

To the Massachusetts Joint Committee on Education, June 23, 2009

**State Senator Robert A. O’Leary
State House Room 511B, Boston 02133
and
State Representative Martha M. Walz
State House Room 473G, Boston 02133**

**RE: H3660, “An Act to Improve Assessment and Accountability
to Ensure Students Acquire 21st Century Skills”**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

My name is Mary Ann Stewart. I am the President-elect of the Massachusetts Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and also a newly elected member of the Lexington School Committee. In 2007 I was appointed to Governor Patrick’s Whole Child Subcommittee for the Readiness Project, which resulted in our state’s blueprint for public education.

I am here today to speak as a parent of three children in Massachusetts public schools and in support of H3660.

Our eldest graduated high school two weeks ago and will attend Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts in the fall; our middle child moves on as a junior in high school, and our youngest moves on from elementary to middle school.

All three children are very different learners: one is a child with an intellectual disability on an IEP; another is comfortable in the “middle of the pack”, who does OK and does not draw much attention to his learning needs in traditional education settings, but shines with project-based, hands-on alternative learning opportunities. A third child is a high-achieving learner who does well in traditional classrooms and also enjoys the enrichment opportunities of honors and AP courses. Two children are “proficient” MCAS test-takers, but are very different classroom learners; MCAS has not measured their achievement as individual learners.

In 1993, Massachusetts launched an ambitious plan to provide an adequate education for our children. While progress has been made, we are still struggling to fulfill its promise. State education reform has been marked by high stakes testing, which has had the unintended consequence of a narrowed curriculum, too much time focused on standardized test preparation and testing, large gaps in proficiency and rising dropout rates, and – fails to measure the achievement of individual learners.

Much of the current debate forsakes a pedagogical agenda, which is lost in the political morass. I believe we are fortunate to have thousands of dedicated educators in our schools, but we must do better for all of our children.

What should students learn and how should they learn it? How do we best serve the many different kinds of learners? How do schools balance internal missions and external mandates? How does state governance and finance impact school districts? These are important questions we must answer if we are to improve student learning for all our children.

We are closing in fast on the end of the first decade of the 21st century. MCAS testing has an important and critical role to play as one measure of student performance, not as a single determinant, high-stakes test. To build on the strengths of our public schools, address weaknesses, close gaps, and move toward a full realization of education reform, we need a balanced assessment and accountability system that will promote 21st century skills, educate the whole child, and focus state attention and resources on schools and districts that most need help in their efforts to improve quality and outcomes for every student.

By integrating the components outlined in H3660, we progress to a more balanced system that maintains high standards, complies with NCLB, is cost-neutral, and does not necessitate MCAS repeal. To be ultimately effective, accountability must be more than a snapshot, of which the MCAS test represents. We need to consider a variety of tools to measure what students know.

I ask you to please support this bill. Thank you.

Respectfully submitted,

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