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Commissioner of Education  
Testimony on No Child Left Behind and State Standards  
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Members of the Commission on No Child Left Behind, thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the Massachusetts Department of Education. For the record, my name is David P. Driscoll, and I am Commissioner of Education for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

I have been Commissioner since 1998, serve as the out-going president of the Council of Chief State School Officers, and was sworn in as a member of the National Assessment Governing Board two weeks ago. I have been in public education for 42 years, and in that time have served as a math teacher, administrator, superintendent, Deputy Commissioner and Commissioner.

As Commissioner of Education, I have a unique perspective on No Child Left Behind in that I can see the impact of the federal and state standards on our 1800 public schools and 1 million students. While I believe the goals of this important law are the right ones, I have serious concerns about the inflexible consequences so many of our schools and districts are about to face.

In Massachusetts we have taken the goals of NCLB very seriously. We know that in public education, setting high expectations – and sticking to them – makes a difference.

We learned that lesson in 2001, the first year we attached high stakes to the grade 10 Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) exam. The previous year, when the results didn't count, just

48 percent of students in the sophomore class passed the math and English Language Arts exams on their first try. But in 2001, when the high stakes kicked in, 68 percent of 10<sup>th</sup> graders passed both exams, earning the competency determination needed to get a high school diploma. That passing rate has risen steadily each year since then, and 81 percent of the class of 2007 passed both exams on their first try in 2005.

Our Proficiency rates have also improved: In 2005, 61 percent of sophomores scored Proficient or Advanced on the math exam, up from 57 percent in 2004 and 45 percent in 2001. In English, 64 percent of sophomores scored Proficient or Advanced, up from 62 percent in 2004 and just 51 percent in 2001.

We measure our success in more ways than just MCAS performance. Our SAT scores have held steady or risen every year for the last 14 years. Last fall our fourth and eighth graders ranked first in the nation in reading and tied for first in mathematics on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. In fact, those results made Massachusetts the first state ever to place first or tie for first on four NAEP exams in one year.

But this year our steady success has begun to wane. Our SAT scores have gone down, and early data on the 2006 MCAS exams suggests that our improvement trend has gone flat.

This sudden shift in our performance could be a one-year blip that will be gone next year, but more likely it signals the need for us to rethink how we are teaching our students, organizing our school days, and training our educators.

Nationally we are seen as a state with high standards that is making progress academically, and consistently meeting our targets for improvement. In 2005, Massachusetts made Adequate Yearly

Progress in both English and math for students in the aggregate for the second year in a row, showing the state as a whole is on track to move all students to Proficient by 2014.

But while we reached our improvement goals as a state, 10 of our districts were identified for improvement in the aggregate, and more than half were identified for improvement because of subgroup performance. In addition, 192 schools were identified for aggregate performance, and more than 400 were identified for subgroup performance. NCLB regulations require the state to take on an expanded role in schools and districts that repeatedly do not make AYP, and that list will continue to grow – in Massachusetts and in every other state - between now and 2014.

We understand the need for accountability, and we recognize the need for consequences, but as I speak to leaders of high performing districts about to face serious consequences, I am beginning to wonder if the inflexible consequences of NCLB are too severe. In its current format, all schools that do not make AYP are treated the same. This cookie-cutter approach to school reform makes no sense – if 100 schools are identified, 100 answers are needed, not one.

As a state we have set one of the highest standards in the country for Proficiency according to standards set by NAEP. Some have urged us to lower that standard to make reaching Proficiency less of a challenge, but we have refused, and will continue to do so.

Holding our students to high – but reasonable – standards is the right thing to do for our kids. Lower standards may mean better results on paper, but will ultimately mean that we short-change our children and their ability to compete and succeed in the global economy.

But maintaining these high standards has left us with the unfortunate consequence of identifying more schools and districts for

improvement, corrective action, and restructuring each year. Superintendents and principals see this as an over-identification, and I agree. Holding our schools and districts to a higher standard than other states have chosen shouldn't come with automatic penalties.

Let me be clear: my concern is not about protecting the adults who may be embarrassed by the label of having their school be "in need of improvement." However, I am not convinced that negative labels and uniform consequences are necessarily the answer. Sticks can only get us so far; perhaps the time has come to use more carrots.

In Massachusetts, we intend to keep faith with the goals of NCLB, because we believe that they set the right expectations for our children. But the time has come to acknowledge that unless we change the way we run our schools, significantly increase funding and add more time for teaching and learning, we are not going to get all of our students to proficiency.

Too much energy is focused on test scores, lecturing, and fulfilling requirements; too little is spent on truly engaging our students in their learning, and that has to change.

This can be done in many ways. For example, we need to re-examine our school calendar. Most schools in the Commonwealth and nationwide are open from September through June, an agricultural calendar that was first set when children were needed to tend the fields each summer. Today our needs are different, and our children need more time – not less - in school. This could mean both longer school days and longer school years in some communities.

What is clear to me is that the old 180-day school year is no longer enough. If we really want to eliminate the achievement gap, we have to consider more time and more resources for our schools.

And that is just the beginning. To truly engage our students in their learning we need to acknowledge and address what is holding them back from learning. Some students feel unsafe, some are hungry, some are struggling with addictions, some feel detached and worry that they'll never fit in.

The importance of student engagement cannot be overemphasized. Ask any teacher—kids today are different than they were even just a decade ago, yet what they are learning in the classroom is basically unchanged from what was taught to their parents. Lecturing, rote memorization and straight-out-of-the-book learning doesn't work anymore. We need to show our students how what they are learning is connected to the real world and to their lives.

We are committed to the goals of No Child Left Behind, and as required, will enforce the consequences for those schools and districts that repeatedly do not make AYP. But we do so with increasing concern. The goals of NCLB are the right ones. We owe it to all students to help them reach proficiency, so that they can succeed and thrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If, however, NCLB becomes merely a numbers game, with more and more schools in the Commonwealth and nationwide identified through a "one size fits all" approach, the purpose of the law will be lost.

Let's stop obsessing about AYP. Instead, let's spend more of our time and energy working with educators to get our kids more engaged in their learning and ensure that they leave our schools with the skills they need to succeed in the world. If we do that, I am certain that we will meet the goals we have set for ourselves, and in the end, no child will be left behind.

At this time, I will be pleased to take your questions.