

FairTest

National Center for Fair & Open Testing

Testimony on Assessment to the Joint Legislative Committee on Education

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Madame Co-chairs and Members of the Committee:

My name is Monty Neill. I am executive director of FairTest (the National Center for Fair & Open Testing), headquartered in Boston, and I am on the board of directors of Citizens for Public Schools.

I am here to testify in support of the bills that end, reduce or place a moratorium on the use of standardized tests for graduation, teacher evaluation, or interventions in schools and districts, and to support of the right of parents to opt their children out of tests. Specifically: H.340, H.418, H.497, H. 3395, S.257, S.294, S.311.

While the overuse and misuse of tests is rampant in the Commonwealth, with harmful consequences, assessment is an essential part of schooling, and communities deserve to know how well their schools are doing across a range of important areas. Standardized tests should be used very sparingly, as one indicator, with no high stakes, while other sources of evidence of learning and school quality provide the robust, comprehensive picture the public deserves.

One example, regarding high school graduation, is the New York Performance Standards Consortium of 48 public high schools in New York. These schools have a waiver from all but one of the five state graduation exams. Consortium students graduate by completing their coursework and four extended performance-based assessment tasks (PBATs) in language arts, math, history and science. All schools use the same teacher-developed scoring guides. Students create their tasks in consultation with teachers. They orally defend each task before a committee that includes at least one outside expert. The result is far richer, deeper, and more serious work than MCAS or PARCC require.

The work prepares students for college success. Its 46 New York City schools demographically mirror the City. Consortium schools graduate a higher percentage of students. Of these graduates, a higher percentage enter college. Of the entrants, a higher percentage than the national average remain in college in the third semester and beyond. Outcomes for English language learners, students with disabilities, African Americans and Latinos are dramatically higher than the city averages. Consortium student discipline and teacher turnover rates are half or lower than the city's.

This great success is but one possible route. It and other examples show that greater quality and equality can be attained by shifting from a reliance on standardized tests to alternatives. New Hampshire is already beginning this process under a waiver from the US Department of Education. California has implemented a comprehensive accountability system that includes a wide range of important factors about schooling. I have attached materials that provide more details on the Consortium and other alternatives.

It is time for Massachusetts to implement a locally-based, state-verified comprehensive assessment system. The legislature must take the lead.

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References:

“Performance Assessments Succeed in New York”:

<http://www.fairtest.org/new-york-performance-standards-consortium-fact-she>

“Multiple Measures: A Definition and Examples from the U.S. and Other Nations”

<http://fairtest.org/fact-sheet-multiple-measures-definition-and-exampl>

California’s Community-Based Accountability: <http://www.lao.ca.gov/reports/2013/edu/lcff/lcff-072913.pdf> (the first section is on funding, the second on accountability)

New Hampshire Performance Assessment for Competency Education; NH has received a waiver to initiate this program. <http://education.nh.gov/assessment-systems/index.htm>