

**Testimony Before the Boston City Council Education Committee
by Tom Louie, Mass. English Plus Coalition
Presented on Behalf of Mr. Louie by Lee Valentine, Mass English Plus Coalition
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Chairman Turner and members of the City Council Education Committee, thank you very much for the opportunity to testify before you tonight. For the record, my name is Tom Louie. I am here representing Mass. English Plus and the Mass. Coalition for Bilingual Education, organizations dedicated to promoting the values of bilingual education and better services for language minority students in Massachusetts. I come before you to endorse the resolution asking for a delay in the implementation of MCAS until there are sufficient resources to significantly close the achievement gap between poorer and wealthier communities, and the gap between students of color and white communities. As a member organization of the Alliance for High Standards, Not High Stakes we oppose the use of the MCAS as a high stakes graduation requirement.

Moreover, I want to testify regarding the unjust nature of MCAS as it is presently applied to limited English proficient (LEP) students. LEP students compose a disproportionately large group of students who have yet to pass the MCAS as a high stakes graduation requirement for 2003. Approximately 33% of 12th grade LEP children still lack a competency determination after the last statewide retest results, a higher rate of failure than for any other group of students reported by the DOE.

I want to share with the Committee a few key points and my recommendations for the interim should the DOE continue to use the MCAS as a high stakes test:

- 1) Chapter 69, 1I of the MGL mandates that LEP children who have been in the United States for 3 years or less are entitled to receive their assessments in the language they are most proficient with. In spite of the fact that 40% of LEP children in Massachusetts have a native language other than English or Spanish, the MCAS is available only in those two languages. While the DOE touts the importance of using the MCAS as a diagnostic tool to make mid-course corrections in the educational development of children, by not offering all LEP children the same type of assessment that mainstream children are entitled to, the DOE is in facial violation of the statute, and has set up a two-tier system.

Regardless of how long a child has been here, if he is still LEP then MCAS subject matter tests are more likely to serve as measures of advanced English language proficiency than they are to measure competency in the subjects that they purport to measure competency in. The DOE has settled for a plan of alternately inaccurately measuring some LEP students or not bothering to assess them at all until it comes time for them to graduate.

- 2) The Education Reform Act also calls for a system employing “ a variety of assessment instruments”. We should explore the possibilities of creating a portfolio

system offering multiple formats to assess student achievement beyond the pen and paper test.

- 2) The English Language Arts test is not an appropriate assessment instrument for bilingual students who are learning ESL (English as a Second Language). The MCAS tests students' knowledge of themes, structures and elements of English and American literature which most bilingual students have not been exposed to. In contrast, new mainstream students who transfer to the public schools from other states or from private schools are not required to take the MCAS at all for graduation, because they have not been exposed to the state Language Arts curriculum. Again, the DOE is implementing a two-tier system.

The DOE is in the process of developing an English Proficiency Assessment (EPA) test that is aligned with newly proposed curriculum frameworks for LEP students. Unfortunately, the Commissioner of Education feels that it will take up to 3 years just to "decipher" the new curriculum frameworks, and other members of the board felt it might take up to 10 years to fully implement them. Yet in the meantime our LEP children are being held to a high stakes graduation requirement.

If the current MCAS graduation requirement is to remain in place, we recommend that bilingual students who have not been here for very long (5 –7 years), be allowed to take the EPA as an option. The EPA should also be the instrument to gauge a student's readiness to take the MCAS.

- 4) Many of our LEP students are in a vocational educational program such as Madison Park High School. Many of them will not be able to pass the MCAS test, despite demonstrating proficiency in the technical and math skills required for their chosen trades. Without a high school diploma, they likely cannot go on to higher education or enter certain apprenticeship programs.
- 5) The MCAS does not take into consideration for the diversity of talents and the diversity of learning styles that exist in our communities. The goal of public education should be helping each and every student to reach their potential, whether as an artist, scientist, or a teacher. We want higher standards, but not standardization.

We should not deny students diplomas when they have passed all the district requirements for graduation. For example, some of the bilingual graduates at Burke High School, which recently received an award for having 100% of its graduates going onto college, would not be able to attend college because they would be denied diplomas despite their record of excellence in the classroom.

Yes, the MCAS mandate has given urban schools such as the City of Boston the impetus to do more to close the achievement gap and raise standards and expectations. But the MCAS is not the answer if we want to drastically improve minority student achievements. It is a mistake to support a flawed assessment instrument as the sole

criterion for graduation. What is even worse is using this one test to guide instructional, promotional, and grading policies within the public schools.

The best way to improve student achievement within bilingual programs is to have better professional development for all teachers who work with language minority students, better authentic assessment instruments to properly gauge student progress in English and academic subjects, whole school change which respects and utilizes the students' knowledge and cultures as assets, strengthen parental involvement, and make sure that appropriate resources aligned with the curriculum are available.

We should devote more resources to ensure LEP students have the opportunities to learn. This would include professional development for of all teachers who work with language minority students, technical assistance to those schools who are most in need, and also promoting initiatives such as smaller class size and smaller schools that would help teaching and learning in the classroom. Without whole school change and the resources and support, we will not be able to close the achievement gap. Current remediation programs are poorly coordinated and insufficient to meet the needs of the large percentage LEP students, which include students with limited literacy skills in their first language.

We are very much concerned about the MCAS's effect on the dropout rate and the potential impact of students who have dropped out engaging in anti-social activities. I have seen some of the statistics for Latino student dropouts and the number of students who have "disappeared" since the 9th grade. Unless we seriously reconsider the current MCAS policies, we will be facing serious negative economic and social consequences for the Commonwealth in the future.