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# Sciortino leading charge to reform MCAS

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BOSTON - Half a year after filing a bill that challenges the high-stakes nature of Massachusetts' high school standardized test, Rep. Carl Sciortino shows no signs of stopping.

The representative, along with dozens of former and current state education officials, spoke to legislators at a State House hearing presenting testimony on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment Test – also known as the MCAS – and its failure to effectively assess students' readiness for higher education or the workforce.

“We had a great response,” Sciortino said about the four-hour June 5 hearing. “Not a single opponent testified.”

Education leaders – including Somerville School Committee Member Mary Jo Rossetti and former Board of Education Chair Martin Kaplan – spoke to the Joint Committee on Education about the need to check on the progress of the MCAS test, which the Board of Education in 2002 established that students in the class of 2003 and beyond would need to earn a Competency Determination to receive a high school diploma.

The presence of education representatives such as Kaplan, who helped implement the Education Reform Act of 1993, was important, Sciortino said.

“It's critical,” he said. “We've had five years ... it's critical to ask, “Is this testing system working?” Are we getting those results we wanted? The answer is no.”

The bill – called H.561 or The MCAS Reform Bill – does not exclude the MCAS test requirement, Sciortino said. The bill proposes to create a 31-member commission that would create an effective way to assess a student's high school performance.

“Keep testing, but change the way you use the test,” he said. “You get a better picture of whether students are learning.”

Sciortino, who represents the 34<sup>th</sup> Middlesex district, including neighborhoods in both Somerville and Medford, said a student's eligibility to receive a high school diploma should not be based solely on the MCAS test but on other academic factors as well, which is one of the reasons he wants to remove the test's high-stake nature.

There has been a 32 percent increase in the high school dropout rate since the test's implementation, from 8,422 in the 2001-2002 academic year to 11,145 in the 2004 –2005 year, Sciortino said.

Education representatives at the hearing expressed concern over the test's lack of balance in keeping high graduation rates along with strong academic programs.

“My community of Somerville has been doing well with our graduation rate,” Rossetti said at the hearing last week. “In fact, we rate the highest in the urban communities. However, our success has

come with costs. No foreign languages at our K-8 schools, drastic cuts in reading services forced on us in 2003 ... still yet to be added back.”

There are several reasons why there is low accountability for the MCAS’ success, Kaplan said. This includes the cost of such a check system and ultimately, trusting teachers to assess their students’ performance.

“They are professionals ... hold them to standards,” he said in a phone interview yesterday.

Kaplan said the test’s inability to effectively evaluate a student’s preparation to work in team settings would be a problem when they begin job searching.

“It is an essential part of work,” he said, “and we don’t test that with a test like MCAS.”

It is unclear what Governor Deval Patrick – who recently hired Brookline School Commission member Ruth Kaplan as Board of Education PTA representative – will say about the reform bill, Sciortino said. Ruth Kaplan is the founder of Alliance for High Standards NOT High Stakes and is a reform bill advocate who helped with its drafting.

“[Kaplan] means we finally have a voice on the Board of Education,” Sciortino said. “[Patrick] seems to be positioning himself to an openness to looking at how we test students [and] pull in other measures and assessments.”

Dozens of other lawmakers signed on to Sciortino’s bill earlier this year, including Rep. Denise Provost and Sen. Pat Jehlen, both Somerville Democrats.

The MCAS is an assessment of students’ knowledge in English, Mathematics and Science and Technology, according to the test’s official website.

Although there is currently no set date for when the joint committee will meet to discuss or pass the bill, Sciortino said he would continue to meet with students, teachers and school superintendents to advocate for the bill.

“This bill has essentially become a full time job for me,” he said. “Until I’m told no, I’m going to keep pressing forward with this. I think our students are better than our current system.”