



TAUNTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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Academic excellence for every student, in every classroom, in every school.

RE: Testimony to the MA Joint Committee on Education
FROM: Ms. Nancy Everidge, Taunton Education Association President
Ms. Carol Doherty, Taunton School Committee
Dr. Julie Hackett, Superintendent of Schools
DATE: October 13, 2015

Success in Taunton Public Schools

Good morning, Senator Chang-Diaz, Representative Peisch, and Honorable Members of the Joint Committee on Education:

My name is Nancy Everidge, and I am the President of the Taunton Educators Association. I am here today with Taunton School Committee member, Carol Doherty, and our Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Julie Hackett. We are testifying in support of Senator Pacheco's Senate bill S.326 that calls for a 3-year moratorium on Commonwealth Charter Schools and licensure for all charter school teachers.

Are district schools failing our children? This is the question that is at the heart of the Massachusetts charter school debate. And the answer to that question is a resounding no! As an educator in the Taunton Public Schools, I am proud to share with you today our many successes. Like so many others in our Gateway cities, students in the Taunton Public Schools are receiving the kind of well-rounded education envisioned by you – the members of the Joint Education Committee – and by so many others in the Commonwealth. Let me share with you some of our many achievements in the Taunton Public Schools.

1. MCAS is the most common metric used to judge the success or failure of a district. Taunton is one of 24 urban school systems in the Commonwealth and we recently ranked third for ELA and sixth for Mathematics.
2. Our tenth grade MCAS scores are the highest in our district's history with 90% proficient and advanced in ELA (compared to the state average of 91%) and 74% proficient and advanced in Math (compared to the state average of 78%).
3. Taunton has been recognized for closing the achievement gap at a rate that is two to three times faster than the state.ⁱ
4. Our graduation rates are 90% (the highest ever in the history of our schools), and our dropout rate is less than 1% (the lowest ever in the history of our schools). We were recognized by the state for reducing the dropout rate by 67.4%. The DESE recognized

Taunton for having the greatest reduction in the dropout rate made by any school system in the Commonwealth.

5. In Taunton, we know our job extends beyond academics. We take care of the social and emotional needs of our students, doing all that is possible to make certain that every child succeeds. We have expanded our Chapter 74 programs, we were recognized by the USDA for having an exemplary “Breakfast in the Classroom” program considered to be a national model. We offer students internships, externships, and mentoring programs for at-risk youth. And we have expanded our after school clubs, sports, and activities to close to 70 choices without raising our participation fees.
6. We are innovators in Taunton. We collaborated to transform into one of the first fully inclusive school districts, an effort recognized last year by the Federation for Children with Special Needs.
7. And as educators, we know our job does not stop at graduation; our Taunton students are college-bound! We have dramatically increased college participation rates by nearly 7% in the last few years, our dual enrollment and Tier I college acceptance rates are on the rise, and more Taunton students than ever before attending prestigious colleges and universities like Brown, Harvard, Princeton, and Yale.

While there is always more work to be done, great things are happening in the Taunton Public Schools!

Financial Implications for Charter Expansion

My name is Carol Doherty. I am a member of the Taunton School Committee. I believe that children deserve the highest quality education possible – ALL CHILDREN. Few would dispute this fact. To provide for the few at the expense of the many is the dilemma we face as the Commonwealth, once again, considers lifting the cap on charter schools. Advocates decry failing schools. So do opponents. No child should languish in a school, public or otherwise, that does not provide a quality education.

While Taunton has had many successes, we struggle financially. We educate 8,200 students and somehow manage to do so with a per pupil expenditure of about \$11,800. By the way, the lowest per pupil expenditure among the urban districts in the Commonwealth.

In a district such as ours it costs more to educate students because we have greater challenges. Taunton has a greater proportion of students with special needs; we’ve had a recent influx of high-needs English language learners (close to one hundred more students in a single year); more than 50% of our children are from low income families. Only 18% of our population have a college degree, compared to the state average of 39%. And we know from research that the educational attainment of a child’s parents has a significant impact on that child’s future success.

We take advantage of every dollar to get great results and have learned to do more for our students with less. With a central administrative leadership team of six, we have some of the lowest administrative costs of any school system in MA. What precious little funding we do have goes directly to the classroom. With some great difficulty, we managed to expand our Chapter 74 programs allowing us to bring in additional revenues. We apply for every

competitive grant we can get our hands on. For example, we were awarded a \$1.2 million competitive federal grant allowing us to increase the number of guidance staff so desperately needed in our schools.

We have closed, consolidated, and redistricted schools to survive. And each year we fight the cash strapped City of Taunton for 95% (not 100%) Net School Spending to adequately fund our schools. Now, as a result of a recent legislative decisions made to count retiree health insurance toward all Net School Spending, it will appear that we are receiving 100%, but the truth of the matter is that our schools will not receive a single dollar more for programs and services essential to properly educate our students.

I believe in the inherent right of every family to choose the kind of education that best meets their child's needs. I do not believe that this should come at the expense of children who remain in their local public schools. Further, if policymakers had any real interest in improving public education the time, energy and resources spent on this fight would be directed to that end.

Providing the quality education we know our children deserve is an uphill battle, but it's worth the fight. The impact on local districts of creating more charter schools needs to be carefully considered. A moratorium on the growth of charter schools is desperately needed. I urge you to support Senate bill S.326. We simply cannot do the job well if we continue to lose more funding. While our students are succeeding in so many ways, we know that they will flourish with adequate funding.

Flawed Data: Another Reason a Moratorium Makes Sense

Good morning, my name is Julie Hackett. I am the Superintendent of Schools in Taunton, where I have served for the past eight years. I am the newly elected Vice President of the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents (MASS). And, for the record, I'm a believer in accountability and charter schools if district schools aren't getting the job done.

But district schools in Massachusetts *are* getting the job done. If Taunton's successes and fiscal challenges, like so many other districts, aren't enough to convince you to support a moratorium on charter schools, what if I told you that the methodology the State uses to calculate the "bottom ten percent" is seriously flawed?

As you know, the regulation for charter schools requires the DESE to compile a list of school districts performing in the lowest ten percent on statewide assessments, presumably to determine where charter schools are most needed. Last fall, Taunton was unfairly identified as performing in this lowest ten percent. Given our stable absolute achievement scores from one year to the next, it made absolutely no sense that we could plummet from number 56 in rank to number 24, from one test administration to the next. Meanwhile, the Commissioner's district (Lawrence) catapulted from the bottom to the top of the list. We knew that something was amiss.

As it turns out, two factors contributed to Taunton being wrongfully placed in the lowest ten percent: (1) the suppression of Taunton's 2013 PARCC data; and (2) the way in which the growth measure was applied, dramatically skewing results.

The Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) changed its method of calculation to include growth scores. This was the right idea and a worthwhile attempt to address disparities from one district to the next. However, as the American Statistical Association (ASA) states, growth or Value Added Measures “are complex statistical models, and high-level statistical expertise is needed to develop the models and interpret the results.”ⁱⁱⁱ Further, they caution that VAMs can “change substantially when different models are applied.”

I worked with a well-respected statistician to get an outside perspective on this issue and I consulted another. It appears that districts plummeted to the bottom or catapulted to the top of the performance list with little or no change in absolute achievement scores because growth scores were applied without the use of indexing, and this drastically skewed the rank order.

I do wish to take anything away from Lawrence students and educators who are working hard and deserve recognition for their efforts; however, I believe it is necessary for me to offer the following observations of both Taunton and Lawrence to further illustrate the issue at hand.

1. The percent of Taunton’s students in Advanced on the MCAS was 25 times higher than Lawrence in ELA, 30% higher in Math, and 3 times higher in Science.
2. The percent of Lawrence’s students in Warning was twice Taunton’s in both ELA and Science and about 25% higher in Math.
3. Lawrence gained two points on Taunton in ELA, but it would take them six years to catch up to Taunton, assuming they continued to gain two points on Taunton each year. In Science, Lawrence gained one point on Taunton, but they would need 14 years to catch up at the same rate.

Despite these factors, the Commissioner’s district was ranked much higher than the Taunton Public Schools, which makes no sense. In an opinion published yesterday in *Commonwealth Magazine*, it was noted that, “Lawrence is no longer Massachusetts’ worst-performing school district. In fact, by state calculations, it has vaulted past more than 40 cities and towns, climbing out of the bottom 10 percent of districts.” As you heard today, Taunton’s MCAS scores rival the state’s in many cases, so we are far from “the worst performing district” if there is such a thing. No district should be labeled or rank ordered, in my opinion, because no two districts are alike.

The second issue involves the DESE’s suppression of Taunton’s PARCC test scores. We were one of five districts to participate in the school-wide PARCC pilot, and the DESE promised to hold all districts harmless. Instead (and I do believe this was an unintentional error), the DESE suppressed the test scores of approximately 300 students (ten percent of our testing population) from East Taunton Elementary, one of our highest performing schools. By contrast, the DESE counted the best scores in recent history for all PARCC classrooms. This created a disparity in test scores not easily rectified, impacting everything from Taunton’s placement in the lowest performing ten percent, our growth scores, and even our District Accountability Review.

The future of public education is in your hands. As you can see, there are many flaws to be worked out and concerns to be addressed. Even if you are a proponent of charter schools, I urge you in fairness to support Senate bill S.326 and the three year moratorium on charter schools.

ⁱ Richard Cross, Theodor Rebarber, Kathleen Madigan, and Bruce Bean, “Beyond Demographic Destiny: An Analysis of Massachusetts Minority and White Student Achievement Gaps” (White Paper, Pioneer Institute, Boston, MA, 2010).

ⁱⁱ “ASA Statement on Using Value-Added Models for Educational Assessment,” (Executive Summary, American Statistical Association, April 8, 2014).