

**STATEMENT OF JAMES A. PEYSER  
TO THE NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND COMMISSION**

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My name is Jim Peyser. For the past seven years I have served as chairman of the Massachusetts Board of Education. I am also a Partner with NewSchools Venture Fund, a nonprofit grant-making organization supporting the launch and growth of entrepreneurial ventures working to accelerate the course of education reform. Prior to joining NewSchools I was the education advisor to Governors Swift and Romney. I am appearing today in my capacity as chairman of the Massachusetts Board of Education.

Massachusetts' Education Reform Act of 1993 required the development of assessments for grades 4, 8 and 10 in all core academic subjects (English, math, science, history and social science), capable of providing student-level results with enough detail to inform instructional decisions. These assessments are known as MCAS, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System. In addition, as a result of action taken by the Board of Education in 1999, all students beginning with the Class of 2003 must pass the 10<sup>th</sup> grade MCAS assessment in both English and math in order to graduate from high school. Prior to the adoption of No Child Left Behind, the state Board of Education decided to add a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading test in order to provide an earlier indicator of reading proficiency or weakness.

MCAS has been widely acknowledged to be a reliable test that fairly measures student performance relative to challenging standards for content knowledge and skill. Besides the quality of its content, one of the greatest strengths of MCAS is the fact that these tests are recreated each year, and the questions from the prior year's tests are published on the Department of Education's website. As a result of this transparency, there is no mystery about what is being asked of students. Moreover, by publishing the questions, it becomes possible to provide a more robust and detailed item analysis of student results. Equally important, with fresh questions each year, schools cannot "teach to the test," they must teach to the standards. Another important feature of MCAS is that it uses a healthy mix of multiple choice and open response questions, including essays on the English exams. This approach ensures that students are evaluated not just on their skill at taking standardized tests, but on their command of the subjects,

The downside of this approach is that it's expensive. Each MCAS test costs the state about \$1.4M per year to develop, administer and score. This figure does not include the school and district staff time needed to manage the actual testing process. In addition, our approach to testing (especially the use of open-response questions) adds time to the scoring and reporting process. Full results from tests administered in the late Spring are not available to schools until late Summer or early Fall.

No Child Left Behind forced Massachusetts to add new reading and math tests in three elementary and middle school grades. It also required the addition of a new English proficiency assessment for English Language Learners. According to the Massachusetts

Department of Education, the total annual cost of these seven additional assessments is just over \$11M. Massachusetts receives approximately \$7.8M in Title VI funds to support NCLB's mandated testing program, which amounts to about two-thirds of our added costs. This gap is probably somewhat overstated, however, since NCLB does not require an approach to testing as costly as MCAS.

Although Massachusetts' initial approach to statewide testing was to administer periodic, rather than annual assessments, the state's education policymakers are fully committed to the annual testing required by NCLB. Indeed, I'm quite confident that if the mandate were to go away tomorrow, we would continue to test every year in reading and math. As rich a source of student performance data as MCAS is, there is broad consensus that episodic results are simply not very helpful to educators. Equally important, without consistent information about student achievement over time, it is impossible to make judgments about the improvement of individual students and cohorts, which is essential information for both educators and policymakers.

Testing is a valuable component of school and district accountability. But if that were its only or primary purpose, we would all be much better off with shorter, machine-scored tests, administered to statistically significant samples of students. The big win is developing an assessment system that provides valid information about individual student performance, which can be used to identify specific student needs and to improve the overall level and quality of instruction. This requires much more information than can be gleaned by testing every few years, no matter how good the tests are.

The ideal situation would be one in which statewide summative assessments, administered each year in the Spring, are complemented by locally developed interim assessments, aligned to state standards. In this way, schools and districts could track student progress towards state standards through the course of the year, so that extra help, alternative materials, or targeted instructional strategies can be employed before an entire year is lost.

This level of testing should not be the responsibility of the federal government. It should not even be a state responsibility. Nevertheless, with federal encouragement states should actively seek to establish an infrastructure to support their schools and districts in developing and administering interim assessments. This is partially a matter of technology. States need to build data warehouse capacity to store and manage all the information (including individual student identifiers) and schools need to deploy locally-based systems to facilitate test development, administration, analysis and reporting. Equally important, states need to help schools and districts create a deep, high-quality pool of aligned test items, so that locally developed interim assessments can be used as reliable indicators of progress towards end-of-year standards.

The bottom line is NCLB's requirement for annual statewide testing has not proved to be an onerous burden on Massachusetts. Indeed, it has been a welcome addition to our pre-existing assessment program and an important component of educational reform and improvement. The question before us should not be whether to do annual testing, but

how to do it better. Here are few suggestions for federal policy changes that might produce some positive effects:

- Provide additional federal funds for improving the quality of state assessments in those states with rigorous academic standards, using NAEP as a model and benchmark.
- Develop an extensive pool of publicly available test items aligned with NAEP standards, which could be used by schools and districts in creating interim assessments.
- Reallocate technology dollars to support the development of state data warehouses and the deployment of locally based assessment systems.

Thank you for your consideration, and for your continuing efforts to examine and improve the No Child Left Behind Act.