



August 8, 2017

Jeff Wulfson, Acting Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education  
Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education  
75 Pleasant Street  
Malden, MA 02148

Dear Acting Commissioner Wulfson,

We are writing to you pursuant to a New Business Item approved by the MTA Annual Meeting of Delegates on May 20, 2017, to express our opposition to the department's new corporate-backed effort to reshape public education by scaling up computer-based "personalized learning" practices through the initiative called MAPLE/LearnLaunch.

The term "personalized learning" is used in many different ways, so this requires clarification. The MTA has long supported differentiated instruction and addressing students' social, emotional and academic needs. We support the kind of "personalized learning" by which educators — who best know the students in their classrooms — guide students as they ask questions, pursue projects, explore subjects they are passionate about, and work alone or in groups on self-designed initiatives. We understand that students learn differently and at different paces — and that good educators will find ways to engage all of their students and build a learning community while addressing individual needs. Indeed, as public education is foundational to democracy, classroom community is a central aspect of teaching and learning.

What we object to is a kind of "personalized learning" that actually *depersonalizes* the classroom by reducing interactions among students and between students and educators, replacing it with computer-based instruction based upon algorithms and what is ultimately a narrow conception of knowledge. Further, this movement deprofessionalizes teaching, seeking to substitute the judgment of distant "content producers" for the expertise and insights of well-trained professionals. This phenomenon is described in the following excerpt from "The Silicon Valley Billionaires Remaking America's Schools" (Natasha Singer, *The New York Times*, June 6, 2017).

And in more than 100 schools nationwide, Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's chief, is testing one of his latest big ideas: software that puts children in charge of their own learning, recasting their teachers as facilitators and mentors.

In the space of just a few years, technology giants have begun remaking the very nature of schooling on a vast scale, using some of the same techniques that have made their companies linchpins of the American economy. Through their philanthropy, they are influencing the subjects that schools teach, the classroom tools that teachers choose and fundamental approaches to learning.

The involvement by some of the wealthiest and most influential titans of the 21st century amounts to a singular experiment in education, with millions of students serving as *de facto* beta testers for their ideas. Some tech leaders believe that applying an engineering mind-set can improve just about any system, and that their business acumen qualifies them to rethink American education.

In addition, we have grave concerns about the data mining that students are subject to within various platforms and the lack of transparency about who has access to what information about students.

We need to be clear. MTA members are not neo-Luddites. We recognize the value of computers in our society and the vast store of information that can be accessed by the internet. But we also know the grave risks of placing too much faith in algorithms, which are subject to often unseen and unacknowledged cultural biases that shape our ideas of learning and knowledge. Digital technology should be used in schools in an age-appropriate manner to facilitate learning as determined by the educator's professional judgment — but not to replace or dominate other forms of inquiry and expression, and certainly not to replace teachers.

The primary driver of quality education must continue to be relationships among living, breathing human beings. That means students bouncing ideas off each other and getting their hands dirty making things as they learn — through art projects, for example, or science experiments or video documentaries. That means teachers leading discussions, encouraging debate, inspiring creativity and even digressing from the curriculum to explore a topic of interest to students, even if that topic has not been included in the next preprogrammed module baked into a student's "personalized learning" pod.

The new "personalized learning" movement we are concerned about appears to be yet another in a long line of attempts to teacher-proof education. The concept seems to be to digitize the best ideas and practices of some self-selected "experts" and then set up a system in which students move through a course of study at their own pace. Such a system would require fewer teachers with fewer credentials. Ultimately, it could be a lot less expensive than our current system. But the human costs would be enormous, since such a system will move us even farther down the road to making education data driven rather than relationship driven.


It is in this context that we express our opposition to the MAPLE/LearnLaunch Initiative. LearnLaunch is a nonprofit consortium of for-profit education technology ventures. The clear goal of this initiative is not to explore the possible benefits *and* costs of "personalized learning," but explicitly to "scale" technology-based personalized learning throughout public schools in Massachusetts. As the *Times* article put it, this amounts to making our students "*de facto* beta testers" of their products.

We are deeply troubled that the department selected LearnLaunch as a partner in this endeavor when the organization is so involved in promoting the sale of educational products. For example, consider the titles of two of LearnLaunch's July seminars: "What to Consider When Selling into Schools from a Marketing Perspective" and "How to Engage Educators, Create Communities, Gain Purchasers and Brand Fans." Putting LearnLaunch in the driver's seat of this initiative would be akin to the Department of Public Health putting a consortium of pharmaceutical companies in charge of prescribing regulations. The fox is guarding the henhouse. This is wrong.

We will be informing our members about our concerns, not only with MAPLE/LearnLaunch but with the many ways educational technology is encroaching on education, feeding the interests of those who are behind these efforts.

Educators should be the ones making education policy and exploring new, innovative practices. These decisions should be driven by what's best for students, not by profit.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'B. Madeloni', written in a cursive style.

Barbara Madeloni  
President

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Erik Champy', written in a cursive style.

Erik J. Champy  
Vice President