

June 26, 2014

The Hon. Lincoln Chafee
Governor
State House
Providence, RI 02903

RE: HIGH STAKES TESTING LEGISLATION H-8363 and S 2059

Dear Governor Chafee:

On behalf of the many individuals and organizations that have worked over the past few years to stop the use of the NECAP as a graduation requirement, we urge you to sign House bill H-8363 as amended and Senate bill S-2059 as amended into law.

When use of a high stakes test was first proposed some years ago, despite objections from many of our groups, the Department of Education was very clear that students had to get a passing score on the test, and that any waivers from this requirement would be “extremely rare.” This was based on RIDE’s assertions that the NECAP measured something meaningful, and that a minimum score was necessary to prove a student’s college readiness. Since then, however, we know the following:

* Not one other New England state using the NECAP does so as a high stakes test for graduation purposes.

* In direct contradiction to the whole point of NECAP passage being a purported sign of college readiness, RIDE declared earlier this year (though too late for many seniors) that students who were selected to non-open-enrollment colleges qualified for a diploma, notwithstanding their failure to pass the NECAP.

* Students have received diplomas despite failing to get a passing score on the NECAP because they have shown what RIDE deems “statistically significant improvement” in their retake of the test. This has led to the absurd scenario of a student not getting a diploma because of their scores on the NECAP, while another student who actually scored lower getting a diploma because their score showed improvement.

* In response, some school districts, in recognition of the intolerable inequities created by RIDE’s policies, have -- with RIDE’s tacit support -- made quite commonplace the allegedly “rare” waiver grant.

As a result, the pretense that particular NECAP scores are necessary or important for graduation has long since been abandoned. Instead, the difference between those students who did not get a partially proficient score and were allowed

to graduate, and those who did not get a partially proficient score and were not allowed to graduate is largely a function of geography and luck, nothing more.

It was this recognition that prompted the General Assembly to overwhelmingly pass this legislation. Legislators also understood that the NECAP was not designed to measure achievement at the individual level; consequently it creates a narrowly focused and minimally reliable measure of learning. When this measure is used to determine the achievement of students who do not fit into its narrow focus, it fails to capture what those students know, and this creates an inherently unjust process for deciding who will, and will not, graduate.

The injustice of this measure is most readily seen with students whose learning process is furthest from the “norm,” typically those students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs). The way these students learn, and express their learning, is far from the standard mode, yet the NECAP measures their learning in a highly standardized fashion. If this were only a problematic issue in psychometrics, it would be of limited consequence, but because real harms accompany failing the NECAP, these psychometric problems have potentially devastating real world consequence.

The injustices that are evident for students with IEPs are also present for students who are English Language Learners and students in poverty. Based on the results alone, using the NECAP as a graduation requirement perpetuates the inequities already associated with the distribution of wealth across our state.

Let there be no mistake: we are all for high standards in education and want all children to achieve them. But we insist that student progress towards those standards be measured in fair and meaningful ways that capture the diversity of learning styles in our student population, and that test results be used, first and foremost, to support those students in need of help, not to punish them.

Because both RIDE’s high stakes testing requirement and its implementation fail to meet those basic standards, we urge your support of this legislation.

Sincerely,

The Autism Project

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