

Acton-Boxborough Regional School Committee Statement
Regarding Citizens' Petition at Acton Special Town Meeting
Planned for November 10, 2015

The Acton-Boxborough Regional School Committee has been asked to comment on the Citizens' Petition being brought to the town of Acton as a non-binding resolution at a Special Town Meeting planned for November 10th.

While the Committee appreciates the interest, concern and involvement of parents and community members in support of this petition, we are unfortunately unable to support this petition as written for a number of very specific and valid reasons. We do realize that although it must seem ironic, given our committee's stance against PARCC as it has evolved, we still must oppose this Citizens' Petition as written.

First, we as a board and district have very specific concerns about the accuracy of numerous claims within this petitionⁱ. In addition, we disagree with the petitioners' view of the financial impact of this petitionⁱⁱ. Those concerns are specifically detailed following this statement.

Secondly, we are concerned about the process and approach being employed by the proponents. As a committee we have spent a great deal of time in recent years on the subject of standardized testing and have taken the time on numerous occasions to make our position known to our legislators and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE). Those are activities we feel have been thoughtfully considered by members of both communities and were designed to influence those in a position to affect real change. When we advocate for change, we make a deliberate effort to speak as one region. In this case, when we as a regional district are asked to accept a non-binding resolution recommended by constituents from only one of our towns, we believe there is a perceived loss of cohesion in the message any action may send.

The BESE is set to vote on the choice of MCAS or PARCC on November 17th; in preparation for that vote, we as Committee members attended public forums, met with legislators and wrote letters summarizing a great deal of thought and discussion. While the results of this Special Town Meeting vote may make it to those decision-makers in advance of November 17th, we feel that the petition as written is off message from that particular vote.

Lastly, as a regional district shared with our neighboring town of Boxborough, we find ourselves in the uncomfortable position of having been asked to take direction from members of only one of our towns that would impact all of our students. We have been told by one of the petitioners that there have been no similar efforts made in the town of Boxborough.

1. Para 1: Common Core (CC) and PARCC are lumped together here but we as a district and committee have separated those issues and feel differently about each.
2. Para 1: We are currently using 2006 Science/Technology/Engineering (STE) Frameworks that are not part of Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The new MA STE framework draft is due for public comment this fall, and these frameworks are based on the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS), which are not part of the CCSS. We are currently using the 2003 History and Social Science Framework, also not part of CCSS. CCSS refer to just ELA and Math.
3. Para 3: We have been using CCSS since 2011, the same year the petition cites our district as being consistently highly rated.
4. Para 4: CCSS were adopted in a public process, for which the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) released draft standards for public comment in May 2010.
5. Para 5: We control our curriculum on the local level, and we follow federal law and state regulations regarding testing.
6. #2: We are not yet using PARCC and the state will vote Nov. 17 to choose PARCC or MCAS. The standards the District uses and how they are referenced incorrectly has been mentioned.
7. #3 MCAS testing already exceeds this number of testing days; for example, 10th grade ELA is 2 days for 3 sessions of reading and one of writing, 10th grade math is two days for two different sessions, and STE is 2 days for 2 different sessions. 7 days total. In addition, item three refers to standardized testing where in actuality the petitioners likely mean high-stakes standardized testing. As written, this limits the vast majority of testing that happens in schools. A "standardized test" is any test where students answer the same questions and it is scored in a standard way to compare results.
8. #4 It is unclear what is meant by "the use of any state or federal educational programs" and testing is governed by federal law and state regulations not the School Committee (SC). It is the SC job to develop the budget, develop policy and oversee the Superintendent.
9. #5 We as a district receive a great deal of money from various grants such as Title III for ELL students, Title I for improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged, and other Entitlement grants. Those provide money to directly serve our students. This is funding that we cannot do without.
10. Summary: The Common Core State Standards effort was led by the National Governors' Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, all of whom are state leaders.
11. The last statement in the second summary paragraph does not include standards or assessment...and to be clear, the terms standards and curriculum are not synonymous. Curriculum is defined as a combination of knowing the standards, knowing the available materials, knowing your

students, knowing the assessment practices and having a deep knowledge of instructional practices. Curriculum is not something you could buy off the shelf or have foisted upon you. We control our curriculum locally here at Acton-Boxborough.

ii Lastly, the authors of the petition were at a recent Acton Finance Committee meeting, speaking to the financial impact of their petition. The petitioners cited four reasons to support their position:

1. Too much technology
2. Privacy concerns
3. Loss of local control
4. Expense

Regarding these points:

1. We have taken a very slow organic approach to technology overall in our district, both to manage the costs and maximize impact. 2. We believe concerns about privacy and security of student test data would be best addressed with the BESE and DESE. 3. As previously explained, we have control over what matters...our curriculum. 4. We currently are well prepared to implement a standardized computerized assessment should we need to, and would not need to purchase additional hardware for such purposes.

November 2, 2015

Re: Citizen's Petition on Common Core and PARCC

Dear Board of Selectmen,

I believe some of the best reasons why you should support our Petition are presented in the letter written by the AB School Committee to the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE), dated October 22, 2015 (see packet from Oct. 22., Section 5.1, page 12 <http://www.abschools.org/school-committee/meetings-agendas-packets-and-minutes>). I'm sure you are familiar with this document, but considering the importance of this issue, I recommend re-reading this letter, then our petition, then the ABSC Statement Regarding the Citizen's Petition (dated Oct. 23). I have re-read these documents carefully many times and offer the following critical review comparing and contrasting each.

Part 1. Letter to the BESE with my explanations/comments in *italics*

Bullets 1 and 3 reference the 2010 standards (pre-Common Core, and pre-2011). This is an important time/year to establish in the record because 2010 was the year the state agreed to adopt Common Core, which was then implemented beginning in 2011.

Our petition clearly refers to pre-2011, which is obviously also 2010 and prior. The ABSC understands this, but incorrectly claims that our petition refers to 2011, not pre-2011 (see more on this below).

Bullet 2 makes some excellent points about unsubstantiated claims that PARCC is superior to MCAS.

Although the ABSC claims there is no connection between PARCC and Common Core, there is ample evidence that the same statement could be made about claims that Common Core is superior to many similar sets of standards.

In other words, the proponents claim it is superior, but provide no evidence that it has been adequately tested by a third party, independent reviewer. The ABSC claims that Common Core and PARCC cannot be lumped together, but they were developed by the same entities and PARCC was developed to test the Common Core Standards. Therefore, the ABSC can rationalize their separation all they want, but they are wrong to do so.

Bullet 4 explains the unintended (or possibly deliberate) consequences of implementing PARCC and how it affects School Accountability Ratings and the Education Evaluation Process.

These costs are peripheral to the PARCC tests itself, but have been costly to Acton already. For example, senior administrative staff (Vice Principals) are now full time at all the elementary schools and the majority of their duties are related to state-mandated evaluation processes related to Common Core requirements.

Bullet 5 points out the unprofessional and inconsiderate manner in which local school districts have been treated. None of the test results/data have been made public?

As citizens, we are discouraged from complaining about the lack of sharing results with the teachers that could actually help individual students if they were allowed to review said data. This is representative of a huge issue: the citizen taxpayers are expected to pay for these radical changes with no input or consequences for the service provider if they fail to live up to their end of the agreement. It is time we show some resistance to this corrupt system by passing this non-binding resolution.

Bullet 6 questions the validity of the tests and if the content is age-appropriate.

There has been only one independent study comparing PARCC and MCAS in assessing college readiness. This study, <https://www.mathematica-mpr.com/news/parcc-and-mcas-exams-comparable-in-predicting-college-outcomes> demonstrated no difference between MCAS and PARCC in assessing college readiness. There needs to be more work on this subject so districts and parents can review evidence that these tests are worse, better, or equal to MCAS. Many of us question why implement new tests at all. These tests interrupt teachers and students with testing (and preparation) topics that haven't been demonstrated to be effective.

The last paragraph from the ABSC letter identifies THE fundamental flaw of PARCC: lack of public participation, which has led to the absence of credibility.

The same statement can be made about Common Core. Furthermore, the absence of public participation also results in lack of accountability. If the government/education industry bullies who have forced this upon our school district had no consideration for public input to date, they are likely to flee from any accountability when the outcomes are not as they predicted.

Part 2. ABSC Statement Regarding Citizen's Petition with explanations/comments in *italics*

First, I appreciate the ABSC's careful review of our petition agree with a number of their criticisms, some of which we intend on addressing through an amendment (or amendments) at the Special Town Meeting. In other cases, ABSC has misinterpreted the Petition or are incorrect in their interpretation of history and nature of Common Core and PARCC.

In paragraph 4, ABSC implies that our Petition is misguided as opposed to their efforts, which are "designed to influence those in a position to affect real change."

I interpret this to mean, we as citizens of a town with children in the local school system must not waste our time with the School Committee because they are not in a position to make any real changes at the local schools. The ABSC must ask for permission from the state for many meaningful changes, and if the state says we can't do it, then they will write a letter. This statement admits that we have already relinquished the real control of our schools to a less accountable entity (mostly anonymous bureaucrats at the DESE).

Paragraph 4 (and 6) also points out that our petition is from the residents of Acton only, not Boxborough and it would be unfair to act on such a petition without Boxborough being represented.

This is a good point that should have been addressed by the people who decided full regionalization was a good idea. Obviously the residents of Acton do not live in Boxborough, so we are not allowed to start a petition in their town. It has never been our intent to deliberately leave Boxborough out of these important decisions. Let me stress, this is a non-binding resolution. Our point is more symbolic, based on important principles of fairness, than it is procedural. We understand there are many steps that would have to be implemented to back out of Common Core and PARCC. Some of it may be able to be done rapidly, others would take much longer. We do not set any timelines on any of these actions because that would be unreasonable. No changes should be implemented without consideration of the opinions and needs of the citizens of Boxborough. Furthermore, we are currently seeking to assist residents of Boxborough to start their own Petition.

Paragraph 5 seems to belittle our overall message and timing of the Petition.

This is the ABSC's opinion, which I accept. However, I believe they are incorrect. The ABSC's opinion on the timing of our petition is irrelevant to the current issues and should not have been considered in their decision whether or not to support our Petition.

1. Common Core and PARCC cannot be lumped together.

As stated above, the ABSC claims that Common Core and PARCC cannot be lumped together, but they were developed by the same entities and PARCC was developed to test the Common Core Standards. Therefore, the ABSC can rationalize their separation all they want, but they are wrong to do so.

2. Common Core refers only to ELA and Math.

We shall amend the Petition to focus on ELA and Math

3. We have been using CCSS since 2011, the same year the petition cites out district as being consistently highly rated.

As stated above, our petition clearly refers to pre-2011, which is obviously also 2010 and prior. The ABSC understands this, but incorrectly claims that our petition refers to 2011, not pre-2011. Either the ABSC made a huge error in claiming that we made a mistake on the year, or they deliberately used this to undermine our credibility.

4. Common Core was adopted through a public process.

Technically, this is correct, but only if you define a public process as having no local outreach anywhere near Acton. The only "local" public meetings held on the topic in 2010 were in Malden (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/boe/minutes/?yr=2010>). We will not budge on our interpretation that Common Core and PARCC were adopted in any sort of

open, accountable and public forum. We are confident the citizens of Acton will be more likely to accept our interpretation of this public process than the standard talking points from the Common Core proponents that has satiated the ABSC.

5. We control our curriculum on the local level, and we follow federal and state regulations regarding testing.

I will explain more on the curriculum below under point 11, but this statement also admits the loss of any local control on testing, which we as citizens refuse to accept without public resistance.

6. We are currently not using PARCC and we should not lump in Common Core.

This is true about PARCC, but there is pressure to accept PARCC and that decision may be taken away from local districts as early as November 17. Again, we have not incorrectly linked Common Core and PARCC (see #1 above).

7. The number of testing days our Petition references would not allow MCAS. The Petition should use the term “high-stakes standardized testing”.

We shall amend the petition to cap the number of days to match the current MCAS requirements. It was not our intent to limit all testing, thus we shall also amend the Petition to use the term high-stakes standardized testing.

8. It is unclear what is meant by “the use of any state or federal funding”.

I agree that #4 is too vague and unnecessary for this Petition. We will amend this by deleting “educational programs or testing” and replace it with “high-stakes standardized testing”.

9. The School District cannot do without a variety of grant sources.

Our intent in this statement is to point out that any grant sources requiring accepting certain standards, testing, etc. should be cautiously reviewed due to unintended consequences. However, we understand this is too vague and will amend it by deleting #5 from the Petition.

10. Common Core was led by the National Governors’ Association and the Council of State School Officers, all of whom are state leaders.

This is a standard talking point from Common Core proponents that seems to have satisfied the ABSC, but anyone who spends a few minutes looking into this will see that both of these organizations were sham organizations developed for the purpose of pushing Common Core throughout the country.

11. The ABSC points out that the quote we used in paragraph 2 from the General Education Provisions Act (GEPA) does not include the specific terms “standards or

assessment”. Secondly, the ABSC defines Curriculum to show that it is not synonymous with Standards.

First, the quote from the GEPA, to which the ABSC is referring:

“No provision of any applicable program shall be construed to authorize any department, agency, officer, or employee of the United States to exercise any direction, supervision, or control over the curriculum, program of instruction, administration, or personnel of any educational institution, school, or school system, or over the selection of library resources, textbooks, or other printed or published instructional materials by any educational institution or school system...”

It is true the words “standards” or “assessment” are not in the quote, but it does include program of instruction, personnel, selection of textbooks, and published instructional material. I contest that Common Core mandates specific programs of instruction, Common Core aligned textbooks and published instructional material, AND requires evaluations of personnel (teacher evaluations). Again, as we’ve seen before, the Common Core proponents choose their words carefully so that they can claim actual control while avoiding accountability. This is done partly through redefining important terms to their advantage (e.g., standards, assessment, and curriculum).

Second, the definition of Curriculum and how it is framed in the context of Standards and Frameworks is a controversial, but incredibly important topic. I ask the members of the Board to compare and contrast two definitions of curriculum.

According to Merriam-Webster, the definition of curriculum is: 1: the courses offered by an educational institution, 2: a set of courses constituting an area of specialization.

It is reasonable to infer that a finer scale definition includes lesson plans within each course offered. This is the definition that most of us outside of the educational industry recognize.

The ABSC has their own definition of curriculum. They do not cite any other sources for this definition.

According to the ABSC, the definition of curriculum is:

“a combination of knowing the standards, knowing the available materials, knowing your students, knowing the assessment practices and having a deep knowledge of instructional practices.”

I will ask the ABSC to explain this definition and explain where it was derived. I interpret this as purposely vague doublespeak with no real point other than redefining curriculum so some administrators/proponents can claim that we control our curriculum. The definition works well so some authorities can claim that we control our curriculum, but all that really means is we control what we know about

materials, students, assessments, and instructional practices. It doesn't mention anything about what is actually taught to students.

Thank you for your consideration of these important clarifications.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Scott Smyers". The signature is written in a dark ink and has a fluid, connected style.

Scott Smyers
382 Central Street