



**Testimony by AFT Massachusetts President Beth Kontos on the Thrive Act
Joint Committee on Education
October 4, 2023**

Dear Chair Garlick, Chair Lewis, and Members of the Joint Committee on Education:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on An Act Empowering Students and Schools to Thrive, also known as the Thrive Act—H.495 in the House, S.246 in the Senate. I am providing these comments on behalf of the 24,000-member American Federation of Teachers Massachusetts (AFT MA).

Massachusetts has long been a leader on educational issues, and, working together, we recently enacted the historic Student Opportunity Act, or SOA, which establishes what may be the most progressive school funding system in the nation.

And now we have before us the Thrive Act, which I think of as SOA’s close cousin. By passing the Thrive Act, we have the chance to lead once again. Passing the Thrive Act is the equivalent of proclaiming to the nation from the dome of this beautiful State House: ***The painful, destructive era of test-blame-shame-and-punish is over. There is a better way to do things, and Massachusetts will once again show the way.***

Today, you’ll hear a lot of testimony supporting the four main components of the Thrive Act. In short, the bill would:

- End state takeovers of schools and districts based on MCAS scores (and end the statutory authority for future takeovers);
- Create a better, more democratic, and locally driven process for supporting schools in need of improvement, fully consistent with federal law;
- Replace the MCAS-based graduation requirement with one based on coursework certified by districts (using a similar process to what happened during the COVID pandemic); and
- Create a special commission to shape a future vision for student/school assessment and improvement.

AFT Massachusetts supports all these components wholeheartedly.

For example, we’ve seen across the state and the country that receiverships don’t work—they are ineffective even by the state’s own metrics, and they are deeply undemocratic, depriving communities of a voice in how their schools are run. They also target and harm communities of color. A better approach is embodied in the Thrive Act: genuinely engaging local stakeholders in

the school-improvement process, premised on the belief that local educators, families, and community members generally know best what our students and schools need to succeed.

We also now have years of data showing that the MCAS-based graduation requirement disproportionately harms historically marginalized students, such as English learners, students with disabilities, and students of color, disrupting their education and in some cases even denying students a high school diploma. The Thrive Act fixes these inequities by establishing a graduation requirement based on coursework, not MCAS. This approach is fairer, better suited to preparing students for the complex challenges of college and the workforce, and fully aligned with Massachusetts' strong academic standards.

Others here today will make the full case for each of the four components of the bill. I'd like to devote the balance of my time to debunking some common myths you may hear about the Thrive Act.

- **First, the Thrive Act does not eliminate MCAS tests and the associated reporting requirements required under federal law.** Consistent with the federal Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA, students would still take MCAS tests in grades 3 to 8, and in high school. That's a total of 17 MCAS tests in ELA, math, and science that students will take across their K-12 careers. If anything, you could argue that's too much testing, but until federal education law is changed, that will continue to be the reality under the Thrive Act.

Likewise, the data from these tests would still be reported out at the district, school, and student level, and data would continue to be disaggregated by student subgroup, including by race and ethnicity, and by English language and disability status. So, if you hear today that the Thrive Act would make it impossible to track how students are doing on a common statewide measure, that is disinformation, and you should challenge that.

- **Second, the Thrive Act does not eliminate accountability for school improvement, and it does not eliminate the state's historic oversight role.** Under the Thrive Act, the state would still have to meet all the testing, accountability, and school-improvement requirements of the federal ESSA law. For example, DESE would still identify schools for support and improvement consistent with the criteria in ESSA. Districts would then be required to convene a representative local stakeholder group to develop a support plan for the school. The plan must tackle the root causes of the school's challenges, examine resource inequities, and include evidence-based programs, such as smaller classes, one-on-one tutoring, and community schools. Following a public hearing, the school committee would approve each plan before submitting it to DESE, which would monitor the implementation of the plan and establish and apply exit criteria.

The major philosophical difference between the Thrive Act and current state law is that the Thrive Act positions local stakeholders as the primary drivers of school improvement. At the same time, the Thrive Act maintains an important state oversight and support role consistent with federal law.

- **Third, the Thrive Act does not prevent the state from intervening in districts where there is corruption, gross mismanagement, violations of law, or a pattern of harm or discrimination against students.** This intervention power exists in parts of state law and regulations – for example, in Chapter 69, Section 1B – which the Thrive Act does not touch. The Thrive Act simply eliminates or changes the parts of state law that authorize state takeover of districts and schools based on low MCAS scores. It is notable under Chapter 69, Section 1K – the part of state law that authorizes state takeover of districts – that this takeover power only applies to districts in the lowest 10 percent on MCAS. Certainly, being outside of the lowest 10 percent does not make a district immune from corruption, mismanagement, violations of federal and state law, or other possible harms to student well-being and safety. In such cases, we support targeted state intervention on a time-limited basis to address the problems and get the district back on track and in compliance with federal and state laws.

I hope these remarks clear up some common misconceptions about the Thrive Act. As you consider this legislation, it will be vital to separate fact from myth.

In summary, the Thrive Act is a comprehensive and thoughtful piece of legislation that would help usher in a new era of real support for students and schools, while eliminating or lessening some of the punitive and harmful high stakes attached to standardized tests. We strongly urge you to endorse the Thrive Act for enactment by the Legislature.

Before closing, I would also like to mention the several bills before you relating to reforming the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. We believe all the bills advance good ideas for making the Board a more representative, effective, and accountable body. These bills deserve a close look. Above all, we believe it is imperative for the Board to include dedicated educator voices. It is my understanding that every other oversight board for professionals in the Commonwealth includes representation from the relevant professionals. Why are educators the exception, and how can the state make smart and sound educational policy decisions without this expertise at the table? We urge you to change state law to require authentic educator representation on the Board.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this testimony.

Sincerely,



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cc: Education Secretary Patrick Tutwiler
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