



Testimony to the Joint Education Committee

by **Jamie Gass**

May 10, 2011

Let me start by thanking **Co-Chairs Chang-Diaz** and **Peisch** for the opportunity to testify today; **Representative Smola** for filing this legislation; and the **Tantasqua School Committee** for its leadership on this important issue surrounding the future of MCAS and our state's academic standards.

My name is Jamie Gass, director of Pioneer's Center for School Reform. I'm testifying in favor of **H3349**.

When it comes to K-12 education reform in the United States, there have essentially been two narratives over the last 20 years. There's everything Massachusetts has done that's made our state tops in the nation on virtually every measure of student achievement and then there's the rest of the country, which has been struck in various degrees of stagnation and decline.

So, what is the future of Massachusetts' academic standards and MCAS testing?

That's a question should have been answered well before last July, when the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) unilaterally decided to discard our state's academics standards and MCAS for weaker quality national standards and yet-to-be-developed national testing.

Thanks to the Tantasqua School Committee and Representative Smola, the Legislature is now holding its first hearing about this enormous change to the historically successful 1993 Massachusetts Education Reform Act (MERA).

As a point of reference, here's what two of MERA's co-authors said about the change away from our state standards and MCAS:

"There are a lot of things that don't work in state government; education reform is not one of them," said former state Senate President Thomas Birmingham. "This is a high risk move that offers very little reward."

Jamie Gass is Pioneer's Director of the Center for School Reform. He has over a decade of experience in public administration and education reform on both the state and municipal levels. Between 2002 and 2005, Jamie worked at the Massachusetts Office of Educational Quality and Accountability (EQA). From 1991 to 1996, he worked for the Dean of the Boston University School of Education/Boston University Management Team in its partnership with the Chelsea Public Schools. Jamie earned a Bachelor of Arts in International Relations from Boston University.

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Former Governor William Weld agreed, calling the change “a retrograde step.” Weld also expressed fears that adopting the national standards would be a precursor to eliminating MCAS. “It would be madness to eliminate the MCAS test,” he said.

In an appearance on *The Emily Rooney Show*, even testing opponent and leading American educational historian Diane Ravitch said, “I admired MCAS... I was very impressed with the high quality of the exam. MCAS exams... involve writing... thoughtful literature and a thoughtful selection of questions.”

What President Birmingham and Governor Weld have said about standards and MCAS should be cautionary messages for Massachusetts, a state that until late July was regarded by experts across the spectrum as having the best K-12 academic standards and testing in the nation.

Ultimately, it was those standards and reforms that catapulted Massachusetts’ students the nation’s best.

The development of Massachusetts’ standards really started in 1993 with the Education Reform Act that was forged by Republican Governor William Weld and Democratic state legislative leaders Thomas Birmingham and Mark Roosevelt. That law included generous state funding (\$100 billion in all since it was enacted), high academic standards, high-stakes student and teacher testing, charter public schools, and accountability for all in the public school system.

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In 2005, Massachusetts became the first state ever to finish first in all four categories measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The next two times the tests, known as “the Nation’s Report Card,” were administered in 2007 and 2009, students again swept every category. In 2008, Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study testing demonstrated that Massachusetts’

students are also globally competitive; tying for first in the world in eighth-grade science.

The state’s reforms are also narrowing race- and poverty-based achievement gaps. NAEP data show that between 2002 and 2009, scores for African-Americans and Hispanics on both fourth- and eighth-grade ELA testing improved more rapidly than those of white students. In 2008, educational standards expert E.D. Hirsch Jr. said:

“If you are a disadvantaged parent with a school-age child, Massachusetts is . . . the state to move to.”

In terms of academic excellence and equality of opportunity, our state standards and testing are at the heart of historic national and international successes.

Sadly, Massachusetts is retreating from its own success. Last summer, the BESE—again without so much as a legislative hearing—discarded our state standards and testing in favor of the weaker so-called Common Core State Standards Initiative and national testing.

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Prior to that vote, Pioneer Institute conducted four independent crosswalks, or evaluations, comparing the proposed national standards to state standards in Massachusetts, Minnesota, Indiana, and Texas. That is, the states with the highest standards in the country. In every case, Pioneer’s experts found Common Core to be of lower quality than the now defunct Massachusetts standards.

Texas (which has rejected adopting the national standards) adopted the former Massachusetts English Language Arts standards in 2007 and is close to adopting math standards modeled on our former math standards. They will soon have the most rigorous academic standards in the country. Massachusetts now has the same academic expectations for its

schoolchildren as Alabama, Arkansas, Mississippi, and West Virginia. I'd encourage you to let that reality sink in for a minute: Massachusetts has the same standards as Mississippi?

However, there are other reasons why Massachusetts should not have adopted the national standards and why H 3349 has merit.

First, according to American law, practice and custom since 1789, and to protect the right to self-government that is vitally important for both fiscal and political reasons, K-12 education is properly the legal domain of our state and local governments. Unlike other nations, the United States has never had a “national” education system. We instead have a collection of largely autonomous state systems. Our Framers understood that the country’s most precious resource—its children—should be controlled by parents, families, neighbors, and the elected officials who are most directly answerable to citizens.

Going back to the Mayflower Compact, the 1780 Massachusetts Constitution (the oldest written constitution in the world) drafted by John Adams, and Horace Mann’s development of the Common Schools in the 1830s, the Bay State has for over 300 years been an independent leader and pioneer in education.

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Adams’s language in the Massachusetts Constitution about the role of state government in education was more specific than any other American constitution:

“Wisdom and knowledge, as well as virtue, diffused generally among the body of the people, being necessary for the preservation of their rights and liberties; and as these depend on spreading the opportunities and advantages of

education in the various parts of the country, and among the different orders of the people, it shall be the duty of legislatures and magistrates, in all future periods of this commonwealth, to cherish the interests of literature and the sciences, and all seminaries of them; especially the...public schools and grammar schools in the towns.”

For hundreds of years, no other state could match our state’s commitment to public schooling.

Second, the national standards movement has been driven and financed by publicly unaccountable Washington, D.C. trade groups that operate outside of government and the public trust.

In Massachusetts, the process of adopting the national standards has been marked by a variety of overt conflicts.

It is noteworthy that the national standards advocates are largely unelected and unaccountable Washington, D.C. trade organizations or special interests. The list includes the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Achieve, Inc., the Council of Chief State Schools Officers (CCSSO), and the National Governors Association (NGA). Their membership is, in some instances, comprised of elected and appointed officials. Tax dollars are used to pay their dues. But these groups are not directly accountable to state and local citizens.

In Massachusetts, the process of adopting the national standards has been marked by a variety of overt conflicts. For example, three of the major evaluations the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education used to base his decision to recommend that the BESE adopt the national standards were paid for by the same D.C. advocates who also paid to develop the standards. This violates a basic tenant of American justice—one cannot be judge and jury in one’s own case.

Last November, Boston’s WCVB reported that state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

(DESE) officials accepted free or discounted luxury travel paid for by national standards advocates before Massachusetts voted to adopt the new standards. Several key DESE and state officials connected with the decision to adopt national standards have since departed state service to accept jobs with the D.C.-based advocates, including the head of assessment for the state, the deputy commissioner of education, and the chief of staff to the commissioner of education.

The lack of transparency surrounding the national standards and issues of trade organization making public policy is punctuated by the fact that Pioneer Institute has been seeking a basic Freedom of Information Act search on the state materials regarding the adoption process for a year. As of yet, Pioneer has received nothing from the Massachusetts Department of Education or the Secretary of Education's office. We're currently appealing this matter to the Secretary of State.

These are troubling developments for our democracy and terrible civics lessons for our schoolchildren.

The third reason I urge you to support Tantasqua's stand against Common Core and for Massachusetts' educational future is that 32 years after establishment of the United States Department of Education in 1979, states and municipalities continue to pay 90 percent of the cost of K-12 education in this country. Why then would state taxpayers rely on others to set the academic standards, select the readings and texts, and determine the parameters by which student performance should be measured?

Finally, while advocates for a nationalized structure in education decry the lack of progress in the states, there are several states, including Massachusetts, Texas, Florida, New Jersey, Indiana, and Minnesota, that have made great strides and achieved measurable educational progress.

Meanwhile, the one jurisdiction where the U.S. Congress and federal government have the most authority over public education—Washington, D.C.—has for more than 30 years had schools that are among the very worst in the country.

I urge you to pass H3349 to retain control of Massachusetts' educational destiny. I urge you to chart a different course from one-size-fits-all federal solutions being advanced via national standards and testing. I urge you to re-assume a leadership and oversight role over this state's educational standards and testing that has seemingly been discarded by the adoption of weaker quality national standards.

About Pioneer

Pioneer Institute is an independent, non-partisan, privately funded research organization that seeks to improve the quality of life in Massachusetts through civic discourse and intellectually rigorous, data-driven public policy solutions based on free market principles, individual liberty and responsibility, and the ideal of effective, limited and accountable government.



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