

To: Joint Committee on Education
From: Jennifer Debin
Re: Bills H340, H418, S311, S294, H3395

My name is Jennifer Debin. I am a public school parent of 4 young boys in Sherborn, MA. My testimony is in support of bills H340, H418, S311, S294, and H3395.

Instead of "what test?", we could be asking "what's next?" I came to be seriously involved in the effort to stop high-stakes testing because my own son stopped wanting to go to school at age 6, one month into 1st grade. I am continually disturbed by the lack of play-based learning and the developmentally inappropriate expectations in the lower grades, which I see as directly connected to the high-stakes nature of testing in our schools. This is the time for a moratorium on high-stakes testing because it would allow us to take a deep look at the culture and standards in place in our public schools. Starting in Kindergarten, school is often crammed with pencil and paper work, lots of seat time, and reduced recess. While putting standards and measurements in place that some thought would help young students, we are destroying one of our greatest resources, our public schools, by turning young children off from learning, demanding they do things most cannot do, and making them feel like failures.

The teachers, schools, and districts are under extreme pressure to make a certain rank (based on test scores), so starting in Kindergarten students are required to focus on ELA and math standards in an academically inappropriate manner. This goes against the way that children learn best--through play and hands on activity.

My own school has not updated its science curriculum in over ten years--it's not tested yearly, so it goes to the backburner. Yet in just a few years Kindergarten has been transformed into the new 1st grade. Children themselves haven't changed; inventing new standards cannot speed up child development. What these new "high" standards can do is create anxiety and frustration, label and sort students, and ultimately turn many off from school.

Most children who drop out of school have had the thought by **second** grade. Even many of those who hang on have to find various ways to cope with a school environment that largely discounts outside-the-box thinkers, crushes natural curiosity, and rewards those who do as they are told. Some of the coping mechanisms are very unhealthy and can range from tuning out, acting out, and dropping out to self harm, and in extreme cases, suicide. Are we creating a culture of seeking outside direction, opinion, and approval at all times? Are we valuing just one type of student?

Hitting the pause button on these tests now will allow us to examine the standards and assessments we've been using and their effects on children, teachers, and schools. I would like to see the development of a culture of inquiry in our schools with student voice at the forefront, *working with* students instead of *doing to*, and the use of authentic assessments. The standards we choose would be research backed, with an element of flexibility, and created with teacher expertise and input from childhood development professionals. This moratorium is of extreme importance right now in that it would allow for time, energy, and resources to be focused on support services, and connecting with and listening to students.

We do not know what the future will hold, but we do know that the students of today will be the ones to create that future. We are losing great teachers and turning off great thinkers, and ignoring vast areas of academic and life importance. We pledge to educate everyone in our public education system and that does not mean striving to make everyone the same.

I want children to learn that mistakes are okay, that their gifts are valued, and that a checklist of ELA and math skills are not the determination of a successful life. We do not have to look far for great public school examples--in the lower grades, there are schools like the student-centered Mission Hill and there are wonderfully engaging high schools like the consortium schools in New York that use project-based and performance assessments. Taking a break from testing will allow all Massachusetts public schools to explore the use of these proven models that lead to increased student engagement, that use flexible and well-balanced curriculum to help students find their strengths, and that result in higher graduation rates across the board. It is often noted that many successful adults have been able to retain their playfulness, curiosity, and creativity--kids enter school with these qualities, so let us focus on creating school environments that enhance them, where internal motivation is given the freedom to flourish.

I was told that the nurse's office at our elementary school "really fills up" on MCAS days. That is very disturbing yet it is not only the extreme stress of the actual testing days that is a problem but the pervasive, year-long drive toward the end goal that are these tests. One of the largest issues now facing us is not that many children cannot read, write or do math, but that they can do it and quickly grow to HATE it because of how it is taught and assessed.