Coalition for Authentic Reform in Education (CARE)
Education Reform in Massachusetts began with high hopes. As educators, parents, and citizens, we believe these hopes have been realized by the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) tests. These tests have disrupted our classrooms and schools, and characterized valuable activities from school activities that had been making more productivity to the benefit of local communities, schools, and teachers. High stakes testing, which results in standards, is judged by the results of a single test, is a quick fix that does not lead to sustained improvement in learning, teaching, and assessment. Required grade tests increase distrust for students and teachers becoming familiar with the tests, and will only serve to narrow curricular and instructional focus on passing test scores, create less interesting and challenging educational opportunities for students, increase grade retention and dropped rates, particularly for low-income students and students of color, and lower levels of involvement among teachers, students, and parents. The use of these tests in state and local decisions makes it impossible that all students should be included in the process.

The original intent of the Education Reform Act was to foster both excellence and equity. The MCAS accountability system is intended to assist schools to create high-quality learning opportunities for all students, to hold schools responsible for implementing high-quality standards, and to assess students’ ability of an available set of core knowledge, skills, and habits of work. In doing so, accountability systems need to ensure that all students – including low-income students, students of color, limited-English proficient students, and students with special needs – have access to high-quality teaching and are prepared to participate in future opportunities in a democratic society.

However, the MCAS is characterized by its high stakes and its narrow approach to accountability will increase the performance gap between low-income and more affluent students, between regular education and special education students, and between White students and Black, Hispanic, and Limited English Proficient (LEP) students. The creation of multiple layers of difficulty would only exacerbate the problems.

While many schools need to improve, the high stakes nature of the MCAS and emphasis on a single paper-and-pencil test distorts the exercise of democracy and local innovation by excluding parents, teachers, students, and administrators from participating and decision-making in the assessment process, and by understating intellectual freedom. We are an already-diminished, with MCAS threatening to undermine the benefits brought up by the first years of Education Reform.

The Education Reform Act specifically called for the state to create a multi-layered assessment system that included local as well as state assessments, and used samples, portfolios, exhibitions, and as well as paper-and-pencil tests. The state should encourage and promote local innovation, creativity, and freedom. Finally, such a multi-layered testing model actually promotes greater public accountability than the single, paper and pencil MCAS, as it builds in multiple means of assessing a school’s performance through a series of local assessments, student quality review, and limited standardized testing.

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