

## Massachusetts professors protest high-stakes standardized tests

By Valerie Strauss , Updated: February 22, 2013

A [coalition of more than 130 Massachusetts professors and researchers](#) from some 20 schools — including Harvard, Tufts, Boston and Brandeis universities — signed [a new public statement](#) that urges officials to stop overusing high-stakes standardized tests to assess students, teachers and schools.

The statement — also signed by academics from the University of Massachusetts, Clark University, Boston College, Lesley College and other schools — is the latest effort in a revolt against high-stakes testing that has spread from coast to coast. [Students are opting out](#) of taking standardized tests, [teachers are refusing](#) to administer them and some superintendents are criticizing the standardized test-based accountability systems passed in various states with the support of school reformers.

The statement asks state education officials to change state assessment policies so that standardized tests are not used for high-stakes purposes, saying:

Given that standardized tests provide only one indicator of student achievement, and that their high-stakes uses produce ever-increasing incentives to teach to the test, narrow the curriculum, or even to cheat, we call on the BESE [Board of Elementary and Secondary Education] to stop using standardized tests in high-stakes decisions affecting students, teachers, and schools.

The Massachusetts statement follows similar efforts: The [National Resolution on High-Stakes Testing](#) has more than 13,700 individual and 460 organizational signers; scores of educators and researchers from 16 different schools in the Chicago area issued a [letter to Mayor Rahm Emanuel](#) warning against standardized test-based teacher evaluation; a [petition](#) in New York state [by principals and others](#) against a test-based evaluation system that has the signatures of more than a third of public school principals in the state and over 6,500 supporters; and a letter from Georgia professors to the governor opposing the use of standardized tests to evaluate educators. Meanwhile, in Texas, some school boards have approved a resolution calling for an end to the overuse of standardized tests.

Here is the text of the Massachusetts statement:

Statement against High-Stakes Standardized Testing

by Massachusetts Professors and Researchers:

There has been a ground swell of opposition to the overuse and misuse of standardized testing across the United States. This includes statements from more than 670 Texas school boards, nearly one-third of all New York State principals, and hundreds of organizations and thousands of individuals who have endorsed the National Resolution on High-Stakes Testing. Against this backdrop, two significant statements have come from groups of educators and researchers in Chicago, Georgia and New York. We applaud these actions and have come together in solidarity with their efforts.

We respectfully present this statement to the Massachusetts Commissioner of Education, the Secretary of Education and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) because you have it within your power to dramatically improve state assessment policies and thereby improve the learning opportunities and conditions for all of our students. We also copy this to the Governor and key legislators, as they too have the power to enact positive changes.

As educators and researchers from across the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, we strongly oppose our state's continued overreliance on high-stakes standardized testing to assess student achievement, evaluate teacher effectiveness, and determine school quality. Given that standardized tests provide only one indicator of student achievement, and that their high-stakes uses produce ever-increasing incentives to teach to the test, narrow the curriculum, or even to cheat, we call on the BESE to stop using standardized tests in high-stakes decisions affecting students, teachers, and schools.

Researchers have documented, and a [nine-year study](#) by the National Research Council (Hout & Elliott, 2011) has confirmed, that the past decade's emphasis on testing has yielded little learning progress. Further, testing experts and the test-makers themselves have consistently warned against using standardized tests for high-stakes decisions such as graduation or retention, or to hire, fire, or reward teachers (AERA, 2000). The tests provide only a snapshot of a limited range of knowledge and skills, so they can provide only limited information to teachers. Because the tests are not designed to determine teacher effectiveness, no accurate conclusions can be drawn about an individual teacher from her students' test scores. Research indicates that a teacher's impact on student learning cannot be reliably isolated from the myriad other factors that impact student learning (Baker et al., 2009). Finally, test experts have shown that test scores can be raised without increasing true student learning (Koretz, 2008), and that the higher the stakes attached to a test, the less trustworthy the test scores are. Cheating scandals in Atlanta, Washington, D.C., and dozens of other major cities dramatically illustrate this problem. Problems with the use of MCAS interact with other educational problems, such as continued funding inequities and the growth of poverty within the state (MassBudget, 2012). While MCAS may help identify the consequences of inequities, its high-stakes uses exacerbate these consequences. These MCAS

problems include but are not limited to:

*Disparate impact on students.* Numerous studies document that the use of high-stakes testing — including test barriers to high school graduation — bears adverse impact on students and is accompanied by widening racial/ethnic and income-based gaps. MCAS testing has not significantly reduced disparities in achievement or eliminated gaps, thus the negative consequences of the high-stakes tests fall disproportionately on the groups that most need help. In Massachusetts' low-income, urban districts, large numbers of students perform below proficiency on the MCAS. Twice as many urban as suburban public high school graduates fail college placement tests in math and English and must take noncredit, remedial classes (Massachusetts DESE, 2008). Results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show a failure to achieve significant reduction in the achievement gap separating Massachusetts' white students from African-American and Latino students since 2003. The negative effects of our high-stakes testing environment are perhaps most pronounced for English Language Learners (ELLs) — for whom the tests were not designed — who cumulatively and consistently fail to achieve proficiency within the limited school time of a year and a day before they are required to take the exam in English. According to a 2011 Gaston Institute report, “In high school, about 18% of [ELL] students were retained in grade, many of them several times and many of them in the ninth grade to avoid having them fail the tenth grade MCAS graduation requirement.” In Massachusetts, ELLs are, on average, nine times more likely to drop out of high school than their peers. The disparate impact of the graduation requirement on students with disabilities also is striking. For example, of the 2,798 students who did not pass all the required MCAS tests by the end of their senior year in 2011, 75% were students with disabilities. The fact remains that Massachusetts has placed the most severe accountability on the backs of its most disadvantaged students.

*Negative impact on curriculum and instruction.* Surveys of teachers in Massachusetts (Abrams et al., 2003; Clarke et al., 2003) and nationally (McMurrer, 2007; Moon et al., 2003; Hinde, 2003) show a marked increase in teaching to the test and narrowing the curriculum to tested subjects as a result of high-stakes testing. In addition, research compiled by the NRC and others shows this comes with a negative impact on school climate, often creating an environment of intimidation, fear, anxiety and stress for both teachers and their students, including kindergarten children (Hout & Elliott, 2011). Further, investigators of the Atlanta cheating scandal identified high-stakes testing as a cause of the problem (Georgia Bureau of Investigation, 2011). Under such conditions, it becomes difficult for teachers to create a learning environment that promotes creativity, critical thinking, risk-taking, experimentation and a love of learning. Moreover, as with other negative consequences, there is a disparate impact: teaching to the test, curricular narrowing and damaging school climates more frequently affect low income and minority students.

*Negative impact on educators.* High-stakes testing creates adverse consequences not only for students but also for educators. Researchers have challenged the validity, reliability,

effectiveness, and ethics of using high-stakes test scores to evaluate educators. Further, as argued in an open letter to Mayor Rahm Emanuel by Chicagoland Researchers and Advocates for Transformative Education (CReATE, 2012), “There is no evidence that evaluation systems that incorporate student test scores produce gains in student achievement... [and] Teachers will subtly but surely be incentivized to avoid students with health issues, students with disabilities, students who are English Language Learners, or students suffering from emotional issues. Research has shown that no model yet developed can adequately account for all of these ongoing factors.” Student growth measures are not capable of identifying with reasonable accuracy and consistency over time who is or is not an effective teacher. Already some highly effective teachers are leaving the profession. Further, Massachusetts’ new system requires that “measures of student learning” be developed as part of annually evaluating every teacher in every subject and grade. This could further inundate students with testing and test preparation.

*Negative impact on schools.* The problems discussed above harm many schools, as well as their students and teachers individually. While federal law requires assessments, it does not require high-stakes standardized testing. There is nothing to prevent Massachusetts from using a very different assessment system, using multiple sorts of indicators gathered over time, as was proposed in the Education Reform Act of 1993.

## **Recommendations**

Because of these and other problems with the high-stakes uses of standardized tests to evaluate students, teachers and schools, we call on the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education to:

\*Work with educators, parents and the public to craft a new assessment system that will more fully assess the many competencies our children need to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and that will avoid the current overreliance on standardized tests.

- Stop using MCAS test results as a barrier to high school graduation.
- Prohibit the use of test scores in educator evaluations and in decisions for hiring, firing, laying off or rewarding teachers.
- Focus teacher evaluations on the appropriate use of evidence-based teaching practices and a comprehensive set of indicators of classroom and school-based student learning rather than one-shot test scores.
- Stop using test scores to designate schools for punitive turnaround reform measures that mandate the firing of 50% or more of the staff.
- Focus turnaround reform efforts on school-wide, research-based approaches.

We know that reforming the current high-stakes testing system will take time and political capital, but we believe that it is not only possible but also imperative if we want to improve the lives of all children and ensure their future success. Given the recent unprecedented attention focused on problems with current testing practice, this is exactly the right time to transform recommendations into reality. Therefore, we make ourselves available to the BESE to assist in these efforts in whatever ways are necessary.

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