



March 6, 2024

Senator Cindy Friedman, Chair
Representative Alice Peisch, Chair
Special Joint Committee on Initiative Petitions
The State House
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Chair Friedman, Chair Peisch & Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback and express our opposition to H.4252, *An Act requiring that districts certify that students have mastered the skills, competencies and knowledge of the state standards as a replacement for the MCAS graduation requirement.*

The Massachusetts Business Roundtable is a statewide public policy organization comprised of Chief Executive Officers and Senior Executives from some of the state's largest employers representing over 300,000 Massachusetts employees. The mission of the Roundtable is to make Massachusetts the most desirable place to live, work, and do business by engaging private sector executives and public leaders to ensure access to a robust, diverse, and talented workforce that enhances the Commonwealth's competitiveness in a global economy.

At the Roundtable, our policy agenda centers on the state's competitiveness with a particular focus on the recruitment, retention, development, and diversity of the state's talent pool...our chief competitive advantage. Yet, while we are home to the most educated talent pool in the country, employers are finding it difficult to find workers to fill open jobs. Last year, there were nearly two-and-a-half job openings for every unemployed person in Massachusetts. This past spring, in a survey of Roundtable members, 75% anticipated some difficulty in filling jobs in the next year. In November, a Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education survey of more than 140 business leaders found that 87% are finding it very or somewhat difficult to find people, with 73% saying hiring is at or near their top challenge. For an economy that has historically been based on access to world class talent, this is a direct threat to our long-term competitiveness.

What does this have to do with the ballot question in front of you?

Many employers cite the state's "deep talent pool" as one of the top reasons why they chose to stay, grow, or relocate to Massachusetts. Part of this is our world-class higher education system including 2- and 4-year public and private universities, but it also includes our first in the nation K-12 public education system. The proposal to eliminate the MCAS graduation requirement would directly impact our education system and worsen the significant talent challenges currently facing employers across the Commonwealth. As a state economy that



relies on a well-educated diverse workforce, we cannot risk upending our education system in ways that would make us a national outlier.

There are three reasons, in particular, that we want to emphasize:

1. First, the MCAS test is a critical tool for assessing progress, establishing standards, and targeting funding. In 1993 and again in 2019, the business community supported substantial increases in state funding for education that were accompanied by high expectations for all students and a transparent system for measuring progress and results. For the state to meet its constitutional responsibility to deliver an excellent and equitable public education for all students, the state needs authority to identify and support districts that are not meeting this standard. MCAS shines a light on racial and socio-economic achievement gaps that would otherwise remain hidden, identifies schools/districts that need improvement and intervention, and then target resources accordingly. This ballot question would make it significantly harder for the state to not only track and hold districts accountable, but to target resources where they are needed most.
2. Second, if the MCAS were eliminated, it would result in more than 300 graduation standards across the state. This would result in district-by-district standards that could lower expectations for far too many students. It would also make it nearly impossible for employers to compare students from neighboring school districts and to understand if students have the required competencies as a high school graduate. In addition, as the Commonwealth and employers move towards skills-based hiring, emphasizing the skills, knowledge, and abilities required for a job rather than unnecessary degree requirements, it is particularly important that there be a uniform standard that employers can use when evaluating recent high school graduates for open positions at their companies. This ballot question would do the opposite, making it more difficult for employers to recruit and further impacting the talent challenges already facing our state.
3. Finally, forty-nine states, including Massachusetts, have a state-mandated graduation requirement. If this ballot question were to pass, Massachusetts would become an outlier as one of only two states without a comprehensive state-mandated graduation requirement. Of importance, in other states that do not have a test requirement, the state mandates a series of courses that students must take in high school in order to graduate. Without MCAS as a graduation requirement, the Commonwealth would be left with no statewide standard for high school graduation, and no standard definition of what it means to be ready for the future. This ballot question does not include any alternatives for a statewide wide standard or address what would happen after MCAS was eliminated.

At the Roundtable, our policy agenda is based on three principles: Opportunity; Equity; and Competitiveness. We believe these principles are not mutually exclusive, and that



competitiveness is contingent upon opportunity and equity. The information that MCAS provides is integral to understanding if the state is meeting its constitutional obligation to provide every student an excellent education. Accountability measures effectively shine a light on racial and socio-economic achievement gaps that would otherwise remain hidden and identifies the schools and districts that need improvement and intervention. In addition, having a statewide standard is a critical tool for employers to ensure that the students of today, which will be their employees of tomorrow, have the requisite skills, knowledge, and abilities for the workplace.

The Roundtable stands ready to work with policymakers in a collaborative effort to support policy solutions aimed to improve our state's education system, which has a direct impact on the state's overall competitiveness. Thank you for your consideration and thoughtful approach to this important policy matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "JD Chesloff". The signature is written in a cursive style with a prominent initial "J" and "C".

JD Chesloff
President & CEO
Massachusetts Business Roundtable