

No Child Left Behind in MASSACHUSETTS

Tough Questions from the Public

MASSACHUSETTS NCLB HEARING

YWCA Boston

January 11, 2006 • 4:00–7:30 PM

Local hearing partner: YWCA Boston

PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATION

Mary Lyon Foundation, Shelburne Falls

HEARING OFFICERS

Ellen Guiney, Executive Director, Boston Plan for Excellence in the Public Schools, Boston, MA • **Janet Helms**, Director, Institute for the Study and Promotion of Race and Culture; Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA • **Charlotte Kahn**, Director, The Boston Indicators Project, The Boston Foundation, Boston, MA • **Peter Kiang**, Director, Asian American Studies; University of Massachusetts Boston, Boston, MA • **Wendy D. Puriefoy**, President, Public Education Network, Washington, DC

STUDENT WITNESSES

Boston: **Sonia Alves**, Emily Narvarez, Teen Empowerment • **Julieann Dilbert**, Boston Adult Technical Academy • **Daisy Guerrero**, John D. O'Bryant School for Math & Science • **Jamal Hamilton**, Middle School Academy • **Ashley Periera**, Boston Latin School • **Damien Howard**, Madison Park Technical Vocational High School • *Shelburne Falls*: **Ally Footit**, **Erin McCloud**, **Amanda Schmidt**, **Kirsten Singley**, **Melanie Stevens**, Mohawk Trail Regional School

PARENT WITNESSES

Margaret Gilsenberg, Lowell Citywide Parent Council • **Leslie Lockhart**, Massachusetts Advocates for Children • **Phala Chea**, Lowell Parent Information Center • **Colin Reilly**, John D. O'Bryant School for Math & Science • **Justin Langlois**, New Bedford • **Caprice Taylor-Mendez**, **Maria Gomes**, **Lucia Santana**, Boston Parent Organizing Network

COMMUNITY WITNESSES

Michele Brooks, Boston School Committee and Transformative Solutions • **Daniel J. Losen**, Civil Rights Project, Harvard University • **Melissa Colón**, Iniciativa, Gaston Institute, Boston • **Linda Gerstle**, Executive Director/CEO, Atlas Communities, Boston • **Kathleen Boundy**, Center for Law & Education, Boston • **Laura Perille**, Executive Director, EdVestors, Boston • **Dianne Wilkerson**, Senator, Massachusetts State Senate • **Chu Ly**, Asian Community Representative, Boston • **Alexandra** (*no last name given*), East Boston Economical Council • **Madura Sociedad**, Boston Parent Organizing Network

In my deepest, darkest moments, I wonder what is going to be different. We have been doing this work for 20 years. We know what makes a difference.

Linda Gristle, Executive Director, Atlas Communities, Cambridge

During a standing-room-only hearing held at YWCA Boston, students, parents, and community leaders from Massachusetts gave passionate testimony about the impact of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the accountability policies in the Commonwealth. Neither received good marks.

Emotional testimony came from students who saw friends and teachers leaving school because of changes being wrought by NCLB and state policies, and from parents whose most frequently used word was “fight” – fight for information, fight for quality programs, and fight for attention from school officials.

The Community Perspective

Technology and demographics have dramatically changed Boston's prospects for the future, according to Charlotte Kahn, director of the Boston Indicators Project. At a time when higher-level skills are needed in the workforce, Boston is losing young people to other parts of the country. With the majority of its school-age population now minorities, what the area needs, she said, “is a ladder of opportunity that works for everyone,” from early education to colleges to lifelong learning.

Many feel that the implementation of the Massachusetts testing program and its federal corollary, NCLB, has been insufficient and wrong-headed. Boston School Committee member Michele Brooks reminded the hearing audience that public schools “continue to struggle to compensate for the years of neglect, inconsistencies, and indifference” experienced by African-American children, but neither funding nor actions have been sufficient. NCLB, she said, heads in the right direction with its promises of a standards-based curriculum and highly qualified teaching. While Brooks believes assessment is necessary, she also feels it has gone awry under NCLB. Testing mandates have changed how schools educate children, she said, resulting in less access to a broad range of subjects and higher dropout and push-out rates, while the achievement gap persists.

Expert witnesses on the community panel reinforced criticism of testing policies as hurtful to children. Kathleen Boundy, co-director of the Center for Law and Education and a national authority on the education of children with disabilities, endorsed provisions of NCLB that hold great potential – parent involvement, inclusion of children with disabilities in mandates for high standards, and accountability based on multiple indicators.

Massachusetts has failed to follow through, however, she said, and the emphasis on parent involvement is “virtually ignored.” She then went on to describe the results:

The impact on the underperforming schools and, in particular, their low-achieving students...is exacerbated by Massachusetts high-stakes assessment. It is no coincidence that state data reflect unacceptably record high numbers of students, who are disproportionately low-achieving, poor, racial and ethnic minorities, students with limited English proficiency, and students with disabilities, being pushed out of poorly performing schools through suspensions and expulsions, transfers to alternative schools, and dropping out.

Boundy recommended returning to the regulatory process, coupled with parent involvement, to assure fair, multiple measures for accountability purposes that meet standards for testing. Such standards were rejected when NCLB was drafted, according to Dan Losen of the Civil Rights Project. He believes that, at some level, there was lobbying in Washington, DC, “to prevent this kind of research-based approach from being part of a more nuanced and more intelligent way to use tests.”

Statistics	Total Schools ¹	% fail to make AYP	% schools in improvement	# LEAs	% LEAs fail to make AYP	% LEAs in improvement	Graduation rate	Per pupil expenditure ²
Mass. 2003–04	1737	33.9%	21.7%	241	54.8%	54.8%	Not avail. ³	\$11,040
United States 2003–04	90237	24.7%	11.4%	13959	28.5%	12.8%	74.9%	\$8,308
Mass. 2004–05	1690	49.5%	24.2%	242	78.5%	64.5%	Not avail.	\$11,681
United States 2004–05	89493	25.6%	12.9%	13878	23.7%	12.4%	Not avail.	\$8,618

Losen’s major concern, however, is the graduation rate crisis in America overall, and in Massachusetts in particular. He calls the lack of accountability for improving graduation rates under NCLB and Massachusetts law “a total sham.” The laws, he said, “fail to consider the actual ways test-driven accountability mechanisms are impacting minority youth in more diverse schools, the way it has been implemented has been a really unyielding test-driven accountability without the resources and without the technical assistance to help students close that achievement gap.” He accused state officials of creating a “mirage” about improvements in graduation rates.

Both Losen and Melissa Colon of Iniciativa, a Latino student advocacy group, cited the exceedingly high Latino dropout rate in Massachusetts – at 30 percent, it is the second highest dropout rate in the country. Low Latino student passing rates on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) start early and don’t improve, Colon said, while the high-stakes testing environment in schools has narrowed teaching and made test scores “trump the educational needs of our children.”

Witnesses were also disturbed by the drift of MCAS and NCLB toward a “test-based curriculum,” the lack of resources to support reform, and short timelines for improvement before funds are withdrawn. The highly qualified teacher mandate stops short of what is needed, some said, because it does not assure that teachers know how to, or want to, work with low-income children. Research about authentic instruction exists, so “why aren’t we doing it?” asks Boundy.

Despite these criticisms, however, most witnesses said that NCLB provisions had potential. But the policies, along with their implementation, were made by “people who have absolutely no idea about what most of you have just said,” declared State Sen. Diane Wilkerson of Boston. When things do not work right, she added, policymakers “seem to be at a total loss to figure out how to make them work and...are in total denial” about the dramatic changes taking place in the state’s demographics. Originally a supporter of MCAS, Senator Wilkerson now opposes it because resources to help low-performing students have disappeared; “the only thing that we have maintained is the requirement to pass the test for graduation.”

¹ Title I Report, Vol. 7 Iss. 4 (LRP Publications 2006). Data for columns 1-6 were taken from this report.

² National Education Association, *Rankings & Estimates Update (2005)*. Figures are computed from NEA Research, Estimates databank. The figures are based on reports through August 2005.

³ Currently, Massachusetts does not calculate the graduation dates; it is gathering data to begin that calculation in 2006. In the interim, it publishes the state’s dropout rate. In the 2003-2004 school year, the dropout rate for grades 9-12 was 3.3%. The dropout rate for the 2004-2005 school year was not available. <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/staterc/>

Testing, Teaching & Trying: The Student Viewpoint

Powerful, poignant student testimony grew even more so as student peers in the audience added their comments. NCLB was the take-off point for personal stories about schooling, but students also revealed resentment over unequal resources and how they have been treated, along with a genuine mistrust of the education system and disappointment with how accountability is playing out in Massachusetts.

A “push-out” from the Boston public schools, Emily Narvarez went on to earn a GED and is hoping to enter college, but she spoke of her concern for students “who are made to feel like they aren’t smart enough to pass a test instead of getting an educational program that meets their needs.” Being required to pass an English test before having a chance to learn the language is unfair, she said, adding that “instead of testing children, we need to see that every student gets the opportunity to learn in the way that will help them be a success. I don’t think we will get anywhere by labeling children as failures.”

Other students spoke about the stigma of being labeled a failure by a single MCAS test and not receiving any extra help from teachers, or of not learning what they were capable of until they enrolled in a different school. Teachers and principals may think teenagers who are alienated do not want to learn, “but it’s not like that,” said a recent graduate and now a youth worker. “A lot of cats I know, they got a lot of potential and they want to do good. But it’s just that the system isn’t helping.”

For students in high-performing schools, MCAS is seen as a waste of time. “It does not help me learn or in any way prepare for college or work,” said Ashley Periera, a member of a YWCA youth group. “I feel that it only tests how well I am able to take tests.” Similarly, Ally Footit from the Mohawk Trail Regional School told the hearing panel that the most frequent comment from her teachers is “make sure you learn this because it will be on MCAS,” but not anything about “how important it is going to be in life, not how much you’re going to use it. It’s almost like you’re taking a whole different course than what you signed up for.”

	Student Enrollment ¹ 2004-2005	Per Pupil Expenditure 2004-2005	Students in Title I Schools ²	Students Eligible for Free/Reduced Lunch	Students with IEPs	English Language Learners	2002 Graduation Rate ³			
							All	Black	Hispanic	White
Mass.	975,574	\$11,681	56.3%	27.6%	15.7%	6.0%	75%	59%	46%	81%
US	48,367,410	\$8,618	49.7%	36.3%	13.6%	10.6%	71%	56%	52%	78%

Students were very aware of inequities in the system. Sonia Alves, a senior at Charlestown High School, said she was not challenged until she took advanced placement classes and then was “shocked” at what was expected of her but grateful to learn good study habits. “It is sad to say,” she testified, “that most of my peers don’t get the chance because there are so few AP courses offered at Boston public high schools. Every student deserves to be challenged,” but many of her friends are not prepared to get into college or to succeed once they get there, she said. A former Boston student who transferred to Framington High School said the environment was completely different: “We have paper, we have pencils, we have good teachers. I went to a school in Boston where it was a big deal if you got a playground.” A student at English High School wondered what was the point of NCLB and MCAS when the printers for his school computer don’t work. He added that “I don’t feel as if I’m wanted, like the state feels like I’m dirty or something. Just because I go to a public school doesn’t mean that they can’t fix the toilets.”

After studying NCLB, a group of students from the Mohawk Trail Regional High School in western Massachusetts concluded that it was based on “distorted facts” from the model often described as “the Texas miracle.” Schools are

¹ National Education Association, *Rankings & Estimates Update (2005)*. Figures are computed from NEA Research, Estimates databank. The figures are based on reports through August 2005. This source provided the Student Enrollment and Per Pupil Expenditure data.

² Hoffman, L. and Sable, J. (2006). *Public Elementary and Secondary Students, Staff, Schools, and School Districts: School Year 2003–04 (NCES 2006-307)*. U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Data were taken from this source for the following columns: Students in Title I Schools, Students Eligible for Free/Reduced Lunch, Students with Disabilities, English Language Learners.

³ *Public High School Graduation and College-Readiness Rates: 1991-2002*, Manhattan Institute for Policy Research (2005). Figure calculated using the Greene method, which estimates the number of students who enter a ninth-grade class, makes some adjustments for changes in population, and divides the resulting number into the number of students who actually graduated with a regular diploma. It is not a four-year graduation rate; as long as there is not a substantial change in the number of students in each class that graduates in more than four years, such students are included in the calculation.

lowering their standards or purposefully holding students back in order to have higher test scores and avoid sanctions, said Erin McCloud. There is not enough funding to meet NCLB goals much less cover courses and electives that are not being tested, the students said. Other students said they had not been informed about NCLB, and their testimony revealed an even broader lack of buy-in regarding the purpose of school or testing. A New Bedford high school student was upset that he could be denied a diploma for failing MCAS because “half the stuff we learn in school we’re not going to be doing in life anyway, like algebra.”

Students empathized with teachers who were being forced to limit curriculum and teach to the test. Teachers are leaving education, they testified, because of NCLB requirements. Large classes and the press of covering material for the MCAS mean that “they don’t have time to talk to you personally and make sure that you’re understanding,” said Amanda Schmidt from the Mohawk Trail Regional High School.

Inner-city students, underscoring the testimony of community leaders about the unwillingness of teachers to work in urban districts, believe many of their teachers don’t care about them. “They go into the system because they want to make a change,” said one student, “but after awhile, they become jaded” because of the pressure from systems like NCLB. Some comments were even more forceful. It’s good to have such a law, said one student, but first, “you gotta get rid of the problems – the violence, the drugs, the racism....It’s wrong, and that kills the kids’ spirit about going to school.”

This testimony was further proof that legislators need to hear directly from students, remarked Senator Wilkerson, who proposed a series of hearings with young people at the State House.

We spent the whole week talking about an anti-gang initiative that was passed yesterday. It’s ridiculous.... It makes no sense. It’s not connected at all to the violence and the issues that you talk about. But a group of well-intentioned adults think they did something, but...they didn’t have the benefit of what you said about this connection between the school and violence....I think you have to be part of this discussion, and you haven’t been.

The Parent Perspective

Parents and parent advocates have similar concerns and are equally frustrated by their inability to influence the system. NCLB is an “empty promise” for children with disabilities, testified Leslie Lockhart of the Massachusetts Advocates for Children and the mother of a disabled child, because it and other laws meant to protect children are not being enforced. “There is more and more reluctance to provide supports to children who are vulnerable and who need extra services,” she said, noting that the focus on high test scores and low education costs often shuts out the most vulnerable children.

Some NCLB intervention provisions are almost cynical, according to Margaret Gilsenberg, chair of the Citywide Parent Council in Lowell. “Simply punishing the schools by labeling them as in need of improvement or under-performing is not constructive and ultimately does not help the students,” she said. In Lowell, the transfer option is unrealistic. Five thousand students were notified of their right to transfer to two schools, Gilsenberg said, and “I do not know of one parent who exercised this option.”

Phala Chea, head of the Lowell Parent Information Center, credited NCLB with bringing the accountability issue to the table, but said NCLB is underfunded and needs to provide more flexibility in testing English-language learners and children with disabilities. Caprice Taylor-Mendez, director of the Boston Parent Organizing Network and a bilingual parent of a special-needs child, said that parent information and involvement are being overlooked. There is no funding, she said, for translation services, for getting information out on time, or for hiring coordinators to do outreach to parents. Leslie Lockhart wants parents and students to get support based on research about what is known to work:

There’s a lot of information. We ignore it, and we legislate down the stuff, and it’s really distressing. It just seems like a whole, harsh penalty-driven system with more and more kids out on the street.”

The Massachusetts hearing was one of nine hearings on NCLB held across the country from September 2005 to January 2006. This is the second set of hearings organized by PEN to convey the public’s concerns and recommendations to policymakers in advance of the scheduled 2007 reauthorization of the law.

Funding for the hearing was provided by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation.