

My name is Ilyse Levine-Kanji. I have served on the Westborough School Committee for the past 7 years. I'm the mother of 2 boys, a typically developing 8th grader named Troy, and Sam, who's a high school sophomore with autism.

I support the legislature's efforts to eliminate passage of MCAS as a "one size fits all" graduation requirement.

Like many people with autism, Sam has "splinter skills," where he excels in some areas and struggles in others. For instance, he earned a solid B in Honors French 3 this year (with a 92 on the year end final) and plays cello in our award-winning high school orchestra. However, Sam has difficulty expressing what he knows.

I testified in front of the Joint Education Committee two years ago when you held hearings on "high stakes testing" because I was concerned. Now that Sam has lived through MCAS testing this year, it's reinforced my belief that students shouldn't be required to pass MCAS in order to receive a high school diploma.

We must have high expectations for people with disabilities because people with disabilities can learn and should become contributing adult members of our society. Also, as a general matter, assessments are necessary and can provide helpful feedback. However, the pendulum has swung too far with too much testing, particularly when the data shows that it's students with disabilities and English Language Learners who are being disproportionately denied diplomas for failing MCAS. Without a diploma, these students are unable to even apply for many jobs and may end up becoming wards of the state – rather than fulfilling their potential.

I have 3 main points: MCAS is not a productive use of time, MCAS can have a negative effect on self-esteem, and MCAS is an inadequate measure of some students' abilities.

Regarding time, Sam has so much more to learn than just how to take a test. Sam spent 8 full school days of testing this year alone for the ELA, Math & Science portions of the MCAS. While other students may spend only a few periods taking the test, Sam requires frequent breaks to help him maintain his focus so the testing takes almost the whole school day. That means that Sam misses out on the material that other students are learning as he is sitting laboriously taking MCAS. Students also spend a great deal of time simply preparing to take MCAS. As Senator Jehlen noted earlier, several districts, including Westborough, have entire course offerings solely geared towards MCAS preparation.

MCAS can also have a negative effect on some students' self-esteem and resulting motivation to work hard. If students fail MCAS, they can retake the test -- and the retakes get progressively easier. For the Class of 2014, the DESE's data shows that only 60% of disabled students passed MCAS on the first try in 10th grade, while 81% passed the easier retakes by the end of 12th grade. This initial failure is an unnecessary blow to students' self-esteem, sending the message to the disabled students that they must be "dumb." Since the DESE intentionally makes the MCAS retakes progressively easier,

one wonders if there is actually a point to making passage of the test a graduation requirement. (For comparison, for the Class of 2014, 99% of non-disabled students ultimately passed MCAS (92% the first time) while 43% of English Language Learners passed MCAS the first time and 80% by the end of 12th grade.)

Standardized tests, which are written for students without learning differences, are an inadequate measure of Sam's abilities. Sam is an extremely hard worker and he can – and does – learn. However, because autism affects his ability to communicate and visualize abstract concepts, Sam is often unable to demonstrate what he knows on a standardized test. For instance, we worked together on a multiple choice question about the area of a circle. Sam knew the formula and made the calculation, but ultimately colored in the wrong bubble because he didn't see that the question asked for the circle's diameter rather than its radius. If Sam needs to calculate a circle's area in the "real world" as an adult, he will be doing it in a hands-on situation where he'll clearly know whether he's measuring the diameter or the radius. Given that Sam has an absolutely amazing memory, my guess is that he'll do better remembering the formula and making the "real world" calculation as an adult than someone who scored higher than him on the 10th grade MCAS. The teachers who work daily with Sam know whether he's mastered sufficient high school material to be awarded a diploma and are far better predictors of Sam's future success than a single standardized test. Thus, requiring passage of all local graduation requirements will be a sufficient monitor for determining who has earned a high school diploma.

You, the members of the Joint Education Committee, have the power to do something that will have a tremendous positive affect on the future of a huge number of children. I urge you to report favorably out of Committee legislation that will place a moratorium on using MCAS or any standardized test as a high school graduation requirement, at least until there is a meaningful alternative assessment for students with disabilities. (DESE's statistics that only 1 of 964 students who took the MCAS ELA-Alt and 3 of 979 students who took the MCAS-Math-Alt received a passing grade shows that the "Alt" is not a meaningful alternative).

Thank you for your hard work and willingness to tackle such a complicated and important issue.

Ilyse Levine-Kanji
Westborough School Committee member and parent