

Testing Testing

School Accountability in Massachusetts

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by Michele Kurtz

Ann Reitzell is busy updating the syllabus for her new pupils, but her mind wanders to the students she taught last year. As a high school English teacher in Massachusetts, Reitzell is waiting anxiously to see how many of her former students failed to make the grade on the state's standardized test, commonly known by the acronym MCAS. Though they will have several more chances to pass the test, failure has a dreadful consequence for the class of 2003 – the denial of a high school diploma.

“I'm just wondering what's going to happen if you have a kid who takes the test four times and for some reason or another doesn't pass it. That certainly is a possibility,” said Reitzell, who has taught for six years, most of those at Burncoat High School in Worcester.¹ The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System test has been given since 1998. But the latest results, due in October 2001, are bound to be the most closely examined, because the tenth graders who took the MCAS in the spring are the first students who will have to pass MCAS English and math to graduate.

Will the results turn Reitzell's school upside down? They could. In 2000, more than half of Burncoat tenth graders failed the English portion of the MCAS and six out of ten failed the math. She and others statewide are bracing for the possibility of large numbers of students being denied diplomas because they failed the exam.

The MCAS, a critical part of the Education Reform Act of 1993, is designed to gauge whether students are learning what the state says they should learn under a new set of standards. It also is a measurement of whether schools are making progress in boosting student achievement. MCAS supporters say the test has forced school districts and schools to look hard at how and what they teach and at whether they are reaching all students.

But with the graduation requirement looming, a bitter debate is being waged in schoolhouses and on Beacon Hill. At issue: Whether test scores should determine who gets a diploma and how schools are rated.

Proponents of education reform stand on both sides of the MCAS debate. Influential business groups, urban school superintendents, and the most powerful politicians in the state

support such high-stakes testing. But many others, including the teachers' unions, the Massachusetts Association of School Committees, and many suburban parents, do not. For the last two years, some students in Cambridge and Brookline boycotted the MCAS,

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protesting in front of their schools as their classmates took the test inside. The Massachusetts Teachers Association has lobbied vigorously against using the test to determine which students will graduate. Parents, educators, and anti-testing activists have joined to form anti-MCAS coalitions.

Some MCAS opponents say judging students based on the results of a single test is inherently unfair and arbitrary. Other critics say that, even if the test has merits as a tool to assess student performance, it is too soon to make the MCAS a graduation requirement because efforts to reform schools are just now taking hold. It is particularly unfair, they say, to punish students who started school before the law was passed. The test might be a useful diagnostic tool, they say, but it should not be a graduation requirement – at least not yet. Many opponents predict students will drop out in large

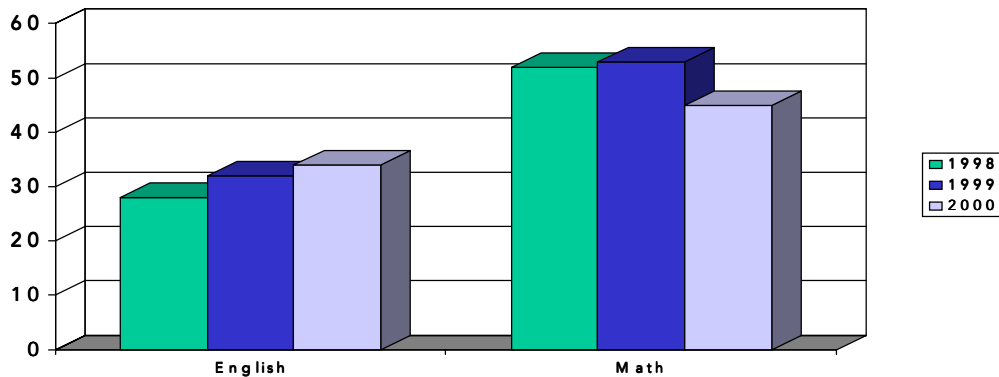
numbers and that schools will narrow the curriculum to cover mainly subjects tested that particular year. "Testing has a place," said Stephen Gorrie, the president of the Massachusetts Teachers Association. "Our fear is the overreliance on standardized testing for making such high-stakes decisions for students."²

MCAS supporters counter that using the examination as a graduation requirement is the only way to spur improvement and raise standards. The state has tested students for decades, but those tests do not carry high-stakes rewards and punishments, and there has been little improvement in student or school performance. For too long, they argue, Massachusetts high schools have granted diplomas to students who do not possess the basic skills needed to succeed in college or at work. "If our high school diplomas meant something, we wouldn't be doing the MCAS," said James Caradonio, superintendent of the Worcester schools. "We've been sending our kids out to battle without bullets."³

Billions of new dollars have poured into the schools to help their students pass the tests. Teachers like Reitzell have held after-school programs and tutorials for students at risk of failing. MCAS advocates say the graduation requirement has also prompted some parents to take a stronger role in their children's schooling.

The results of the tests have been disappointing to people on all sides of the debate. Some 34 percent of tenth graders in 2000 failed the English portion of the test, and 45 percent failed the math. Minority students failed in alarming numbers. The African-American failure rate was 60 percent for English and 77 percent for math. Sixty-six percent of Hispanic students failed the English portion and 79 percent failed the math. Based on past test results, as many as 30,000 students may have failed the 2001 test. The prospect of denying diplomas to thousands of students – many of them minorities – has many educators scram-

Figure 1: Tenth-grade MCAS failure rates



Source: Massachusetts Department of Education

bling to avoid a disaster and even some reformers thinking of delaying the graduation requirement.

It's a deal: Money for accountability

For all the controversy and protests, the MCAS is only part of a major redesign of Massachusetts education enacted in 1993. Driven by concerns about school funding, lawmakers sought to funnel more money to poor districts and set higher standards for schools and students at the same time. Concerned about wide gaps in resources between school districts - in 1994, for example, the Everett school system spent about \$4,400 per student, compared to the affluent Weston's \$8,900⁴ - key legislators and the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education led the charge for new funding and better school accountability.

Not surprisingly, the quality of education lagged in poorer districts that spent the least.

The disparities, in part, grew out of Proposition 2½, the 1980 ballot measure that severely limited the amount communities could levy in property taxes for school funding. "Very dramatic cuts were made in public schooling," recalled Mark Roosevelt, a former state representative and gubernatorial candidate who wrote the 1993 education reform law. "Almost a generation of young teachers were pink-slipped out of the profession. And we're still paying the price today."⁵

At the same time lawmakers were devising a plan to make resources more equal, a 15-year-old court case was already setting the stage for a major funding overhaul. The Supreme Judicial Court in 1993 found wide disparities in educational opportunities between the state's poorest and wealthiest communities, and ruled that Massachusetts

had not met its constitutional duty to offer an adequate education to all public school students. The court ordered the governor and legislature to figure out a way to close the gap.⁶ Officials decided to strive for a minimum funding level, or “foundation funding,” that would essentially guarantee every district a base level of money. To accomplish that, the state would pump millions into poorer districts to help bring up their per-pupil spending over several years.

But in exchange for the extra money – every district would get some dollars, though poorer systems would get more – schools would be expected to show progress under the new law. Districts could use the new money to lower class sizes, offer after-school tutoring, or otherwise boost student achievement and meet state goals. Their progress would be gauged by the MCAS. “We were sort of calling people’s bluff,” Roosevelt said. “We said to people, ‘OK, you need more money? We’ll give you more money. You give us accountability.’”⁷

Other states also had begun to address the issue of accountability for schools and students. In Massachusetts, business leaders had complained for years that high school graduates lacked the basic skills they needed to be productive in the workplace - a complaint echoed as recently as January 2001 when a nonpartisan research group released a study that showed that one-third of the state’s workers lack the basic technical skills needed for today’s jobs. The report, by the Massachusetts Institute for a New Commonwealth, was spurred in part by concerned business leaders who said they need more employees who have modern-day job skills. The report found that although they have a high school education, 667,000 Massachusetts workers have trouble with the most basic responsibilities, including reading and applying information from graphs.⁸ More and more college students were required to take remedial courses once they arrived on campus. Curriculum, course offerings, and expectations varied widely from district to district, with suburban districts generally expecting more than urban ones.

To prepare all students for post-secondary education and increasingly sophisticated workplaces, policy makers set out to establish clear, concise, and measurable standards for

Measuring and managing

“You can’t manage what you can’t measure,” goes the well-known business adage, which is why most successful companies review their performances regularly throughout the year. The same should go for the nation’s 90,000 public schools. Fortunately, the White House and Congress are considering ways to hold schools accountable by requiring that states annually test all students from third through eighth grade in reading and math. ... When Nancy Ichinaga became principal of [Bennett-Kew Elementary School in Inglewood, Calif.], average test scores were in the

bottom 3 percent of the nation. Within a few years, she turned the school into one of the highest performing in all of Los Angeles County. Even though four out of five of Ichinaga’s students qualify for the federal free and reduced-price lunch program, they performed at the 62nd percentile in reading and the 74th percentile in math last year. Why the change? Ichinaga credits the success to a research-based curriculum – and to testing students’ mastery of the content every six to eight weeks. In communities across the country, you can find public schools where low-

income children excel academically. At almost every single one of them, frequent testing enables the principal and teachers to ensure that, yes, “no child is left behind.” Testing is a crucial barometer: It lets teachers know which students require extra help. It also lets principals know which teachers are most effective and which need additional training.

From Megan F. Farnsworth, “Schools: A High-Test Formula for Success,” The Heritage Foundation, www.heritage.org/views/2001/ed041201b.html

students and schools across the state. Schools would be expected to eliminate the “general track,” a basic course of study that required little of students, and make students take more difficult courses. In other words, the goal was to raise the bottom so that even the lowest-performing students would have to take some courses that traditionally have been considered college-prep, such as algebra.

That would be a huge challenge to urban schools. A study of course-taking patterns among Massachusetts high school students showed that those enrolled in the less demanding general curriculum were disproportionately male, minority, and from large cities.⁹

To help with the massive changes, the education reform law also laid out other requirements: more teacher training, additional authority for every principal, and more clearly defined roles for school committees.

Supporters of education reform hoped these mandates and the extra \$3 billion – to be doled out over at least seven years – would give districts the resources they needed to improve student achievement and meet the tougher new goals set by the state. To know for sure, lawmakers wanted a new test that would assess whether students were learning what the state outlined in basic curriculum frameworks. Students in grades 4, 8, and 10 would be tested. And, most significantly, high-school students would have to pass the tenth-grade test in order to graduate. The class of 2003 is the first group of students to face that hurdle.

A national debate

A *Nation at Risk*, the 1983 report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education appointed by President Ronald Reagan, began the modern age of school reform when it warned that America’s national and economic security was threatened by a “rising tide of mediocrity.” In response to the report, governors pushed their legislatures to raise standards. Leading reformers in the bipartisan effort included Bill Clinton of Arkansas, Thomas Kean of New Jersey, William Reilly of South Carolina, Pierre Du Pont of Delaware, and Robert Graham of Florida. Those standards usually focused on the courses that would be required to graduate from high school.

In Massachusetts and across the country, education leaders began to focus more on testing to determine whether schools and students were meeting standards, or at least making progress.

To date, 17 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico have policies that base promotion or retention on a student’s score on a state and/or district assessment, according to the Education Commission of the States, a Colorado-based group that tracks education policy. Twenty-four states either require that students pass a test to graduate or are in the process of implementing such a requirement.¹⁰ Though standardized testing has met with protest and controversy nearly everywhere, it has been embraced by several presidents as a means to hold both students and schools accountable. President George W. Bush based his national education plan on a proposal that would mandate that states give standardized tests

in grades 3 through 8.

Many states are far ahead of Massachusetts in using standardized tests as part of education reform. One state often cited as a model is Texas, which tests students in most grades and requires them to pass a graduation exam. The Lone Star State is also planning to make its test a requirement for promotion in several grades. A 2000 court ruling in Texas will likely uphold the legality of graduation tests. In that case, a group of students who were

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denied diplomas because they failed the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills sued the state on the grounds that the graduation policy discriminated against minorities, who were failing the exam in greater numbers than white students. But a federal judge ruled that the test was not discriminatory, and noted that the testing system was designed to identify and help target minority students at risk of failing.¹¹

While half of the states require testing for graduation, few have implemented such a broad and challenging exam as Massachusetts without providing an alternate route to graduation.¹² Wisconsin imposed a strict test similar to the MCAS, but also offered students the alternative of presenting a "portfolio" of their work to qualify for a diploma.

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Several states with high school exit exams nonetheless award either diplomas or certificates to students who have attended class, earned good grades, and have teacher recommendations.¹³ At least three states, Georgia, Maryland, and Tennessee, are moving toward replacing broad math and English tests with end-of-course exams.¹⁴ Other states have chosen to delay the graduation requirement until they can be sure schools are teaching what is covered on the test.

Massachusetts Education Commissioner David P. Driscoll believes MCAS scores will rise significantly now that the test is a graduation requirement because students will take the exam more seriously. Furthermore, the State Board of Education has taken several steps to lower the failure rates: Students who fail the test will have at last four more chances to pass

Mismatch

A forthcoming study by researchers from the University of Wisconsin suggests there may be little overlap between what state assessments test and what teachers teach. In one of the 10 states studied, the overlap in one subject was found to be just 5 percent. The findings raise questions about the implementation of a basic premise of standards-based accountability: States should delineate

what students should know and be able to do, teachers should match instruction to those standards, and state tests should measure how well students meet those expectations. ... The researchers at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research, based at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, surveyed mathematics and science teachers and examined state-administered exams in those subjects

for grades 4 and 8. The detailed survey instrument asked teachers about the content they teach and the classroom practices and modes of thinking that their instruction requires.

From Ulrich Boser, "Teaching to the Test?" Education Week, June 7, 2000, available at <http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=39align.h19>.

it, and the retests will not include the most difficult material. Other states have seen their failure rates drop dramatically on retests.¹⁵ Driscoll and the board also have considered endorsing local graduation certificates for students who do everything but pass the MCAS. And the board is also considering an appeals process that might allow poor test-takers to demonstrate their mastery of MCAS material in a way other than passing the exam.

Other states also have been using test results as a tool to ensure that schools do their job. In Texas, the state labels campuses from “low-performing” to “exemplary” based largely on the percentage of students passing the TAAS. Texas’ school ratings, which can drive or destroy a real estate market and bring shame or glory to a campus, take into account how minority groups and students from low-income families perform. If one group of students fails to meet the established passing rate, the school is labeled “low-performing,” a fact critics say unfairly paints good schools as failing but that supporters say forces schools to address the needs of their most struggling students.

Even many MCAS supporters say the Massachusetts school rating system is so confusing that it does not perform any useful purpose. When asked, many Massachusetts teachers cannot recollect their school’s performance rating. Although state officials are reexamining the rating system, so far, school ratings are based only on passing rates and improvement on the MCAS. States such as Texas and Florida also use non-test-related criteria such as dropout rates to help determine where a school stacks up. This year Governor Jane M. Swift recommended the state consider dropout rates and the narrowing of the achievement gap between whites and minorities as indicators of school improvement.¹⁶

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A tough test?

The MCAS, which is known as a “criterion-referenced exam,” tests knowledge of a set curriculum and gives students scores based on their level of mastery, in contrast to national “norm-referenced tests,” which grade a student’s performance in relation to other students. Depending on the grade level, MCAS includes math, English/language arts, science and technology, and history. Students take the MCAS in sessions of 45 minutes or an hour, but they are allowed to take longer.

A key question is whether MCAS asks students to know too much, and whether it does so in a confusing and overly challenging manner. Students in some schools have complained that the tenth-grade MCAS tests subjects and concepts they havenot been taught. Unlike some state standardized exams, the MCAS is not designed to ensure a student has basic

skills, but rather to push students and schools to reach a higher standard (though supporters argue that the passing score is so low students only have to demonstrate basic skills to pass). The MCAS requires test-takers to do much more than answer multiple-choice questions, which also bolsters the test's national reputation as one of the more difficult standardized exams. In Massachusetts, students must tackle “short-answer” math questions that do not provide a list of answers to choose, answer “open-response” math items that require students to show their work, and write an English essay. All public school students – including those in charter schools – must take the MCAS. Students in special education also are required to take the tests. Depending on their disability, some qualify for special accommodations, such as extra time to take the exam. And beginning last year, some students with severe disabilities took an alternative assessment instead of the MCAS. Bilingual students with limited English proficiency can use bilingual dictionaries during the MCAS.¹⁷

The MCAS is scored on a scale of 200 to 280. “Failure” or “Warning” is 200 to 218, “Needs Improvement” is 220 to 238, “Proficient” is 240 to 258, and “Advanced” is 260 to 280. (The state does not assign odd-numbered scores.) Although it can vary slightly by subject and from one year to the next, students typically must score about 24 points out of a possible 60 points to achieve a passing score of 220.¹⁸

An examination of test questions illustrates the wide variety of question type. Because the stakes are highest for tenth graders – and most of the controversy over the state test focuses on the graduation requirement — this paper will focus largely on examples of the tenth-grade MCAS test questions.

In 2001, tenth graders were given the following writing prompt:

A frequent theme in literature is the conflict between the individual and society. From a work of literature you have read in or out of school, select a character who struggles with society. In a well-developed composition, identify the character and explain why this character's conflict with society is important.¹⁹

Tenth graders faced this math question:

When Elena works on Saturdays, she buys a salad and juice for lunch. There are two take-out restaurants near where she works. The prices in the two restaurants are given below.

| Hector's To-Go | | Tammy's Take-Out | |
|-----------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|
| Juice..... | \$2.00 per bottle | Juice..... | \$1.00 per bottle |
| Salad bar | 25 cents per ounce | Salad bar...50 cents per | ounce |

a. How many ounces of salad, together with a bottle of juice, can Elena buy at Hector's To-Go for \$4.50?

b. Write an equation that shows the cost, C , of Elena’s lunch at Hector’s To-Go if she buys a bottle of juice and n ounces of salad.

c. On the grid in your Student Answer Booklet, graph the equation you wrote in part b. Use the horizontal axis for the number of ounces, with each increment representing one ounce. Use the vertical axis for cost, with each increment representing 50 cents.

d. What are the different amounts of salad that Elena can buy so her complete lunch is less expensive at Tammy’s Take-Out than at Hector’s To-Go? Remember that Elena always buys a bottle of juice with her salad. Show or explain how you found your answer.²⁰

(To view some more sample questions from the tenth-grade exam, go to www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/testyourself.html.)

Some MCAS critics say the test is simply too hard. As evidence, they point to the fact that Massachusetts students tend to outperform their peers nationwide on other tests. For instance, in 2000, Massachusetts fourth graders tied for first nationally on the math portion of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, known as “the nation’s report card.” And yet, 60 percent of fourth graders either failed the MCAS or performed at the level of “needing improvement.”

The same year, the state’s eighth graders tied for fifth place on the NAEP, according to results released in the summer of 2001, but two-thirds of eighth graders either failed the MCAS math test or ranked in the “needing improvement” category. “The MCAS test is made to be extremely difficult, and as a result, it’s being used to attack schools and students and to label them failures, when by other reasonable standards, they’re not,” Monty Neill, executive director of the National Center for Fair and Open Testing, a Cambridge group that opposes the MCAS, told the *Boston Globe*.²¹ Also this summer, Massachusetts students contin-

ued to outpace students in states where at least two-thirds of students take the SAT, ranking second among that group of 11. Scores among Massachusetts students overall also topped the national average in both the math and verbal sections of the college entrance exam.²²

In light of such rosy results, MCAS critics ask: Why is the state creating a crisis?

State education officials say Massachusetts scores on national tests demonstrate that reform is working. “You can’t get these kinds of results, particularly in math, unless, classroom by classroom, teachers are changing their focus and using the standards at hand,” Driscoll said in August 2001, when the most recent NAEP scores were released.²³ MCAS supporters say some students still lag desperately behind – a fact that can be obscured by

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overall averages – and that despite high rankings on other exams, Massachusetts must push for higher standards. “No matter where we stand in the rankings, that doesn’t give us a free pass,” said James Peyser, chairman of the state Board of Education and Governor Swift’s chief education policy adviser.²⁴

Most apparent is the racial achievement gap that persists, no matter what test is given. The average fourth-grade score on the math NAEP for Massachusetts fourth graders who are white was 241, while it was 212 for black students and 210 for Latino students.²⁵ The gap between white and minority students on the SAT also continues to grow. Furthermore, comparing student performance on MCAS and the SAT is misleading, Driscoll says, because the SAT measures students relative to their peers, while the MCAS is designed to measure them against specific academic standards.

A comparison of MCAS scores and scores on other national standardized tests from four school districts in Massachusetts showed that the MCAS reasonably predicts performance on the other tests. A student likely to post low scores on the MCAS is also likely to score low on the Stanford 9 or the PSAT, according to the analysis done by the National Board on Educational Testing and Public Policy.²⁶ While the study found correlations, it also found variances in scores on the MCAS and other standardized tests, which the researchers said deserved scrutiny. The study outlined possible reasons for the differences: other tests are entirely multiple-choice; the tests are given at different times of year, and the tests differ in length.²⁷ The study suggests that the cutoff scores for performance levels may be unreasonably high – a rallying cry for MCAS opponents.

Just what the cutoff score should be for passing the MCAS – and therefore graduating from high school – has provoked intense debate. Some say the cutoff point undercuts the

High tests and real learning

As part of a comprehensive overhaul of its schools in the early 1990s, Kentucky put in place an assessment and accountability system that rewarded and sanctioned schools largely on the basis of changes in scores on complex, partially performance-based assessments. In the first four years of the program, scores showed steep gains, and the Kentucky Department of Education awarded approximately 50 million dollars to schools that showed large gains in scores. The Kentucky program – called the Kentucky Instructional Results Information System, or KIRIS – uses a variety of testing techniques in an effort to guard against deleterious effects of teaching to the test. Besides

traditional multiple-choice items, assessments have included “performance events” involving both group and individual activities, as well as open-response questions and writing and mathematics portfolios. ... If increases in KIRIS scores indicate improved mastery of a broadly defined subject, then those gains should be reflected substantially on other tests. National Assessment of Educational Progress data are particularly important because the KIRIS assessment is designed to measure much of the same content and skills that NAEP measures. The discrepancy between KIRIS and NAEP scores in reading is unambiguous: while fourth-grade KIRIS scores increased by a

remarkable 0.75 standard deviation in two years, NAEP scores remained unchanged. In mathematics, NAEP scores of Kentucky students did increase somewhat over four years, but the increase was comparable to national trends. Gains on KIRIS were 3.6 times larger than NAEP increases in the fourth grade and 4.1 times larger in the eighth grade.

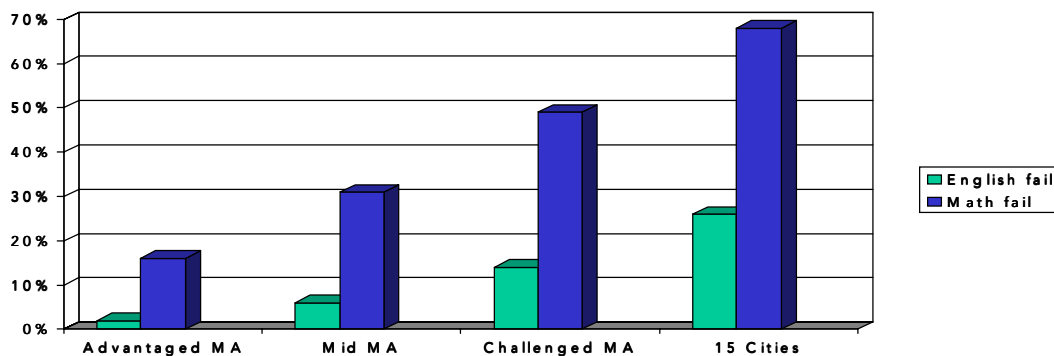
From “Test-Based Accountability Systems: Lessons of Kentucky’s Experiment,” RAND Research Brief, available at <http://www.rand.org/publications/RB/RB8017/>.

reform movement because it is set too low. John Silber, former Boston University President and state board chairman, and Edwin Delattre, a former state board member, state the case starkly: “The Commonwealth is prepared to grant a high school diploma to students whose performance, as certified by their MCAS scores, ‘needs improvement.’ This is giving up the battle for high standards before it is joined. If tenth-grade students are given a pass and a high-school diploma on the basis of a standard which the Department of Education defines as a high ‘F,’ they will have no incentive for making that improvement in the 11th and 12th grades. We must resist this and any other temptation to fudge the meaning of a passing grade in order to give fraudulent diplomas to ill-prepared students.”²⁸

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MCAS critics also maintain that students are tested too much. In 2001-2002, students in every grade, from 3 through 10, will take at least one MCAS subject test. Tenth graders will spend roughly two grueling weeks in MCAS exams. Most Bay State students also take college-admissions exams such as the SAT and the PSAT, and some may be required to take diagnostic exams such as the Stanford 9 and the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. Another mandatory test is in the works for eighth graders as part of a plan, involving more than a dozen states, to teach algebra and geometry in earlier grades.²⁹ “It’s not going to replace the MCAS,” said Alan Safran, senior associate commissioner for student achievement at the Massachusetts Department of Education. “The point is it will help us compare our kids to other states where MCAS is not given.”³⁰ More tests could be on the way, too. Under President Bush’s proposal for school accountability and testing, states would have to

Figure 2: 2000 8th grade MCAS failure rate by demography



Source: “Effective school districts in Massachusetts,” study by Dr. Robert D. Gaudet, University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute

administer standardized tests in reading and math each year in grades 3 through 8. For Massachusetts, that would mean adding reading and math tests to some grades in which they're currently not given.

High stakes but low scores

Whatever the arguments about the proper policy strategies for improving education, the first three years of scores on the MCAS have been disappointing. Except for certain grades and particular schools, MCAS scores have been low.

Improvement has been uneven: Scores went up between 1998 and 2000 in fourth-grade English/language arts, math and science, but while eighth-grade scores improved in English and science they fell in math. Tenth-graders showed improvement in math but have dropped in English and science. In 2000, 20 percent of fourth graders scored at the advanced or proficient level in English and 40 percent reached those levels in math. Sixty-two percent of eighth graders in 2000 scored in the advanced or proficient levels in English, yet only 34 percent scored in that range in math. The tenth-grade scores in 2000 were the most

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disconcerting: just 36 percent of students scored in the advanced or proficient levels in English and 33 percent did in math.³¹

“One sobering observation from the 1998 and 1999 reports is still true,” wrote researcher Robert Gaudet in a University of Massachusetts study of three years of MCAS results, pointing to the relatively stagnant MCAS scores. “So far, after seven years of increased reform funding to many systems, there is little evidence that many of our schools have changed in any fundamental ways. MCAS scores were relatively flat from 1998 to 1999 to 2000. There is certainly good news in the scores of some districts, but in the main, the pace of progress has not matched the hopes and expectations of many citizens.”³² Although schools have launched new tutoring and after-school programs, many note that there

has not been a true revolution on most campuses. For the most part, the fundamentals – how schools are structured and how teachers work with students – remain unchanged.

That may be largely because the poorer communities that education reform was designed to help are generally not seeing significant changes in their operations. In those communities, students tend to come to school with fewer social and economic advantages than those in wealthier communities. Chart 2 shows the possible connection between a district’s demography and its MCAS passing rate.

In his research, Gaudet set out to find examples where reform appeared to be working.

He compared a district's MCAS results with how one might expect it to perform given its demographic profile. He took into account factors such as average education level and income, poverty rate, single-parent status, language spoken, and the area's enrollment in private schools. He found that while reform efforts appear to have boosted schools in Massachusetts communities, such as Arlington and Braintree, that are demographically average, it has not had much effect in the poorer communities education reform was also supposed to help.

"Reform works well for middle- and higher-end communities," Gaudet told the *Boston Globe*. "But when you get to the lower 50, and especially the lowest 15, they're just overwhelmed by the demography they have to overcome."³³ None of the larger cities – which are also among the poorest — dramatically exceeded demographic expectations. Districts that overperformed their demographic expectations tended to be middle-class or demographically advantaged communities. Wealthier communities were twice as likely to outperform expectations than poorer communities, he found. Generally, overperforming districts spent at or below the state average and did not receive large amounts of education reform aid.³⁴ Gaudet said his third annual study suggests "reform-savvy middle class communities," such as Stoneham, Millbury, and Norwood, have made the best use of the new state dollars.³⁵

Unfortunately, little research has been done to isolate which strategies used by schools seem to work and ought to be tried elsewhere. "Why would you spend so much money and not try to find out how it's being spent?" says Roosevelt, the former lawmaker and one of the architects of education reform. Some, including Reville, the reform review commission, want the state to oversee how districts spend their money on teacher training. In its annual report in 2001, the Massachusetts Education Reform Review Commission recommended the Legislature allocate money specifically for program evaluation as well as funds to pay for the state to review how districts have responded to education reform. "There is a remarkable

Test cheats

Last June, New York City's Special Commissioner of Investigations, Edward F. Stancik, issued a report titled "How to Succeed Without Really Trying." The report revealed how 61 students from the Eastern District Senior Academy in Brooklyn had been awarded high school diplomas after receiving credits for running errands for teachers and taking courses like bicycle repair and Whiffleball theory. ... Under pressure to improve student performance on standardized reading and mathematics

tests, some educators resorted to a strategy far worse than "teaching to the test": helping students cheat on the tests. Some teachers and principals simply changed the answers themselves when students had completed the tests; others told students to erase wrong answers and mark the correct ones; and some had students write their answers on scratch paper, then told them the right answers before the students completed the actual test paper. ... "The reality is that many second-rate schools in the inner city

are becoming third-rate as students are drilled day after day to pass the tests," said [standardized test critic Alfie] Kohn. "Every hour spent on such exam preparation is an hour not spent helping students to become critical, creative, curious learners."

"Cheating to the Test," Heartland Institute, School Reform News, March 2000, available at <http://www.heartland.org/education/mar00/cheating.htm>.

lack of evaluation of education reform in Massachusetts,” Gaudet wrote. He estimates that less than one-quarter of 1 percent of state education reform funding has been used to assess how well the state is spending the other 99.75 percent.³⁶

Nevertheless, some administrators have ideas about what strategies have produced positive results in their districts. Braintree’s overall MCAS scores are 32nd in the state, even though the district’s demographics suggest they should rank 91st, according to Gaudet’s work. Braintree Superintendent Peter Kurzberg pointed to the district’s emphasis on aligning its curriculum with state guidelines, teacher training, and extra math help as major reasons for the district’s success.³⁷

State officials are hoping that large amounts of money spent in poorer districts will translate into major improvements in student achievement. Among other things, schools have used the money for summer school and after school programs that target students who fail MCAS, as well as tutoring and reading programs.

According to some estimates, the state has spent about \$3 billion in new money as a result of the education reform law, bringing all districts up to the foundation budget.³⁸ For many districts, that’s meant smaller classes and extra programs that target students who need more help to pass MCAS. A report on support services found that by 1998-99 at least 200 school districts offered after-school or summer school programs or individual tutoring.³⁹

The increase in funding has been dramatic for poorer communities. Spending per student is now higher in high-poverty cities, such as Boston, Lynn, Lawrence, and Springfield, than in any other group of communities, except for the wealthiest quarter, according to the Massachusetts Education Reform Review Commission’s annual report of 2001.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, these districts’ MCAS scores remain low. That led the reform commission to this conclusion: “Low income areas need more money to reduce class sizes, provide extra time in the school day and the school year, give teachers additional training, and deal with the social, emotional, and family problems these youngsters bring with them to school.” The commission recommends raising the foundation budget by 5 to 7 percent. Although there is widespread agreement among education officials that poorer school districts needed the extra money provided through education reform, many argue that reforms take time to catch up with investment, and that the state should wait before increasing financial help to districts.

Beyond the headlines

There are less obvious products of education reform. Districts have been working to align their courses and teaching with the state curriculum, the basis for MCAS test questions. According to a 2001 report by the Massachusetts Education Reform Review Commission, which monitors the reform’s implementation and reports to lawmakers, 57 percent of administrators surveyed said that in the last five years their schools spent a higher percentage of the budget on curriculum and instruction than ever

before.⁴¹ That news is encouraging to some skeptics who traditionally question whether additional funding sent to schools makes it into the classroom.

Educators have been required to focus on material and skills their students must master to be successful on the MCAS. Because of the required changes, educators have needed additional training. And although many districts complain that they desperately require more targeted staff development to help teachers address MCAS, more than three-quarters of administrators surveyed in the reform commission's study said their professional development budgets have increased since the reform act passed. Even so, last year state officials found that in 1998-99 more than a third of the state's school districts spent less on teacher training than state law requires. More than two-thirds failed to include enough money in their budgets for teacher training the following year. Architects of the 1993 reform law deemed teacher training so critical they made it the only specific area in which districts had to spend a certain amount.⁴² Little evaluation has been done on what effect training paid for with reform money has had on teaching quality and student achievement.

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Data from MCAS results also offer useful guidance for teachers who wish to track their students' progress and devise strategies to reach the underperforming students. The MCAS results were intended to give educators detailed information about their students' progress and to help them decide where to plug holes in their programs. A study by the Massachusetts Education Reform Review Commission examined whether the test has lived up to that promise. "School and district administration and staff are analyzing, distributing, and studying student achievement data in ways and toward purposes that were rare only a few years ago," the report said. "Based on this work, they are also making significant changes in the areas of curriculum, instruction, assessment, and allocation of resources."⁴³ Teachers are using the information to identify students' strengths and weaknesses and gaps in the curriculum, as well as sharing teaching strategies with each other more than ever before, the report found. But some teachers complain that valuable time is lost because schools do not receive most of the data until the fall – after a new school year has already begun.

MCAS critics say that kind of feedback is not necessarily helpful. The emphasis on the MCAS test, they say, prompts educators to narrow the material they cover and stifles instructional creativity. Opponents say such a system breeds "teaching to the test," and "drill and kill" in classrooms. Research on the effect high-stakes testing has on teaching quality is scarce. But anecdotally some teachers have said they feel limited in what they can do in the classroom. Others, such as Reitzell in Worcester, say the test has reinforced the importance of requiring students to do higher-level activities, such as writing. And some MCAS supporters say teaching to the test is fine, because unlike some states' tests, the MCAS requires

students to demonstrate much more than basic skills.

Low test scores are also prompting tough questions for districts about possible grade inflation and promotion of students who lack grade-level skills. When a student with a record of good grades fails the MCAS, what does that say about standards in that district? What does it say about that student? And finally, what does it say about the test? “The fact that there are high stakes has certainly brought attention to problems, such as social promotion, which is certainly something I’m not in favor of,” said Dan Adams, a teacher for 31 years and chairman of the math department at Brockton High School, where 64 percent of tenth graders failed the math test in 2000. “But the administration of it is driving us all nuts.”⁴⁴

Despite the disappointing MCAS results and complaints about the test, some say reform is beginning to bring a slow but dramatic shift in education thinking. “There is a cultural change it has wrought,” said Reville, chairman of the Massachusetts Education Reform Commission and one of the pioneers of education reform. “Now we’re saying trying hard is necessary but it’s not sufficient. What counts is: Is anybody learning anything?”⁴⁵ The burden falls on schools, which the state has only rated once for their MCAS scores. Critics say it is not fair to subject students to a graduation requirement before the state has put in place a solid, stable accountability system for schools. “At the 11th hour it appears we’re already to run pell-mell toward student accountability and embrace that and visit the consequences on the kids, but we haven’t been willing to do it for adults,” Reville said. “We’re doing it backwards.” Those who favor pushing ahead with the graduation requirement say the state cannot afford to delay the part of education reform that they hope will force real change in schools.

Rating system questioned

In January 2001, the state released the first set of school ratings – and immediately drew scorn from critics. Many said the rating system was confusing and hard for the public to digest. In some cases, some of the state’s top-performing schools received an “F” from the state for “failing to meet” expectations.

The state Department of Education assigned two separate ratings to each school based strictly on MCAS scores. First, it placed schools in one of six categories, from “critically low” to “very high,” based on the percentage of students performing at the proficient and advanced levels and the percentage who failed the test. For the second label, the state considered improvement in scores over the previous two years. Schools where large numbers of students had failed the test in previous years were expected to make large gains. Those in which most students performed better were expected to make smaller improvements.

But the system’s credibility came into question when some of the state’s top public schools in wealthier districts – such as as Harvard, Newton, and Wellesley – received “Fs.” They had performed so well in previous years that boosting scores higher was nearly

impossible. For a school rated “high-performing,” but also “failing to meet expectations,” some parents could not help but ask whether they should be delighted or alarmed. Critics note that if parents cannot understand the ratings, then their usefulness as a mechanism to pressure schools to improve is dubious.

The bottom line, critics say, is that the school rating system is flawed because it is too narrow and does not include other factors in a school’s appraisal, such as dropout rates and attendance.

But supporters of the ratings system contend that a single label is overly simplistic, given the wide array of demographics in schools. They say the rating system forces all schools to improve, not just those at the bottom. And, they argue, it gives credit to schools that struggle to educate students in challenging circumstances.

Furthermore, top education officials say it makes sense to prevent wealthier districts from getting complacent. “I think it’s possible we may be discovering some of these schools aren’t as good as they think,” said Peyser, the state Board of Education chairman and top education advisor to Governor Swift. “Reform improvement isn’t only for the low-performing schools.”⁴⁶ Still, Peyser acknowledges that the system might have selected better rating terms and dispensed with grades like “F” for failing to meet expectations.

Adding to the controversy is the fact that the question of how schools will be held accountable – and by whom – has taken some time to nail down. Only a few months before the 2000 ratings were released, then-Governor A. Paul Cellucci and legislative leaders created the Education Management Audit Council (EMAC), a new entity independent of the Department of Education, to examine schools. That board is headed by Peyser, who said the state department will continue to release school ratings every other year. But beginning in January, the EMAC will conduct district-level evaluations that will consider other data besides the MCAS.

But as of early fall, the group had not decided how it would select which districts to evaluate, how many it would try to evaluate, or even what sanctions or rewards could result from the evaluations. “We’re having discussions about doing things that should have been done five years ago,” said Roosevelt, the former lawmaker who serves on the group. “It’s embarrassing.”⁴⁷

Officials are also still discussing what steps the state should take in cases in which schools’ MCAS scores indicate they’re in serious trouble. “It’s not clear what the consequences of an accountability system are,” Peyser said. Under the law, the state could go as far as to take over schools that are chronically underperforming, but Peyser says examples of takeovers in other states are not encouraging. In 2000, the state labeled a handful of schools “underperforming” based on their MCAS scores and follow-up visits by state intervention teams.

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State's part in reform

Some critics say the state itself is largely to blame for the lack of student success on the MCAS so far. The state was late in adopting and distributing new curriculum frameworks, which are intended to guide instruction. The state also has continued to tinker with the curriculum frameworks in the past few years. "Teachers are trying to put into place curricula and methods that align with the state's new educational goals," wrote Reville, chairman of the Massachusetts Education Reform Review Commission. "But when the state keeps changing the goals, districts can be left holding the bag, having just invested in new curricula, methods and texts to match the then current frameworks ... The danger is that this process will cause the districts to ignore state goals, which may be regarded as highly temporary and unreliable."⁴⁸ The result has been frustrating to teachers. "It's almost like tap-dancing on quick sand," said Gorrie, the president of the Massachusetts Teachers Association.⁴⁹

Meanwhile, some say the state Department of Education has not played a strong enough role in assisting districts, largely because the agency is woefully understaffed. "The idea has been the state would step in and push," said former Representative Roosevelt. "The state has not done that."⁵⁰

The Department of Education has held workshops for principals and teachers and worked with a handful of the worst districts. It has also helped some districts apply for grants for MCAS remediation. But as the disappointing MCAS scores continue to roll in, more and more schools are asking for guidance.

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But given its current resources, the state's Department of Education cannot possibly provide the sort of technical assistance or research schools want. The department's staff had dropped from about 1,000 positions in 1980 to roughly 325 at the time the Education Reform Act was passed in 1993, according to a study conducted by researchers at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst for the Education Reform Review Commission. The architects of education reform envisioned a larger state role, but "there have been few additional resources devoted to building the state's implementation capacity," according to the report. The study found that the lack of resources at the department have "posed major challenges for the implementation" of the 1993 reform.⁵¹

More than 95 percent of new state spending from the Education Reform Act has been funneled through the department to local districts, leaving little for state-level oversight of the act, according to the report.

The department's budget squeeze also keeps the state from fulfilling one of the critical

tenets of reform, according to the report. “Because of limited resources, the state accountability system emphasizes oversight of a few schools that appear to have the most egregious problems, rather than the education reform principle of continuous improvement for all schools in the Commonwealth,” the report said. Driscoll, the education commissioner, agreed with the report’s conclusions and said that his department has struggled to respond to all of the districts’ requests for help. In 1993, the state focused on funneling new money to the districts, he said, but over time schools wanted more assistance than the state had originally planned.⁵²

But some MCAS supporters question the premise of the report, arguing that the state’s job is not to tell districts how to improve. “I think there’s a misunderstanding of the role of the Department of Education,” Peyser said. “The report assumes the department contains answers to the mystery of effective education ... The Department of Education will not fix this problem. The department will not drive education reform.”⁵³ Peyser and others say the state should set standards and give schools money to reach them – but then allow the districts to develop their own approaches to reach the goals.

Looking ahead

Facing the specter of a massive number of students being denied diplomas, policy-makers are scrambling to find ways to avoid that political nightmare. From the Board of Education, to original reform leaders, to Governor Swift, policy makers are putting forth ideas to cut the failure rates.

The state Board of Education may create an appeals process that would allow students with good grades but failing MCAS scores to show they have mastered MCAS material in some way other than passing the test.⁵⁴ The board might give students extended testing time, a different test setting, or someone to read the questions aloud.

The board delayed making the science and history MCAS tests part of the graduation requirement. And in January the board said students would have five chances to pass the tenth-grade MCAS and could take retests that left out the hardest questions. Some in education circles have criticized that decision, saying easier retests might not ensure that students know the math and reading they should. Making the test easier could make students less eager to try, knowing they can pass the less rigorous version later, warned William Guenther, president of Mass Insight Education, a public policy group that supports testing in schools. “The concept of targeted testing makes a lot of sense, but only if it is done right,” he said. “How they are going to design a retest that will focus on assuring a minimum level of skills without making it easier is the question.”⁵⁵

But others say the move makes sense, because the original test is designed partly to gauge if a student is performing at high levels. By taking out the more difficult questions, and adjusting upward the percentage of points students must attain to pass, some state officials say retests would measure more accurately whether a student is passing. “Some

students who are capable of the 220 get caught up in the hard questions,” Peyser said.⁵⁶ The Board of Education also might approve an MCAS alternative that “may be different from the pencil and paper test we’re giving now,” Driscoll told the *Boston Globe*.⁵⁷ “Let’s say a kid can demonstrate, with a hands-on approach, his knowledge of geometric concepts,” he said. “If he can demonstrate it in another way, we should at least explore that.”

Governor Swift has outlined a list of additional proposals, some requiring legislative approval. Swift recently proposed giving \$1,000 grants to families of students who repeatedly fail the MCAS and do not get the help they need at school. (The money could be used for outside tutoring or test preparation classes.) Swift also wants students who have failed MCAS but met all other graduation requirements to get post-high school MCAS tutoring at the state’s community colleges.⁵⁸

Reville and other education reform backers, including some business leaders, now say the state should consider phasing in the graduation requirement if large numbers of students continue to fail. They call for allowing districts to give local diplomas – as opposed to state-endorsed ones that carry more clout – to students who fail the MCAS but meet other graduation requirements. Each district could award a certain number of the local diplomas, based on the percentage of students who have failed the test. Every year that number would decrease, but after five years districts would no longer have the option.⁵⁹ Reville says that would give schools and students more time to realize the benefits of reform, but without abandoning the graduation requirement or the MCAS as a measurement.

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Roosevelt said he is leery of retreating from the graduation standard in any way but said it might come to that. “I would wait until the last minute to buckle,” he said, adding that the local diploma is probably “the best of all bad ideas.” “You have to convince superintendents and districts that this is not going away.”⁶⁰

But some have issued strong warnings against creating a two-tiered system of diplomas, even temporarily. “If we open this door to nowhere, we are simply perpetuating the old corrupt bargain for more years and more kids – and we risk never being able to close that door in the future,” wrote Mass Insight’s Guenther. “How have we helped the students without skills in English and math by giving them a second class local diploma that implies they have basic skills in these subjects when they don’t? This makes explicit the double standard we have implicitly accepted in the past, and eliminates much of the pressure to solve the real problem at hand: helping every child develop the skills they need to succeed in today’s world.”⁶¹

Peyser, the chairman of the state Board of Education, agrees. “Once you create a second tier, you’re giving license to the schools and the students to wipe their hands and say, ‘We’re done with these kids.’”⁶²

A more likely scenario may be delaying the requirement for all students while schools continue working to bring up performance. But so far support for the current plan remains

strong among the state's most powerful education policy makers. Governor Swift, Senate President Thomas F. Birmingham, and House Speaker Thomas M. Finneran have all said the state should stay the course, as have the superintendents in Boston, Worcester, and Springfield. They argue that it does not make sense to change the graduation requirement before the 2001 results are in.

Officials are also anxious to see the results of the retests, the first of which will be given in December. "What we really want to do is see this thing through as far as we can in hopes that in doing so we'll get the vast majority of kids over the bar. If we find ourselves in 2003 and we really haven't made much progress and there are just thousands and thousands of kids who aren't going to cut it, I think we'll have to reevaluate at that time," Peyser said. "This isn't a mutual suicide pact, but by the same token if we do anything to weaken the standard prematurely I think we do real damage to the kids we're trying to help."

About the author

Michele Kurtz is a freelance writer who lives in Cambridge and writes regularly for *The Boston Globe*. Before moving to the Boston area in March 2001, she was a staff writer for the *Austin American-Statesman*, where she covered state education and the Texas Legislature. In her eleven years as a journalist, she has also worked for the *Raleigh News & Observer* and the *Pensacola News Journal* and written about education for both newspapers. She graduated from Indiana University in 1991.

Notes

Quotations of interviewees are noted for just the first reference.

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⁵ Mark Roosevelt, former Massachusetts state representative, interview, August 21, 2001.

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