

HOUSE No. 4604

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

REPORT
of the
SPECIAL JOINT
COMMITTEE
on
INITIATIVE PETITIONS
on the
INITIATIVE PETITION
of
DEBORAH THERESE MCCARTHY
AND OTHERS
FOR THE PASSAGE OF AN ACT
REQUIRING THAT DISTRICTS CERTIFY THAT STUDENTS HAVE MASTERED
THE SKILLS, COMPETENCIES AND KNOWLEDGE OF THE STATE
STANDARDS AS A REPLACEMENT FOR THE MCAS GRADUATION
REQUIREMENT
(see House, No. 4252)

April 30, 2024.

MAJORITY REPORT.

A majority of the Special Joint Committee on Initiative Petitions (“The Committee”) recommends that the Initiative Petition 23-36, House 4252, “An Act requiring that districts certify that students have mastered the skills, competencies and knowledge of the state standards as a replacement for the MCAS graduation requirement,” (“the Initiative Petition”) as currently drafted and presented to this Committee, OUGHT NOT TO BE ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE AT THIS TIME.

The purpose of this report is to provide a recommendation to the full legislature on whether to accept the Initiative Petition as written for consideration and enactment.

The proposed Initiative Petition would amend Section 1D of Chapter 69 of the General Laws by eliminating the uniform statewide competency determination set by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and replacing it with a competency determination established by each of the over 300 school districts in the Commonwealth.

Testimony

The Committee heard from experienced professionals, proponents, and opponents of the Initiative Petition, as well as members of the general public.

Subject matter expert Robert Curtin, Chief Officer for Data, Assessment, and Accountability at the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (“DESE”), testified that the overwhelming majority of high school students are able to graduate regardless of their socio-economic status, ethnic/racial background, or disability status. All of these subgroups graduate at rates far in excess of 90 per cent, with the exception of those with profound cognitive impairments. Mr. Curtin further testified that 99 per cent of students are able to graduate by passing the 10th grade Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (“MCAS”) or pursuing one of the alternative paths available to them. According to data from the Class of 2019, the last graduating class not impacted by COVID-19, of 70,000 high school seniors statewide, 700 failed to graduate because they had not met the requirement and in Boston, the largest district in the state with a high percentage of low-income students and students of color, only 7 in that class failed to graduate only for this reason. Over 88 per cent of twelfth grade students in the Class of 2019 achieved a “passing” score on the 10th grade MCAS tests. Mr. Curtin elaborated on previous comments, explaining that those who do not achieve that score on the first try can pursue a variety of options to demonstrate that they have acquired the requisite knowledge and skills. Students can retake the test until they achieve a passing grade, they can pursue a “Performance/Cohort Appeal” by demonstrating to DESE that their classwork is equivalent to that of students in their classes who did pass the test, or they can complete a district developed Educational Proficiency Plan if their MCAS score is slightly below passing. As a result of these multiple pathways, Mr. Curtin testified that, on average, less than 1 per cent of high school seniors fail to graduate solely because they did not meet the graduation requirement.

Other subject matter experts testified from the perspective of education leadership positions. Paul Reville, the Francis Keppel Professor of Practice of Educational Policy and Administration at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and former Massachusetts Secretary of Education during the Patrick Administration, commented that passage of the Initiative Petitions “would usher in a new era of scattershot standards and undermine decades of education reform.” Stephen Zrike, current superintendent of the Salem Public Schools and former receiver of Holyoke Public Schools, testified that requiring students to meet the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (“BESE”) competency determination is good preparation for the world beyond high school where graduates will be expected to perform in order to progress in their chosen fields.

Panels of proponents, including the President and Vice President of the Massachusetts Teachers Association (“MTA”), Max Page and Deb McCarthy respectively, current educators, and a college student, testified that the graduation requirement “create[s] classroom environments filled with anxiety and stress,” to the detriment of “excitement about learning.” The panelists further testified that the graduation requirement “has actively harmed our most marginalized students, especially our students of color, English learners, low-income students, and students with disabilities.” Rebecca Pringle, the President of the National Education Association, testified that MCAS scores are not an accurate, complete, or fair measure of student achievement and measures of achievement should focus on holistic approaches to identify students’ strengths and areas for growth. Ms. Pringle emphasized that since students are not standardized in their learning styles, standardized tests do not provide a full picture of students’ problem-solving abilities and ability to think critically.

Oponents to the Initiative Petition countered the proponents’ testimony by noting that as students’ progress through high school and beyond, they will be expected to demonstrate their knowledge and skills through a variety of assessments that have consequences. They also maintained that elimination of the graduation requirement would lead to more, not less, inequity. Jeff Howard, a former member of the state BESE and the founder and president of the Efficacy Institute, testified that “proficiency standards are a means for promoting social and economic equality. ... ‘Demonstrate these proficiencies and you will be prepared to meet the challenges of the world’”. He also stated that “the MCAS graduation requirement is an introduction to [the] world of certification and accountability all our students will enter after high school.” Jill Norton, parent of a special needs student and education consultant, spoke in favor of retaining the current graduation requirement so that schools would not regress to a time when special needs students graduated who could not meet basic standards.

Conclusion

The Education Reform Act of 1993 established the current system of K-12 education in the Commonwealth including the uniform graduation requirement. Prior to the implementation of that legislation, Massachusetts had no statewide curriculum standards,

each of the local districts set their own graduation requirements and the quality of K-12 education varied dramatically from district to district across the state.

The Act required a significant increase in state funding to local districts to support the implementation of the standards as well as the uniform assessment system, the MCAS, designed to measure progress toward the goal of improved outcomes for all students. The legislature recently substantially increased funding with a more targeted focus on equity through the Student Opportunity Act.

The Initiative Petition eliminates the uniform graduation requirement without creating a uniform alternative. Based on the testimony presented, there are significant concerns with the lack of a standard, statewide assessment. Both the education leaders and the opponents of the Initiative Petition acknowledged the need to make improvements to the current system so that students who fail to achieve the minimum level of knowledge and skills required to graduate receive the support they need to meet those basic requirements. However, simply eliminating the uniform graduation requirement, which will allow students to graduate who do not meet basic standards, with no standardized and consistent benchmark in place to ensure those standards are met, will not improve student outcomes and runs the risk of exacerbating inconsistencies and inequities in instruction and learning across districts.

For these reasons, we, the majority of the Special Joint Committee on Initiative Petition, recommend that “An Act requiring that districts certify that students have mastered the skills, competencies and knowledge of the state standards as a replacement for the MCAS graduation requirement” (see House No. 4252), as currently drafted and presented to this Committee, OUGHT NOT TO BE ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE AT THIS TIME.

Senators.

Cindy F. Friedman
Paul R. Feeney
Ryan C. Fattman

Representatives.

Alice Hanlon Peisch
Michael S. Day
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