

March 6, 2015

Commissioner Mitchell Chester  
Department of Elementary and Secondary Education  
75 Pleasant Street  
Malden, MA 02148

Dear Commissioner Chester,

My principals and I welcome the move to a new generation of tests that will actually assess students' ability to perform complex tasks, and we applaud the DESE's thoughtful decision not to count this year's PARCC assessment results towards a district's accountability status. We are writing to you, however, to urge you as well to withhold publication of student test results during the first two years of PARCC testing, just as was done with the MCAS tests during their initial implementation trials.

In addition to school districts not having had the requisite time needed to adequately prepare students, faculty and technology for the test, the company that created and oversees the standardized tests is also not prepared. Pearson is not yet ready to guarantee that its technology can handle the volume of testing that is soon to ensue. During last week's trial math tests, our students were kicked off the Pearson website every ten minutes- hardly favorable conditions for accurate assessment. Furthermore, the DESE has been unwilling to release the more challenging performance-based tests for trial, so our students will have no opportunity to become familiar with manipulating the data on their computers, for example, through the use of online protractors, before the actual tests.

While we acknowledge that districts will be "held harmless" this year relative to their accountability levels, and we appreciate that the testing windows have been expanded, the fact remains that our students' scores will still be made public. In as much as they will present inaccurate data, they will provide our communities with a skewed representation of our students' learning. There is of course a bigger issue here than the technical unreliability of the Pearson servers and the lack of time for schools to fully prepare for the exam. The DESE plan to publicize students' scores on assessments with a design that is unfamiliar and using technology that requires adaptation is patently unfair. The kinds of questions and the use of computers to read, interpret and answer them are new to students and teachers alike. Furthermore, the PARCC assessments test the learning of content that in many cases has never been taught before. Students who will do poorly on these tests through no fault of their own will nevertheless feel like failures. No teacher worth his or her salt would put students in this position, and were the DESE to do this to tens of thousands of students this spring, it would be equally inappropriate.

We believe that standardized testing has a role in the educational process, in as much as it provides diagnostic data for educators to use to identify achievement gaps and baseline data for communities to use to ensure the quality of their schools. But the publication of their results and subsequent press

rankings of schools and communities should not be seen as a primary means for improving schools' performance. Rather, deep and lasting school improvement occurs when testing is primarily used to diagnose student learning challenges and achievement gaps as well as curricular alignment concerns so that teachers can devise and share instructional strategies that work for all.

Educators want to be held accountable, but "accountability" does not work as a primary impetus for change, either as a shaming mechanism or by tying teacher evaluation to test scores. Creating the conditions for collaboration, ongoing professional development and peer based organizational structures through which teachers hold each other accountable is a much more effective means for improving student learning.

It would be prudent to take the next few years to work out the kinks in the PARCC assessments before we rush to publicize their results. During that time we should assess how much testing time we actually need to serve the appropriate purposes for standardized testing. Let's make sure that the technology works, that schools have equal access to it, and that students know how to use it to take tests before they are publicly assessed. Let's make sure that the kinds of questions that measure students' critical thinking are meaningful and accessible, that the reading passages are appropriately challenging and relevant and not Latin poetry as the sample 10th grade PARCC reading passage would suggest, and that our teachers have had the time to adjust to the curricular changes called for by the Common Core.

The DESE and superintendents share a deep and abiding concern for our students and their ongoing academic, physical, social and emotional growth. Standardized testing plays a role in helping us meet these goals, but so do compassion, care and common sense. Therefore, we ask that you mandate that the scores are for district and DESE use only.

Sincerely,

Jon Sills

Cc Bedford School Committee  
Secretary James Peyser  
Tom Scott, M.A.S.S.