

**Statement of Cathy E. Minehan**  
Joint Education Committee Public Hearing  
Monday, March 5, 2001

To Whom It May Concern:

As President of the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, chairman of Boston's Private Industry Council, and vice-chair of Mass Insight's Campaign for Higher Standards, I have dedicated considerable effort to understanding the impact of the evolving, high-tech driven economy of this region on its workforce. In my view, the greatest challenge facing our region is creating and retaining the skilled workers needed to fill the high-value added jobs being created in both good economic times and in downturns here in New England. If the skills of our labor force--already good relative to the rest of the United States--can be enhanced, our region will grow relative to the rest of the country, and the benefits of this growth will be spread broadly. If not, we are at risk of both lagging behind, and doing a great disservice to the young men and women of our state and region.

I also write as a parent of two children who graduated from the public school system in Massachusetts. My son, now a university freshman, was in the first 10<sup>th</sup> grade class to take the MCAS. I saw through his eyes the initial problems with the test--its length for one--and I have studied the questions on that test and subsequent tests. I have watched both the testing process, and the tests themselves, change and improve and I have also seen the focus for the initial graduation requirement narrow to English and mathematics. I believe these are wise changes. I also must comment that the feedback I received as a parent on the written portion of my son's MCAS test was as thoughtful a set of insights on his writing ability as I have ever seen from a widely administered test. Obviously, there have been problems with MCAS, but I believe those issues are being addressed and that the test itself can be a valuable contribution to a parent's understanding of a child's abilities.

With the recent decision to offer as many as five opportunities to pass MCAS, the Board of Education has set a reasonable process for pulling all students up to a necessary standard in the core academic skills of math and literacy. As an employer, I have looked at the standards that high school students will need to meet to pass the test before graduation. I am convinced that young men and women who have not reached these levels of competence will face a difficult or even impossible challenge in the evolving labor market.

As you may know, the Federal Reserve Bank, like many other large employers in Boston, brings many Boston high school students into our workplace for internships and summer jobs. They are good employees. Their verbal skills are often excellent, and their work ethic improves week by week. They are held back, however, by their limited writing and reading skills. And, at a place like the Federal Reserve Bank, mathematics

matters. Often we wonder how far these young men and women could go if they were further ahead academically.

The plight of these students is the most important public policy argument for education reform standards, tests and the graduation requirement. There was a time when young men and women who had not acquired basic literacy and math skills could find jobs that promised a future for them and their families. Those days have passed. The economy is increasingly unforgiving. Those who cannot read, write and compute to a reasonable standard find themselves trapped in low wage jobs with little chance for advancement. Without standards we will fail these young men and women, and, in a fundamental way, we will fail ourselves as well. Our regional and state economy will not grow as it should, bringing benefits to all of us.

I know that many are advocating a retreat from using MCAS as a graduation requirement. This would move the challenge off the front page and out of sight. It would take the heat off funding the remedial efforts necessary to give struggling students the skills they need. I want to be on record as one who believes that we cannot retreat from the commitments education reform made to these young people. Standards should give them the opportunity to succeed in life, and the reform process made us all accountable as leaders for ensuring results. We owe it to the class of 2003, and to all students in Massachusetts, to stay the course with standards based education, and with an uncompromising commitment to ensuring students have mastered the skills that will make them, and the local economy more generally, thrive in this competitive world.