication of Citizens for Public Schools | Summer 2010

## Are you an independent thinker? We need you to **think and act** for public schools!

By Lisa Guisbond

Welcome to Citizens for Public Schools' newsletter, *The Backpack*. CPS's mission is to promote, preserve and protect public schools and public education. We formed in the spring of 1982 to oppose a Massachusetts ballot question seeking to divert public tax dollars to private parochial schools. Since then, we have broadened our focus to include a range of issues affecting public education in Massachusetts, including school finance, high-stakes testing, charter schools and re-segregation.

*The Backpack* is our way of reaching out to our members and friends and keeping you informed of important issues facing our public schools. It's also our way of letting you know how CPS is working to protect and improve public education, by fighting for schools that are vibrant, healthy and equitable. It's also our way of letting you know how you can join us in our efforts.



We know our readers are people who learned along the way to think for themselves, whether from their parents, a great teacher, or an influential friend or mentor. Well, in these difficult times for public education, we need all the thinkers we can get! Sometimes it seems, when it comes to education policy, there is a real shortage of independent thinking going on.

Just look at the federal Race to the Top program, which has succeeded in getting Massachusetts and most other states to make sweeping changes in education policy on charter schools, collective bargaining rights, teacher evaluation and other important areas, despite no evidence that RTTT's prescriptions will improve things for public school students. In fact, there is considerable evidence that RTTT will worsen problems created by No Child Left Behind's test-and-punish approach to schools, teachers and students, problems such as narrowed curriculum, teaching to the test, student disengagement and dropouts.

Massachusetts's legislators were persuaded to push through an education reform package called the "Achievement Gap" bill in hopes of getting in on the RTTT action. The feds rejected the Massachusetts proposal and now we're left with serious school budget crises as well as the consequences of a poorly thought out and flawed bill. (See CPS web site [report](#) for a summary of the bill.)

These are critical times for our public schools. Yes, we need to think critically about the policies being implemented on our behalf, but we also need to act! Will you join us?

In this issue, we tell you about a national "Postcards to Mrs. Obama" Campaign, reminding her of her strong words about NCLB and urging her to talk to the president about ending high-stakes testing. We introduce you to the influential scholar and author Diane Ravitch, whose new book has caused quite a stir and given new hope to parents and teachers looking for NCLB reform. We present the first installment of a regular column from the teacher's perspective, from award-winning teacher Ann O'Halloran and guest authors. And we include a CPS statement on the recent news that almost 3,000 of our high school students risk being denied diplomas because they haven't passed a Science MCAS exam.

We hope you enjoy this and pass it along to any friends who might be interested.

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*Lisa Guisbond is editor of The Backpack and a CPS board member.*

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## Postcards to Mrs. Obama: End high-stakes testing

Many teachers, parents and students have watched with dismay as President Obama and Secretary Duncan pursue an approach to education whose main difference from Bush-era policies seems only one of degree. In many ways, Duncan is taking the Bush test-and-punish approach to new extremes. For example, "Race to the Top" is pushing states to link teacher evaluations and pay to student test scores, despite ample evidence that this will worsen problems like narrowed curriculum and teaching to the test.



It's disappointing because we remember Obama's strong campaign statements in which he seemed to recognize the harm done to classrooms by No Child Left Behind, as when he said, "too many teachers are forced to teach to fill-in-the-bubble tests."

Mrs. Obama too spoke with passion about the way high-stakes tests can stifle learning and block talented students from reaching their potential. "No Child Left Behind is strangling the life out of most schools," Mrs. Obama said. "If my future were determined by my performance on a standardized test I wouldn't be here. I guarantee that."

Now a network of organizations, including *Citizens for Public Schools*, *FairTest*, *Time out from Testing* and the *Forum for Education and Democracy*, have launched a postcard campaign to Mrs. Obama. The campaign started on May 28, with the groups asking that people send postcards to Mrs. Obama with this message:

*Dear Mrs. Obama:*  
*We want to provide the best high-quality education for our public school children, just as you want to provide the best for Malia and Sasha.*

*Our children are not test scores.*

*Encourage the President to end the use of high stakes standardized tests!*

The point of this message is not that we expect an expensive private school education for all public school children. It's that, like the Obama children, public school children deserve schools that offer rich, engaging and well-rounded curricula with a full menu of academic subjects as well as art, music, physical education and recess.

Many public school students are losing access to this kind of education because of the mandated high-stakes testing of NCLB - even before the budget crises made things even worse. President Obama could be doing something to address these problems. We hope that by reminding Mrs. Obama of what she said, she will talk to her husband about what needs to be changed.

For complete instructions on how to participate in this campaign, go to [www.citizensforpublicschools.org](http://www.citizensforpublicschools.org).



Diane Ravitch

## Diane Ravitch in Boston: Resist "Race to the Top," Defend Public Education

By Jackie Dee King

Nationally renowned education scholar Diane Ravitch called on Massachusetts teachers and their allies in early April to resist the destructive education policies sweeping the country, including those pushed by the Obama administration as requirements for receiving federal "Race to the Top" funds.

"What good is it to get these federal grants if they can only be used to fund harmful policies?" she asked hundreds of teachers, parents and local officials gathered at the Boston Teachers Union headquarters in Dorchester on April 5.



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“We live in a time of national *madness*” in education policy, she told the audience, which erupted repeatedly in applause.

Ravitch deplored the “test and punish” direction of policy under Obama’s education secretary Arne Duncan: the intensified use of high-stakes standardized tests to determine student and school progress; the closing of “underperforming schools,” firing of teachers, “moving kids around like pieces on a checkerboard,” and aggressive pursuit of charter schools as a panacea to all problems in education. Duncan began to implement these policies when he was CEO of the Chicago public schools, she noted, and they are now being touted as a model for the nation.

Ravitch has been touring the country to promote her best-selling book, “The Death and Life of the Great American School System.” From Chicago to Boston to Los Angeles, the response, especially from educators, has been wildly enthusiastic. More than 1,000 people attended her April session at the National School Boards Association in Chicago and gave her a standing ovation. “Teachers love her—because she tells the truth,” said Tom Gosnell, president of the American Federation of Teachers, Massachusetts, after her talk in Boston. Ravitch explains that teachers are demoralized as never before in their professional lives; they feel they are being scapegoated for problems in American education, and for many of the broader ills in society.

**“Public education is more in jeopardy than at any time in history”**  
-- Diane Ravitch

Ravitch herself once espoused some of the views she now criticizes, such as increased testing and school choice. (She served as Assistant Secretary of Education in the George H.W. Bush administration.) In recent years, she has come under fire by conservatives for her change of heart. In response, she quotes John Maynard Keynes who was rebuked for his reversal on a key economic issue: “When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?”

Ravitch said she had hoped that accountability and choice would strengthen public education, and instead they are being used to attack and destroy it. “Public education is more in jeopardy than at any time in history,” she noted. While tests can be valuable as diagnostic tools, they should not be used for “accountability” purposes such as decisions about student graduation, teacher pay, or school closings—they are neither valid nor reliable for those uses.

Teachers are under attack as never before, Ravitch warned, citing the case of Central Falls, Rhode Island, where the entire staff of a struggling school was recently dismissed. Ravitch talked to a top Rhode Island administrator, who told her about a thoughtful teacher evaluation process that had recently been developed. However, that process was thrown out and the staff was told they would have to reapply for their jobs. “Here we have a poor community, many non-English-speaking students, the school is struggling. Is help on the way? No, they just fire everyone,” Ravitch said. (*Since then, the staff has been rehired, after teachers made most of the contract concessions the district superintendent had demanded.*)

Teachers’ unions are being demonized, Ravitch said. She herself has been attacked by many conservatives for being too supportive of teachers’ unions. “In general, I don’t pay much attention, but every now and then I like to dip in to these sites and ask them, ‘Have you found a high-performing school district yet in which the teachers are not unionized?’ So far, they haven’t come up with a single example,” she noted. “The non-unionized areas of the country are generally the lowest performing districts for students.”

In her book, Ravitch writes that one of the constants in her long career has been her strong belief in high standards—meaning a rigorous and well-rounded curriculum for all students in literature, history, math, science, geography, foreign languages, and the arts. But the standards movement has been hijacked by the “accountability” movement, she points out, and as a result education has been degraded, especially for low-income children. In many inner-city schools, the demands of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law have led to a narrowed curriculum, with real learning replaced by drill-and-kill exercises to increase test scores in math and English.

The NCLB mandate that all children be “proficient” in math and English, according to state tests, by the year 2014 was an unrealistic goal that set public schools up for failure, Ravitch said. Schools that failed to make adequate yearly progress toward that goal were to be subject to increasingly severe sanctions - even to closure - and would be replaced by charter schools or private management. (While the Obama administration’s new regulations will not include the 2014 mandate, and will lift some of the most onerous requirements from higher performing schools, those in the bottom 5%—actually the bottom 20% which bob in and out of that lowest 5%—will still be subject to the same penalties.) “We are turning many of our most vulnerable children over to private enterprise,” she said, “and many neighborhoods won’t have *any* public schools anymore.”

National studies have repeatedly shown that, as a general rule, charter schools do not outperform regular public schools for any demographic group, and many do worse, Ravitch noted. A national 2009 study by researchers at Stanford University found that, of



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charter school students examined, 37% had learning gains that were significantly below that of local public schools, 46% had similar gains, and only 17% showed growth that was significantly better. While there is no doubt that many public schools, especially those serving low-income students, need significant improvements and creative reforms, these studies show that turning public schools over to charter operators is not a universal answer, she argued. Even though some charters do a good job of educating children, it is not clear that they are replicable on a wide scale. For one thing, charters often attract the most motivated students in a district, and they retain the ability to “counsel out” low-performing or disruptive students, who then go back into the regular public schools.

Yet Massachusetts legislators passed an education “reform” bill this winter which lifted the statewide cap on charter schools. The law was designed to conform to the requirements of the “Race to the Top” competition, in the hope of winning millions of education dollars for the state. School districts and teachers’ unions were under tremendous pressure to buy in to the program, dubbed by some as a “Dash to the Cash” or a “Race to the Trough.” While the new law instituted sweeping and expensive changes in policy (the charter schools are paid for out of funds that would otherwise have gone to regular public schools) Massachusetts so far has not won any new funds from the federal program (though it has reapplied for a second round). Only two states, Delaware and Tennessee, received the federal grants in the first round, but the Obama administration continues to dangle the prospect of future money before cash-strapped states - providing them with just enough incentive to continue on a path of testing, penalties, and privatization.

Ravitch ends a recent EdWeek blog post with a rousing call for political leadership to help reverse direction in education policy: “Everywhere I go, the same questions come up: Who will step up and lead the vast and widespread opposition to current policies? Who will give voice to the disempowered teachers, parents, administrators, and school board members who know we are headed in the wrong direction? Where is the political leader who will take this struggle to the next level?”

Until that call for elected leadership is answered, Diane Ravitch herself is proving to be remarkably effective in galvanizing audiences in support of the profound changes we need in national education policy. The rest is up to us.

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*Ravitch is a Research Professor of Education at New York University and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. She has worked with both Republican and Democratic Administrations. From 1991 to 1993, she was Assistant Secretary of Education under Lamar Alexander in the George H.W. Bush administration. President Clinton appointed her to the National Assessment Governing Board, which oversees federal testing. She is the author of more than 20 books published over a period of four decades. For further exploration of the issues raised here, visit her Ed Week blog Bridging Differences, a discussion with Deborah Meier at <http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/Bridging-Differences/>*

*Jackie Dee King is co-editor of The Backpack and a longtime education activist, writer and editor.*

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## Learning Curve

by Ann O’Halloran

In my 32 years of teaching, the waves of change in education have often made me seasick. In recent years, it has been first the MCAS and then the federal No Child Left Behind law, wave after wave of high-stakes tests. By the mid-2000s it became clear to me that education policy was drifting off the shore of what was reasonable, leaving thousands of students stranded, without hope, branded as failures. Working with special needs students made me acutely aware of how our one-size-fits-all assessments were a terrible fit for too many. It seemed so strange that, just at the time when Massachusetts schools were working to include students with special needs, the state created a system that made it so difficult for those students to show their progress. I wondered: **Who is paying attention here in Massachusetts?**



Ann O’Halloran at CPS Annual Meeting

Since 1998 teachers like me have learned the inside scoop on MCAS by seeing its impact on the faces of our students: One of my students, Marsha, was nine. She looked down, shyly, as she said, “I’m not any good at math.” “Why would you say that?” I asked. “My family got my test scores and they said I’m not good in math.” Jimmy clutched himself and in a panicky voice, said, “I have to go to the bathroom. Bobby had a screaming headache. Jill, an academic star, didn’t want to come to school. “It’s all about MCAS, now,” she said. Tom, frozen with anxiety, folded his arms across his chest and refused to write anything on his MCAS composition. Mike was all ready for

the test. A student with ADHD, he was tested individually and could write his answers in the test booklet. He was on “overdrive” that MCAS day, quickly glancing at the passage to be read and checking off his answers. After ten minutes, he shouted, “I’m done!”





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That was so easy!" Chuck was thrilled with his writing as he diverted from the topic of "What did you do on a Snow Day." His story started with the snowstorm and he delightedly then wrote about an invasion of aliens. Sally was worried for me, her teacher, "Are you going to get fired if I don't do good on the MCAS?" [Now that worry has come true for teachers getting pink slips in "chronically underperforming" schools!]



L to R: Jackie Dee King, Larry Ward, Lisa Guisbond, Jean McGuire, Rep. Frank Smizik at CPS Annual Meeting

Just this week, it was reported that almost 3,000 students risk being denied their high school diplomas because they failed Science MCAS test, many of them by just a few points. Most of these students have special needs or are trying to master English as a second language or live in deep poverty. We failed them. Leading scientists and science teachers had recommended that standardized tests in science not be used for a graduation requirement. **Who is listening here in Massachusetts?**

Once there was a dream of true reform, embodied in the 1993 Education Reform Act. That legislation required an ongoing Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System. Within that acronym, MCAS, is buried the true goal - a truly comprehensive assessment of students, where they could demonstrate their learning in a variety of ways. If we had pursued that goal, all our students could have revealed their learning, not by an arbitrary (and adjustable) cut-off score. Those with special learning needs could have demonstrated their own personal growth. Instead, an arbitrary testing system steals the future hopes of thousands of students. Since 2003, more than 19,000 have now failed to earn a diploma due

to failing one of the graduation requirement tests. Without a diploma, the doors closed to them include apprentice programs to learn skilled trades, barber or hairdressing school, or enlisting in the military.

I realized by 2004 just how badly Massachusetts had strayed from the vision of the Education Reform Act in 1993. That was the year I asked at a meeting, "Is *everything* we do in our schools, now dictated by NCLB?" And the resounding "yes" just about knocked me off my seat. **Shouldn't we stop and take a serious look at what MCAS and NCLB hath wrought!**

Using our "official name" -- the Commonwealth of Massachusetts -- reminds us that this small corner of America is for everyone - particularly the youngest and most fragile ones among us.

We are meant to embrace all - the young children of the poor, critically in need of sound nutrition, ongoing health care and early educational intervention, the youngsters who live in distressed family conditions or homelessness, those with special health or learning needs, those struggling to learn a new language and way of life (just as our parents and grandparents did). We are meant to educate all - in this wonderful Commonwealth. We need to find a better way - perhaps even revisit the original vision of Education Reform back in the early 1990s.

**"As a public school teacher, *Citizens for Public Schools* has become a life preserver, and this is why..."**  
-- Ann O'Halloran

At CPS I have found a large and growing circle of thoughtful activists who focus on crucial issues in public education today. There is a constant flow of ideas through our listservs, our newsletter, *The Backpack*, and public forums featuring varied leaders in research and education. In October we sponsored a conference, Educating the Whole Student, with renowned educator Deborah Meier as the keynote speaker. At our annual meeting we honored Jackie Dee King, Larry Ward and Lisa Guisbond of CARE, Jean McGuire, Executive Director of METCO, Judge Luis Perez of the Worcester Juvenile Justice system and two legislators, Senator Patricia Jehlen and Representative Katherine Clark. CPS co-sponsored a conference at UMASS/Amherst with Pauline Lipman, professor of policy studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago, as the keynoter.

While teachers like me become outraged at how MCAS affects our most fragile students, **CITIZENS FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS has been paying attention, listening, and questioning MCAS and other education issues. CPS has been working for change.**

*Ann O'Halloran taught for 32 years in Boston, the Cambridge Friends School, Waltham and Newton, regular and special education, grades K - 8. In 2007 she was named Massachusetts History Teacher of the Year and one of five finalists for the national award. She has volunteered with Citizens for Public Schools on a regular basis since retiring from teaching in 2008. If you are an educator or parent interested in the MCAS issue, please feel free to contact her at [ohalloran.ann@verizon.net](mailto:ohalloran.ann@verizon.net).*



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## CPS deplures denial of diplomas based on Science MCAS

The report that almost 3,000 Massachusetts high school seniors will be denied diplomas based on Science MCAS scores reveals once again the deep flaws of the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education's (BESE) high-stakes testing policies. These are students who have completed four years of high school and satisfied the requirements of their school districts. Many of them overcame significant obstacles such as learning disabilities, economic hardship, or learning the English language in addition to their academic subjects.

These students will have difficulty continuing their education and are likely to be derailed from productive futures, at great cost to themselves and our social fabric. Failure to earn a high school diploma means these young people will earn far less, have less stable families, and are more likely to land in prison. We can ill afford a public policy that puts thousands of Massachusetts students on a path to failure because of a few points on a single standardized test.

Massachusetts high school students come from a wide variety of home and school backgrounds. The facilities and resources for authentic science education vary greatly from community to community across the Commonwealth. Many of our schools remain underfunded and ill-equipped for science and engineering education.

*"...science tests often focus on recall of vocabulary, stressing 'excruciatingly boring material,' failing to judge the capacity of students to think"*  
-- Bruce Alberts

The Board of Education's fundamental assumption, that a paper and pencil test covering an arbitrary list of topics truly captures student progress, is deeply flawed. It is particularly flawed in the area of science, in which an understanding and an interest in the scientific methodology is more important than memorizing any single body of information.

When the BESE instituted the science MCAS requirement, it was against the recommendations of leading Massachusetts scientists and science educators, as well as the authoritative National Academies of Science recommendations that standardized test results should not be used for high stakes decisions such as graduation.

The pressure on teachers to get their students past this barrier requires test prep instruction. This drives creative teaching and instruction out of the classroom and replaces it with drill-and-kill in which students focus on lists of questions drawn from previous tests. Prominent national figures such as Bruce Alberts, president of the National Academy of Sciences, have sounded an alarm about the way high-stakes tests affect science education. Albert said science tests often focus on recall of vocabulary, stressing "excruciatingly boring material," failing to judge the capacity of students to think, and ultimately discouraging many of them from choosing a career in the field. These consequences are independent of the quality of the standardized tests and independent of whether students are able to pass the tests.

As is typically the case with standardized tests, we are asked to accept the reliability of the tests without evidence. Was there any assessment by a committee independent of the test vendors and DOE of the quality of the tests? Do we know that they are aligned with the state standards? Who set the cutoff scores and what were their criteria? Should we continue to ignore the major critiques of the MCAS science exam, in particular its failure to encourage or support authentic inquiry-based learning and teaching.

We need to invest in more extensive science and technology education in our high schools: well-trained teachers, laboratory facilities, budgets for projects, field trips and science fairs. These would be a far better use of public resources than purchasing standardized tests and test services from private vendors.