

Lawmakers urged to end MCAS rule for high schoolers

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By Maria Sacchetti, Globe Staff | June 6, 2007

Frustrated teachers, students, and school officials, buoyed by Governor Deval Patrick's pledge to improve the MCAS tests, urged lawmakers yesterday to stop denying high school students a diploma based solely on high-stakes tests.

They called on the state to use a variety of measures to judge students' abilities in addition to the 10th-grade English and math tests that have been graduation requirements since 2003. Under a legislative proposal outlined yesterday, students could offset low test scores with portfolios of their classroom work, including report cards, term papers, or science projects.

Yesterday's hearing before the Joint Committee on Education signaled new hope for opponents of high-stakes testing who have criticized the state for unfairly denying diplomas to special education students and others who struggle with tests.

The state has fiercely defended the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, saying that all students should be held to the same high standards.

The governor's spokesman said Patrick does not have a position on the measure discussed yesterday. But last Friday, Patrick promised to name a committee to tackle various education issues, including improving MCAS and adding new assessments.

"The governor supports MCAS as a high school graduation requirement," said spokesman Kyle Sullivan. "However, he doesn't believe it should be the sole assessment of student academic progress."

Patrick's willingness to discuss the MCAS emboldened lawmakers who felt change was impossible in the recent past. A year ago, New Bedford backed off plans to give diplomas to students who flunked the test when Governor Mitt Romney threatened to yank millions in state funding.

"The political reality is different now," Representative Carl M. Sciortino, Jr., a Medford Democrat and bill cosponsor, said in an interview.

Sciortino told the committee he is concerned that students cannot find jobs or go on to college because they lack high school diplomas. He wants a 31-member committee to draft new assessments by 2008 and put regulations in place by 2009. Until then, he said, the MCAS graduation requirement should be suspended.

Rashene McIntyre, a senior at Boston Arts Academy, urged the committee to vote in favor of the bill. He said he likes to craft essays, write songs, and sing gospel and classical music. But he has flunked the MCAS seven times and will not earn a diploma this year.

"I'm 20 years old; I am trying to do something with my life," said McIntyre, wearing a sticker that said "MCAS reform now," after testifying before the Joint Committee on Education. "I get scared when that test just comes right in front of me. That's my future."

MCAS stemmed from the 1993 Education Reform Act, which pumped billions of dollars into schools and set statewide academic standards in several subjects. The law called for a variety of assessments, but since 1998 the state has focused mainly on MCAS.

The state now tests students in grades 3 to 8 and 10. In 2003, the 10th-grade English and math tests became high school graduation requirements, and science and history tests will be added in coming years.

Proponents praise the test for setting uniform standards in a state where funding and expectations varied markedly. In 2001, only 68 percent of sophomores passed MCAS on their first try; last year 84 percent passed it. After retests, 95 percent of students eventually pass the test to graduate.

Christopher R. Anderson, chairman of the state Board of Education, which oversees public schools, praised the MCAS for contributing to higher standards and said he would oppose suspending it.

"I couldn't conceive at this point of a scenario in which we would want to abandon MCAS as a yardstick for graduation

in Massachusetts," he said in an interview.

Many of those who testified yesterday had mixed feelings about suspending MCAS as a graduation requirement, even as they wanted to improve it.

David P. Magnani, a former senator and chairman for the Education Committee when the 1993 act was passed, reminded the committee that the current system forced schools to pay attention to students they had once neglected.

After he spoke, Representative Alice K. Wolf, Democrat of Cambridge and a committee member, nodded.

"We would not like to go so wrong again," said Wolf, who backs the bill. "This is what we were trying to get over in 1993."

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