Testimony from Deb McCarthy, Hull teacher, in favor of House 340

Good morning. My name is Deb McCarthy and I am a fifth grade teacher from Hull. I have been working with the students in my hometown for 39 years now, 20 of them in the classroom. It is possible that you may remember me from last June when I showed up to share personal stories about the trauma children were experiencing from this regime of high-stakes testing. I shared horror stories of students cutting themselves and over-medicating themselves, along with instances of inhumanity when we as educated professionals prioritize the tests before the death of a loved one. I recalled a time when in Hull we delayed sharing news of the sudden death of a beloved art teacher so as not to upset the testing conditions for the students. I recalled another incident of a student in Massachusetts who took the test in the months before his death from cancer so as not to adversely affect his teacher’s performance rating. And then there is the story of a third grade student who took the test the day after his father died, as an act of normalcy.

At that time there was a disconnect between my experience with testing as a teacher and the positions of the leadership at the Massachusetts Teachers Association. There was an innocence on my part about the politics of the test, the money trail of the test, and the narrative of the spin of those who use children as the cornerstone for their own private agenda. That is no longer the case.

I stand before you this morning as the Chair of the MTA’s Government Relations Committee for the. I am joined by the leadership of the MTA, the lobbyists and other staff of the MTA, the incredible rank and file of this union of professionals dedicated to public education. We are joined today by our allies and friends at the Less Testing More Learning campaign, Citizens for Public Schools, Jobs with Justice, the Boston Teachers Union, AFT Massachusetts, members of the Massachusetts Association of Superintendents, school committee members, educators from higher education, parents, students, mental health specialists, local town officials, and state legislators in support of H. 340, which calls for a moratorium on this high-stakes testing madness. We ask you to slow the bus down for the sake of the students we so proudly serve.

In these past 12 months what has concerned me the most is that those who speak to the merits of high-stakes testing are admittedly educated, passionate, and articulate, but they are not advocating for what is in the best interest of students. Theirs is a voice that is vested in and connected to the priorities of profit-making companies.

When one tells you about the importance of testing and its connection to college and career readiness know that it is a farce. I am the proud parent of four recent college graduates. Their college and career readiness had nothing to do with a test score and everything to do with their zip code, their parental support, and their individual drive and determination. I am blessed to be the parent of an engineer, an accountant, a lawyer and a teacher. Truth is it was the lawyer who had the lowest score, but she never missed a day of school in 13 years, her tenacity to persevere and prove that she was better than the rest, and her passion for perfection allowed her to rise to the top of career readiness, not her test score. Truth is the highest test score belongs to my daughter the math teacher — the one who broke her
father’s heart because while her test score was the best, her career choice will not help her pay off her student loan as quickly as her sister the lawyer will pay off hers.

Please know that for me this movement will always be about the students I serve and advocate for. My fifth grade students endured 11 days of high-stakes testing this year, they saw their school transformed into a testing factory for three months as their schedules were uprooted and all sense of normalcy and routine was lost to testing. My students were frustrated, anxious, depressed, angry, and downright belligerent at times about these developmentally inappropriate PARCC questions.

Honestly, I believe that every time an advocate for testing uses the word rigor to justify why these tests are good for students, they must spend three months in a classroom with these students so that they can truly understand the depths of despair these students face as 10-year-olds trying to do their best for “College and Career Readiness.” Every time they use the word rigor they should be required to rigorously fight for the students who have lost their federally mandated protected time on IEPs to the testing accommodation time of others. And every time someone uses the word rigor to defend the narrative of accountability, ask yourselves, “Is education about the rigor of a high-stakes test score for profit, or is it about engaging, motivating, and inspiring our young learners to fulfill their potential and to live a life with purpose and meaning?” The second reason is why I teach.