

TO: Members of the Arlington School Committee
FROM: Paul Schlichtman
RE: Resolutions for the May 9 meeting
DATE: May 6, 2019

As I mentioned at our last meeting, I am asking the school committee consider signing on to two resolutions.

The first resolution is a revision of the Somerville School Committee member Lee Erica Palmer's resolution pertaining to the controversial essay question on the 2019 Grade 10 English Language Arts MCAS. (It is on the agenda for the May 13 meeting.)

As you are aware, there was an essay question that was labeled as racially troubling by multiple organizations. According to Boston Magazine:

The question cited Colson Whitehead's novel *The Underground Railroad*, which won a Pulitzer in 2016. The book follows two slaves fleeing a plantation in Georgia in the 1800s—but the students were asked to write from the point of view of Ethel, a racist white woman who betrays the slaves on their way to freedom.

<https://www.bostonmagazine.com/education/2019/04/04/underground-railroad-mcas-question/>

The State House News Service reports:

Massachusetts Teachers Association President Merrie Najimy said students were so upset by the question that their results on the rest of the exam would be affected. "The problem is the test itself," Najimy told the News Service. "Whatever DESE decides to do, all students need to be held harmless across the state and the test itself needs to be ruled invalid."

<https://www.statehousenews.com/email/a/2019583?key=f97fe>

While the state has discarded the test question from scoring the 2019 ELA test, the test itself remains a graduation requirement. The deletion of a significant question, as well as the compromised test conditions (requiring a student troubled by the essay question to continue through testing), puts the validity of the test in question.

Ms. Palmer wrote a resolution to assert that, in addition to invalidating the question, students should be "held harmless" and not required to retest to obtain a valid score in order to graduate.

I have rewritten Ms. Palmer's resolution to put it in our voice, and I believe it reflects our values to hold our students harmless for the consequences of the state's actions.

The **second resolution** involves teacher licensure, the Massachusetts Tests for Educator Licensure (MTEL), and efforts to recruit diverse educators in Massachusetts. This resolution would be presented for consideration by the Delegate Assembly of the Massachusetts Association of School Committees at their annual Delegate Assembly on Friday, November 8, 2019.

I am a member (MASC Representative) of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education's Accountability and Assistance Advisory Council. At our March 20 meeting, there was a presentation and discussion of the barriers for recruiting and retaining educators of color. Shay Edmond of DESE led a discussion on the topic, and commission members stated the licensure process is a deterrent. In addition to the challenges for an out-of-state applicant to complete the Massachusetts licensure process, the draft meeting notes note several barriers presented by the MTEL:

The Council also noted additional barriers related to MTEL, including the Communication and Literacy Skills test and other structural biases related to the test: required payment type (must have a credit card to register) and test center locations in relation to public transportation.

While not reflected in the notes, the reluctance of second-language learners to subject themselves to the Communication and Literacy Skills test is also a barrier to the licensure and employment of a diverse teaching staff, particularly among those who have the option of pursuing employment in other states.

The requirement to conduct a licensing test was established by the Legislature (MGL Chapter 71, Section 38G) under the 1993 Education Reform Act, and was implemented in 1998 under the leadership of Board of Education Chair John R. Silber. To be eligible for certification as a provisional educator, the candidate shall

- (1) hold a bachelor's degree in arts or sciences from an accredited college or university with a major course in the arts or sciences appropriate to the instructional field;
- (2) pass a test established by the board which shall consist of two parts:
 - (A) a writing section which shall demonstrate the communication and literacy skills necessary for effective instruction and improved communication between school and parents; and
 - (B) the subject matter knowledge for the certificate; and
- (3) be of sound moral character.

The Board of Elementary and Secondary Education establishes the regulations for the teacher testing program. The MTEL is administered by Pearson Education.

The Communication and Literacy Skills test contains two subtests: The Reading subtest consists of 42 multiple-choice questions, and the Writing subtest consists of 35 multiple-choice questions, 7 short-answer sentence correction items, and 2 open-response assignments.

The test fee for the Reading subtest is \$76, the Writing subtest is \$85, and the fee for taking both subtests on the same day is \$112.

Subject area tests vary in format, but generally they take four hours and has a fee of \$139. For example, the Music subject area test contains 100 multiple-choice items and 2 open-response assignments.

As previously noted, educator licensure regulations are set by the state Board of Elementary Education, and licenses are granted by the Commissioner under the supervision of the Board. Membership of the Board is governed under Chapter 15, Section 1E of the General Laws:

No appointive member of said board shall be employed by or receive regular compensation from the department of education, or from any school system, public or independent, in the commonwealth, or serve as a member of any school committee.

Thus, the teacher testing requirements were implemented by non-educators, and licensure regulations and standards are determined by non-educators. Education is the only profession or trade in the Commonwealth where practitioners are banned from serving on the board that regulates their license.

While these may seem to be two different topics, they are intertwined, as the board has nurtured the Pearson testing program without any evidence that barrier is a reliable and valid indicator of the ability to perform as an educator. Board members are imposing a testing regimen they have never experienced, and establishing professional regulations they never need to observe.

Further reforms enacted by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education have established a prescriptive educator evaluation system. School committees are familiar with these requirements, as they are required to evaluate and report on the superintendent's performance annually. Given the standards that need to be demonstrated by a first year teacher in the state evaluation process, rigorous screening of applicants and the prescribed evaluation of first year teachers can ensure the recruitment and retention of high quality educators without the barrier of a difficult teacher testing regimen at the entry point of the profession.

RESOLUTION TO HOLD HARMLESS 2019 10th GRADE MCAS
DUE TO RACIALLY TROUBLING QUESTION

WHEREAS the graduation requirement makes the tenth grade MCAS exam one of the highest stakes exams most Massachusetts students take; and

WHEREAS teachers, families, and schools all invest time and resources to give students the best possible chance at success on the exam; and

WHEREAS the 10th Grade MCAS English Language Arts (ELA) MCAS prompted students to write an essay question from the perspective of an openly racist character who betrays slaves trying to escape in the novel, *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead; and

WHEREAS, the Massachusetts Teachers Association, the Boston Teachers Union, the American Federation of Teachers Massachusetts, the Massachusetts Education Justice Alliance and the New England Area Conference of the NAACP issued a joint statement calling on the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) to not score tests containing the question; and

WHEREAS, DESE quickly moved to void the scores on that question, and

WHEREAS, research shows that exposure to negative stereotypes and traumatic experiences can have a negative impact on student performance; and

WHEREAS, the impact of the racially troubling question on performance on a diverse student population as they continued to take the tenth grade ELA MCAS cannot be quantified; and

WHEREAS, the reliability and validity of the scoring under these circumstances is compromised; and

WHEREAS, students should not be compelled to retest, in this context, for the purpose of obtaining a valid passing score;

NOW, THEREFORE, be it RESOLVED:

The Arlington School Committee calls on DESE to exempt students who took the Spring 2019 10th Grade ELA MCAS with the rejected question from the graduation exam requirement in English Language Arts; and that a copy of this resolution be delivered to the Commissioner of Education, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Governor, the Arlington legislative delegation, the Massachusetts Association of School Committees, and otherwise widely distributed.

VOTED:

DATE:

BY THE: Arlington School Committee

RESOLUTION PERTAINING TO EDUCATOR DIVERSITY AND PROFESSIONAL LICENSURE

for submission to the MASC Delegate Assembly

WHEREAS current research clearly demonstrates that public school students benefit from a diverse teaching staff; and

WHEREAS Massachusetts districts are challenged to attract a diverse teaching staff; and

WHEREAS attracting diverse candidates often involves recruiting candidates from outside Massachusetts; and

WHEREAS Massachusetts licensure requirements, including the Massachusetts Tests for Educator Licensure (MTEL) requirements, serve as a disincentive for candidates looking to relocate to take a teaching position; and

WHEREAS test administration is conducted in centers that are often inaccessible without a car; and

WHEREAS the cost of testing can be a barrier to potential applicants; and

WHEREAS there is no evidence the MTEL is a reliable or valid measure of successful practice as an educator; and

WHEREAS school districts are capable of selecting qualified candidates for teaching positions, as well as supervising, evaluating, and deciding on whether to retain the services of probationary candidates; and

WHEREAS the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education governs educator licensure in Massachusetts; and

WHEREAS practicing educators and school committee members are prohibited from serving on the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education; and

WHEREAS the teaching profession is the only profession or trade in Massachusetts where the holders of a license are prohibited from serving on its governing board; and

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Massachusetts Association of School Committees calls for the elimination of the MTEL as a licensing requirement for educators; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Massachusetts Association of School Committees calls for the governance and licensure of professional educators to be vested in a board comprised of licensed educators.

RATIONALE: The licensure of Massachusetts educators is governed by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. The oversight of licensure by non-educators has resulted in a complex, difficult licensure system that discourages qualified candidates from applying for licensure and employment in Massachusetts. Recruiting a diverse, qualified cohort of new educators will be enhanced if the barriers presented by MTEL are removed, and if licensure regulations and standards are placed in the hands of a committee of educators.