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March 4, 2024

The Honorable Cindy Friedman  
Senate Chair, Special Joint Committee on Initiative Petitions  
State House, Room 313

The Honorable Alice Peisch  
House Chair, Special Joint Committee on Initiative Petitions  
State House, Room 234

## **Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation Testimony on House Bill 4252**

Chair Friedman, Chair Peisch and members of the Special Joint Committee:

My name is Doug Howgate and I am the President of the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation. MTF is submitting testimony today in opposition to House Bill 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*.

To understand our opposition to this initiative petition, it is first necessary to understand the current process by which a Massachusetts student successfully graduates high school and receives a diploma. Presently, there are two requirements for receiving a high school diploma in Massachusetts: a student must meet local coursework requirements, as well as a statewide competency determination standard. Through this approach, each individual community determines the coursework, skills, and requirements that it deems necessary for high school success; while the state maintains a consistent and equitable standard of educational attainment. This partnership between local communities and the state has worked well; 96 percent of Massachusetts seniors consistently meet local requirements for graduation and achieve the statewide competency determination standard.

The initiative petition under consideration today would drastically alter this process, which has been a cornerstone of Massachusetts' education policy and success over the last 30 years. It would eliminate the statewide standard for high school graduation and create a patchwork of more than 300 local standards to assess a student's suitability for graduation. This proposal would do no less than move us back more than 30 years in our efforts to create a public education system that offers educational opportunity and preparation for future success for all students, regardless of where in the state they live.

The implications of eliminating a statewide graduation standard are clear: it would immediately and significantly increase educational inequities throughout the state. Depending on where they live, families and students would now be held to more than 300 different standards for receiving a high school diploma. Inevitably, standards in historically high performing districts would look much different than standards in other districts.



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We do not need to guess at the negative consequences of such inconsistency and inequity. The education reform movement of the early 1990s was borne of the stark differences and lack of educational standards between school districts. The strategy to remedy those unconscionable disparities was twofold: significantly increase financial resources and establish statewide goals and standards. The reason for this approach is as obvious as it seems: making something better not only requires investment, but a shared understanding of what better means.

We now find ourselves at a time when the state is once again increasing education support by billions of dollars, with those critical investments focused schools serving our highest need students. The Student Opportunity Act is an historic renewal of the state's commitment to provide the financial resources necessary for students to graduate high school with a worldclass education.

But, as in 1993, financial resources alone will not fulfill that commitment; those resources must continue to be partnered with a statewide standard for what educational success means. At the most basic level, taxpayers deserve to know that districts receiving significant state funding are providing students with the skills and knowledge necessary to meet a basic and measurable standard of high school success. More importantly, walking away from a statewide standard and replacing it with more than 300 alternatives is knowingly returning to a time where we allow our most affluent communities and our neediest communities to be held to two wholly different sets of standards.

It is important for the state to actively work to ensure that the competency determination standard is accurate, unbiased, effective, and does not interfere with educational instruction. There are undoubtedly ways our current competency determination can be improved. Seeking to address the flaws in our one standard by replacing it with more than 300 others is as counterproductive and inequitable as it sounds and that is why MTF is strongly opposed to this initiative petition.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "D. Howgate", is written over a light gray rectangular background.

Douglas Howgate, President