

Part III. Standards-Based Reforms

If state funding is one pillar of MERA, then the other major component is standards-based reform. MERA committed the state to a complex, interdependent system of standards, assessment, and accountability, with aspects affecting students, educators, schools, and districts.

1. *How do the various pieces fit together?*

The following table summarizes the status of the major standards elements contained within MERA.

Common Core of Learning	
<i>Summary</i>	<i>Status</i>
<p>Section 29 of MERA directs the state to establish “a set of statewide educational goals for all public elementary and secondary schools in the Commonwealth” As a starting point for standards development, the Board and Department developed the “Common Core of Learning,” which consisted of three broad sections:</p> <p><i>Thinking and Communicating</i> (key learning skills, including reading/ writing, math, arts, technology, and complex problem-solving)</p> <p><i>Gaining and Applying Knowledge</i> (key content: literature & language, math/science/technology, social studies/history/ geography, visual & performing arts, and health)</p> <p><i>Working and Contributing</i> (key societal skills, including study and life skills, knowledge of careers, personal responsibility, and civic engagement)</p>	<p>The Commission on the Common Core of Learning worked from September 1993 through June 1994. During the process, the Commission conducted hearings involving approximately 50,000 Massachusetts residents and received input from over 15,000. The final version of the document was released in 1994. In the mid-to-late 1990s, a revamped Board of Education focused more extensively on the Curriculum Frameworks in specific subject areas. The Common Core of Learning is no longer distributed by the Department of Education.</p>

Curriculum Frameworks	
<i>Summary</i>	<i>Status</i>
<p>MERA authorizes the Board of Education to direct the Commissioner of Education to institute a process for producing curriculum frameworks in the core subjects (specified as mathematics, science and technology, history and social sciences, English, foreign languages, and the arts). The curriculum frameworks are the standards that must guide and inform</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) teaching and learning, 2) professional development, and 3) certification and evaluation, <p>against which student, teacher, school and district performance are intended to be assessed and held accountable.</p> <p>The Frameworks have become the linchpin of MERA implementation, providing a common foundation for such previously separate areas as local curriculum, student assessment, and teacher preparation program approval.</p>	<p>Framework committees, including classroom teachers and other direct educational practitioners, developed frameworks in 7 areas (see below) by 1997. Several proved contentious, and all have been revised since. DOE now states that “each of the curriculum frameworks will always be considered as works in progress, and we will continue to refine them to strengthen them and to keep them current.” Some practitioners have complained that the “moving target” of framework revisions has made local curriculum/textbook decisions problematic.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • English Language Arts: Released 1997; Revised 2001 • Mathematics: Released 1996; Revised 2000 • Science, Technology, & Engineering: Released 1996; Revised 2001 • History and Social Science: Released 1997; Revised 2002 • Foreign Languages: Released 1996; Revised 1999 • Arts: Released 1996; Revised 1999 • Health: Released 1996; Revised 1999

Student Assessment System	
<i>Summary</i>	<i>Status</i>
<p>MERA requires the Board to adopt a student assessment system “designed both to measure outcomes and results regarding student performance, and to improve the effectiveness of curriculum and instruction.” The law also requires “comprehensive diagnostic assessment of individual students” to be conducted “at least in the fourth, eighth, and tenth grades.” These diagnostic assessments “shall identify academic achievement levels of all students in order to inform teachers, parents, administrators and the students themselves, as to individual academic performance.” MERA specifies that the assessment system should 1) employ a variety of assessment instruments, 2) be criterion-referenced³⁰, and 3) as much as practicable, include consideration of work samples, projects and portfolios.</p>	<p>The “Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System,” or MCAS, has been developed and administered, with four performance levels: advanced, proficient, needs improvement and warning/failing. Results have been reported in English Language Arts, Mathematics, History and Social Science, and Science, Technology, and Engineering in the following grades in the following years:</p> <p>1998: English Language Arts (Gr. 4, 8, 10) Mathematics (Gr. 4, 8, 10) Science, Technology, & Engineering (Gr. 4, 8, 10)</p> <p>1999: English Language Arts (Gr. 4, 8, 10) Mathematics (Gr. 4, 8, 10) Science, Technology, & Engineering (Gr. 4, 8, 10)</p> <p>2000: English Language Arts (Gr. 4, 8, 10) Mathematics (Gr. 4, 8, 10) Science, Technology, & Engineering (Gr. 4, 8, 10) History & Social Science (Gr. 8)</p> <p>2001: English Language Arts (Gr. 3, 4, 7, 8, 10) Mathematics (Gr. 4, 6, 8, 10) History & Social Science (Grade 8)</p> <p>2002: English Language Arts (Gr. 3, 4, 7, 10) Mathematics (Gr. 4, 6, 8, 10) Science, Technology, & Engineering (Gr. 5, 8)* History & Social Science (Gr. 5*, 8)</p> <p><i>* Only student-level item analysis is reported for this test</i></p> <p>Portfolio assessment has not been used in assessment of regular-education students.</p>

³⁰ A criterion-referenced assessment is one in which student performance is evaluated against an absolute standard, in contrast to a norm-referenced assessment, which ranks students’ performances in comparison to each other.

Competency Determination	
<i>Summary</i>	<i>Status</i>
<p>MERA establishes a competency determination—a minimum performance level on core academic subjects to be required for graduation from high school.</p>	<p>The competency determination (state graduation requirement) was originally envisioned to require a “proficient” score in four core content areas: English, math, science, and history/social science. The Board of Education reduced this requirement to a “needs improvement” level in two content areas, English and math, in 1999. This level of performance is currently scheduled to be a graduation requirement beginning with the Class of 2003.</p>

Certificate of Advanced Mastery	
<i>Summary</i>	<i>Status</i>
<p>MERA establishes a certificate of advanced mastery (CAM) to recognize academic achievement comparable to advanced students in other countries.</p>	<p>Criteria for the Stanley Z. Koplik CAM awards were approved by the Board in 2000. The CAM is given to students for outstanding performance on assessment tests in addition to success in competitions and student publications. To be eligible to apply for the award, students are required to score in the advanced category on one of the 10th grade MCAS exams, and to score in at least the proficient category on the other exam(s) with scaled scores. Any student who meets the basic requirements may submit an application to the Department of Education, listing two additional qualifying accomplishments, at least one of which needs to be an AP or SAT II test score. 860 students received CAMs in 2000, and an additional 1,859 did in 2001. Recipients who enroll in a Massachusetts public college or university receive a merit-based four-year tuition waiver from the Board of Education, a value of approximately \$700-\$1,700 per year, if they maintain a minimum grade point average of 3.3.</p>

Certificate of Occupational Proficiency	
<i>Summary</i>	<i>Status</i>
<p>MERA establishes a certificate of occupational proficiency (COP) to recognize comprehensive education and training in a particular trade or professional area comparable to advanced students in other countries. Recipients must pass the state competency determination as well as demonstrate strong occupational training.</p>	<p>Proposed standards have been developed by committees of educators, practitioners and representatives of business and industry. Standards were adopted for automotive service technology, cosmetology, culinary arts, & horticulture in 2001, however, the process for students to obtain a COP based on these standards has yet to be developed. To date, no students have received COPs.</p> <p>Proposed standards for carpentry/cabinetmaking, electronics, graphic communications, and marketing were released for public comment in June, 2002. Once these standards are approved by the Board, the Department will use them along with the four that the Board adopted in 2001 as the basis for developing occupational assessments for the Certificate of Occupational Proficiency.</p>
Integrated Academic and Vocational Standards	
<i>Summary</i>	<i>Status</i>
<p>MERA directs the Board to set standards that integrate academic and vocational education.</p>	<p>Other than the requirement that all vocational students pass the competency determination in English language arts and mathematics, academic and vocational education efforts have proceeded largely separately, with most emphasis placed on academic performance in MCAS-assessed areas. Vocational education and career education efforts have been consolidated in the DOE “school-to-career” cluster; the position heading this cluster is currently vacant.</p>

School and District Accountability	
<i>Summary</i>	<i>Status</i>
<p>MERA directs the Board of Education to “adopt a system for evaluating on an annual basis the performance of both public school districts and individual public schools” and requires that the accountability determinations be based on the results of the state student assessment. The Board is to “establish regulations defining when a school or school district has chronically failed to improve the educational program provided to students served by the school or district,” approve districts’ remedial plans for under-performing schools, declare a school to be “chronically under-performing” if it does not demonstrate significant improvement according to its remedial plan within 24 months after the plan’s approval, and designate a receiver to take a district over when it is chronically under-performing. The Commissioner of Education is also directed to provide technical assistance to schools or districts that have been designated as under-performing.</p>	<p>Adult accountability has lagged behind the student assessment component. Largely because MCAS was not administered until 1998, the Board of Education did not approve accountability regulations until late in 1999. Consequently, the most serious accountability sanctions included in MERA have not yet been used. Also, between 1997 and 2000, four different state entities (the State Auditor, the Education Management and Accountability Board, the Program Quality Assurance office within DOE, and the Board of Education) took responsibility for evaluating district compliance with MERA. In the spring of 2001, a new Education Management Audit Council, chaired by James Peyser (also the Board of Education chair and education advisor to Acting Governor Jane Swift) and housed in the Governor’s Office, took charge of the “accountability” function of Education Reform. The Accountability and Targeted Assistance cluster of DOE kept responsibility for assisting under-performing schools. To date, 8 schools and no districts have been declared under-performing on the basis of student performance.</p>

Educator Certification Standards	
<i>Summary</i>	<i>Status</i>
<p>Under MERA, lifetime certification was replaced by two stages of certification—initial and professional—and by required renewal of the highest stage every five years based on completing a specific number of Professional Development Points (or credits). MERA also required that educators seeking certification must pass written tests of communication and literacy skills and of subject matter knowledge, the latter based upon the content in the curriculum frameworks.</p>	<p>In addition to holding a bachelor’s degree in arts or sciences, completing a state-approved program, and being of “sound moral character,” successful candidates for initial teacher licensure now must also pass the Massachusetts Tests for Educator Licensure—a general communication and literacy skills test and the appropriate subject matter test for each license sought. Massachusetts’ statewide summary pass rate for 1999-2000 was 81%. Pass rates for most institutions have increased since the first administration of the tests in April 1998. Standards and requirements leading to improved pass rates have been implemented at different rates by different teacher preparation institutions. Although these are licensure tests, over half of the teacher preparation institutions have begun to require their candidates to pass one or more of these tests prior to either entry, student teaching, or exit from their programs. Revised teacher licensure regulations were approved for public comment by the Board in June 2002, with expected revision and approval in the fall of 2002.</p>

2. What are others saying about Massachusetts standards and assessments?

Achieve, Inc. evaluation of Massachusetts standards and MCAS.

Achieve, Inc.³¹, an independent, bipartisan, standards-research organization that emerged from the 1996 National Education Summit, published a 2001 evaluation of the state’s K-12 mathematics standards and 10th-grade MCAS tests in English language arts and mathematics. The commonwealth’s English language arts K-12 standards were not analyzed because “Achieve believes these are already among the best standards in the nation and uses them as ‘exemplary standards’ against which other states’ standards are compared.”³² Achieve’s findings were as follows (quoting from the 2001 report):

³¹ As of 2001, Achieve had analyzed the policies and expectations of 10 states and was working with seven others.

³² *Measuring Up: A Report on Education Standards and Assessments for Massachusetts*, Achieve, Inc., October 2001.

Results for Massachusetts – from Achieve, Inc. 2001 report

Massachusetts has made substantial progress in developing and implementing two essential components of standards-based reform—strong standards and assessments that measure what the standards expect. The major findings:

- **Overall, Massachusetts’ standards and high school tests are of high quality and are aligned, providing a solid foundation on which to build state education policy.** The grade 10 MCAS tests are rigorous and generally well aligned with the standards, ensuring that students are required to demonstrate important knowledge and skills before graduating from high school. While the mathematics standards are not without shortcomings, which are discussed in more detail below, overall these expectations represent an articulate statement of what students should know and be able to do, at least at a minimum, by the time they complete high school. (The English language arts standards, as noted above, previously have been judged among the strongest in the country.) Importantly, this sets Massachusetts apart from the other nine state standards and assessment programs that Achieve has reviewed—it is the only state that has both strong standards and strong assessments.
- **The grade 10 tests are rigorous yet reasonable—and are, in fact, the most challenging of the exit-level tests Achieve has reviewed.** The MCAS tests measure the important knowledge and skills demanded by the standards, are technically sound, encourage high levels of performance, and provide a template for effective classroom instruction. And releasing all common items each year is an exemplary strategy that enhances not only educational practice, but also the credibility of the state’s educational improvement efforts. Many students should be able to pass these tests by the end of the 10th grade, and it is reasonable to expect that the other students, given sufficient curriculum and teaching support, should be able to meet the standards by the end of high school. Students who perform below the “needs improvement” level likely have a minimal level of skill and will need intensive instructional support to achieve the minimum standards.
- **The mathematics standards generally are well organized, jargon-free, clear and precise.** The standards embody reasonable minimum-level criteria for student competency and are generally comprehensive. However, the standards should be strengthened by placing more emphasis on developing students’ conceptual understanding of mathematics. Also, they are not yet as challenging as standards from Japan, Arizona, or Achieve’s Mathematics Achievement Partnership, of which Massachusetts is a founding partner state.

Recommendations for Moving Forward

As Massachusetts moves forward in implementing its system for standards-based educational improvement, Achieve recommends that the state consider two improvements in particular:

- **The MCAS high school tests include relatively minor flaws that should be fixed in subsequent rounds of testing. For example, the math test emphasizes some standards at the expense of others, and the English language arts test needs more treatment of nonfiction.** The MCAS mathematics test measures important content that all high school students should be responsible for knowing, yet it can be improved further. Achieve found a number of mathematics test items ostensibly designed to assess number concepts that instead more directly measure algebra standards; this has the effect of weighting the test more heavily toward algebra and omitting some advanced number concepts. Also, while the test is generally well constructed, the balance of items does not provide adequate coverage for all of the important knowledge and skills detailed in the standards. The state should ensure that items assessing numbers and data analysis are appropriately challenging on the next edition of the MCAS mathematics test.

The language arts test is rich and rigorous, but it focuses too much on literature. All students should be

exposed to a deep and engaging literary curriculum, but they also should learn how to read and interpret informational texts, such as historical documents, scientific journal articles, and technical manuals. And, the state should consider varying the 10th-grade writing prompt from year to year to assess students' skills in producing different kinds of compositions, rather than just literary analyses. By giving short shrift to students' abilities to work with informational texts, the test does not evaluate the full range of skills students need to participate meaningfully in the emerging "knowledge economy."

- **The mathematics standards should require more rigor and depth, attention to and emphasis on mathematical reasoning, and a sharper focus on essential content at each grade level.** At the middle and high school levels, students will need to be held to higher expectations to be fully prepared for success in college and high-performance workplaces. While Achieve acknowledges that many Massachusetts schools and students are struggling to meet the state's current standards—and these students will need intensive academic support in the short run—over time, as long-term changes in teacher recruitment, preparation and professional development begin to take effect, the state should raise the rigor of the mathematics standards. In the immediate future, the state may wish to publish companion materials to the mathematics standards that include numerous sample problems and activities and descriptions of how educators can build students' conceptual understanding of mathematics and reasoning ability.

American Federation of Teachers (AFT) analysis of standards systems.

The American Federation of Teachers released *Making Standards Matter* in 2001. This report includes a state-by-state analysis, in terms of standards, curriculum, assessments, accountability, and developing a coherent system.

With the exception of elementary social studies (since revised), Massachusetts standards were found to be "clear and specific" at the high school, middle school and elementary level in English, math, science and social studies. In curriculum, the report found the Commonwealth to have "learning continuums and instructional strategies" for all subjects at all levels, with the exception of elementary social studies (p 82). The state also received high marks for supplying performance indicators for all subjects. With regard to assessments, the report found English, math and science to be aligned with standards at all three levels (elementary, middle school and high school), and in social studies to be aligned with standards at all levels except elementary.

Overall, AFT determined the system to be "nearly coherent" with the following recommendations on how to make it more coherent.

Massachusetts has addressed many of the vital elements [for a coherent system]; now it needs to make sure they are all working together.

1. The elementary social studies standards need to pay more attention to civics.
2. The elementary social studies test needs to be aligned with the standards.
3. Missing curriculum components need to be developed [math and science instructional resources and lesson plans in all subject areas].
4. Students who are struggling to meet the standards must receive extra academic assistance to get them back on track. (AFT, p 83)

The AFT report suggests that current grant remediation programs and local decision-making power about academic support for struggling students are not enough, and that academic assistance and funds should be required by the state for all students who are not meeting the competency standards.

Education Week’s *Quality Counts*.

In its annual, state-by-state report card on education reform, *Quality Counts*, Education Week gives letter grades to the 50 states in several areas, based upon a variety of criteria. In the area of standards and accountability, Massachusetts received a “B+” rating in 2001 and an “A-” rating in 2002. Three states received “A” ratings in 2002 (Kentucky, Maryland, and New York), with three others receiving “A-” ratings (Florida, Illinois, and Louisiana).

Thomas B. Fordham Foundation report on state standards.

In 1998 and 2000, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation released “The State of State Standards.” In the 2000 publication the Massachusetts standards were reviewed and given an overall grade of “B-.” (The curriculum frameworks reviewed in the Fordham report have been updated since the release of this report, but it may still be useful to see the comments and grades on the frameworks as they existed at the time.)

Thomas B. Fordham Foundation Massachusetts 1998 and 2000 Standards Report Card³³

Subject	1998	2000	Year of Curriculum Framework Reviewed	Updated Release
English	A	A	1997	2001
History	B	B	1998	2002
Geography	D	D	1998	
Math	F	D	1997 Guide	2000
Science	C	A	1998 Guide	2001

The English Curriculum Framework is highlighted in another Fordham publication as the best English standard in the nation.³⁴ With regard to math, the reviewer felt the guide released in 1997 that supplemented the initial framework clarified some of the guidelines and in general improved the framework. In science, the supplementary guide also improved the framework and “many of the problems are quite good and the assessment material does clarify the Framework.” The English and History frameworks had not changed since the 1998 review and so the same review applied.

Report of the Technical Advisory Committee for the Massachusetts Tests for Educator Licensure (MTEL)

MERA included testing for licensure of educators as part of a comprehensive, standards-based system for improving teaching and learning. To fulfill the original scope of the licensure testing program, DOE appointed a Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) in Spring 2001 to review information, materials, and procedures used by the testing contractor, National Evaluation Systems (NES). The TAC was charged with reviewing the technical quality (validity, reliability, and other performance characteristics) of the Massachusetts Tests for Educator Licensure (MTEL) program

³³ Finn, C & Petrolli, M. (2000) “The State of State Standards 2000” Thomas B. Fordham Foundation available at <http://www.edexcellence.net/library/soss2000/2000soss.html>.

³⁴ Thomas B. Fordham Foundation (2000) “The Best State Standards” retrieved on 10/15/02 from <http://www.edexcellence.net/topics/standards.html#anchor1092003>.

Part III. STANDARDS-BASED REFORMS

and providing DOE with a written report. The committee made the following statement about Massachusetts' teacher test:

The effort on which Massachusetts is embarking is no small task and clearly affirms its commitment to improved teacher training as a major part of its systemic reform effort. We recognize that there is no assumption that licensure tests will, by themselves, raise the performance of Massachusetts public school students. However, such tests are an essential component of the total reform effort. In our professional opinion, the Massachusetts teacher licensure testing program is a strong, sustainable, psychometrically sound, and essential component of that reform effort.³⁵

³⁵ SOURCE: Report of the Technical Advisory Committee for the Massachusetts Tests for Educator Licensure (MTEL), p. 1

3. The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS)³⁶

What are the state testing requirements?

MCAS was implemented in response to the Education Reform Law of 1993, which required that MCAS be designed to:

- test all public school students across the Commonwealth, including students with disabilities and students with limited English proficiency;
- be administered annually in at least grades 4, 8, and 10;
- measure performance based on the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks learning standards;
- report on the performance of individual students, schools, and districts; and
- serve as one basis of accountability for students, schools, and districts.

What is tested on the MCAS?

MCAS assesses students’ learning against common standards that are specified in the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. MCAS was first administered to students in the 4th, 8th and 10th grade in the spring of 1998, when students in these grades took English Language Arts and Mathematics tests. Since that time, additional grades and content areas have been added, as the table below indicates.

TABLE 3.1: 2001 MCAS TESTS ADMINISTERED

2001 MCAS Tests Administered by Grade Level							
Content Area	Grade Level						
	3	4	5	6	7	8	10
Reading	▲						
English Language Arts		▲			▲	▲	▲
Mathematics		▲		▲		▲	▲
Science and Technology/Engineering			▲			▲	
History and Social Science			▲			▲	▲

³⁶ Adapted from MA DOE website http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/overview_faq.html#faq5

What types of questions appear on the MCAS?

MCAS uses a variety of types of questions to assess student knowledge and skills:

Multiple-choice questions

- used in all content area tests
- students select an answer from four options

Short-answer questions

- used in Mathematics tests only
- students generate a brief response, for example, a short statement or computation leading to a numeric solution

Open-response questions

- used in all content area tests
- students create a one- or two-paragraph response in writing or in the form of a narrative or a chart, table, diagram, illustration, or graph, as appropriate

Writing Prompts

- used in English Language Arts tests only
- students write a composition based on the writing prompt, which may relate to a reading passage

How are the student answers scored?

Over 6 million student responses are scored by professional scorers employed by the testing contractor and by Massachusetts teachers who have been specifically trained. All open-response answers are scored by professional scorers only. Writing compositions are scored by Massachusetts teachers at Summer Scoring Institutes which have been held since 1998.

Responses to the open-response questions are scored using a scoring guide, or rubric. MCAS scoring guides indicate what knowledge and skills students must demonstrate to earn 1, 2, 3, or 4 score points. Students' compositions are evaluated on two criteria: topic development, based on a 1-6 score point scale, and standard English conventions, based on a 1-4 score point scale.

How are test results reported?

Student scores on the MCAS range from a low of 200 to a high of 280. Results are reported for individual students, schools, and districts according to four performance levels defined by the Board of Education (see “Scoring Categories”³⁷). To be considered passing, students must obtain a score in at least the “needs improvement” range—220 or higher.

Scoring Categories—Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS)²⁶

ADVANCED (260-280) - Students at this level demonstrate a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of rigorous subject matter, and provide sophisticated solutions to complex problems.

PROFICIENT (240-260) - Students at this level demonstrate a solid understanding of challenging subject matter and solve a wide variety of problems.

NEEDS IMPROVEMENT (220-240) - Students at this level demonstrate a partial understanding of subject matter and solve some simple problems.

WARNING/FAILING (200-220) - Students at this level demonstrate a minimal understanding of subject matter and do not solve simple problems.

Are all students required to participate?

The Education Reform Act of 1993 requires the participation of all public school students in grades being tested. The intent of this requirement is that all students should be provided with an opportunity to learn the material covered by the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. All public school students in grades being tested are required to participate, including students:

- in charter schools
- in institutional school programs
- in educational collaboratives
- receiving publicly funded special education in private schools
- with disabilities who either have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or receive Section 504 instructional accommodations
- who are limited English proficient (unless they have been enrolled in United States schools for three or fewer years AND are ineligible for the Spanish-language version of MCAS)

Home-schooled students are not enrolled in the public school system and are therefore not required nor entitled by law to participate in MCAS. After MCAS has been fully implemented, the Department of Education plans to consider whether and under what circumstances it is feasible to

³⁷ Massachusetts Department of Education “General Performance Level Definitions” retrieved from website [http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/mcaspld.html] on June 12, 2002.

permit privately educated students, including those being home-schooled, to participate in the MCAS testing program if they wish do so.

How are test results used?

MCAS results have multiple intended uses:

- **Improvements in teaching and learning**—Parents and students can use the results to monitor students’ progress. Local educators can use the results to help identify strengths and weaknesses in curriculum and instruction.
- **Student accountability**—Beginning with the Class of 2003, students will be required to pass the MCAS grade 10 tests in English Language Arts and Mathematics as one requirement for a high school diploma. Students will be given multiple opportunities, if necessary, to pass the tests. Students must also meet local requirements for high school graduation—for example, completion of required coursework.
- **School and district accountability**—The Board of Education has established standards for performance for schools and districts that improve or fail to improve student academic performance, as required by MERA.

What happens if 10th-graders don’t pass the MCAS?

Passing the MCAS in English language arts and mathematics will be a graduation requirement for the class of 2003. Therefore, the 2001 assessment of 10th-graders in the Class of 2003 represented the first “high-stakes” administration of the MCAS. Students in the 10th grade who do not pass the MCAS have five opportunities to re-take and pass the MCAS.

Students who fail the MCAS in the spring are able to take a “focused retest” version in the fall. The focused retest maintains the same 220-level achievement standard as the original test, but it strips out the higher-level questions required for proficient and advanced standing and replaces them with additional competency-level questions. The first retest was administered in the fall of 2001. Ideally, students failing the full test would be able to take the focused re-tests each time. However to date this has not occurred—students who still need to pass the MCAS after the fall retest are given an opportunity to take the full (not focused) test in the spring with the 10th graders.

Originally the Board of Education determined that students who failed the 10th-grade MCAS upon their first attempt would have four opportunities to re-take and pass the test prior to graduation. To this point, 10th-graders who do not meet the competency determination are able to take the test four times. However, if the current timeline for results (early fall) is followed, students taking the test for the fourth time in the spring of their senior year will not have the results of the test in time to determine eligibility for a high school diploma.

TABLE 3.2 : CLASS OF 2003 MCAS ADMINISTRATION DATES

Testing Dates	Type of Test	Scores Released
Spring 2001	Full MCAS test	Fall 2001
Fall 2001	Focused Re-test	Spring 2002
Spring 2002	Full MCAS test	Fall 2002
Fall 2002	Focused Re-test	Scores not yet released
Spring 2003	Full MCAS test	
June 2003	<i>Class of 2003 Scheduled to Graduate</i>	

Students who take the re-test a fifth time will not receive their scores, and thus know their graduation status, until after graduation day if the current trend in reporting scores persists. (To date, scores for the spring test administration have not been reported until the following fall.) This potentially will make it difficult for 12th-grade spring retest-takers to make plans regarding higher education and employment.

What options are available for post-12th graders who have not passed the MCAS?

If Massachusetts is to maintain the expectation that all students can reach common standards, post-12th grade pathways will be an important vehicle for ensuring that the system can accommodate student needs, in terms of both time and resources. As of the publication of this report, no programs, policies, or resources have been finalized for solving this looming challenge. Currently, students without a high school diploma or equivalency (e.g., GED) are not eligible for federal financial aid programs. The Board of Higher Education has called for transitional solutions to be developed for the classes of 2003 and 2004. Options under discussion include MCAS remediation in community colleges, district-based MCAS remediation programs, and GED preparation programs.

4. The Accountability System

MERA gives the Board of Education the authority to declare a school or district chronically under-performing and allows the state to intervene in schools or districts found to be chronically under-performing.³⁸ Ideally, a system would be developed to hold the adults in the education system accountable for providing children with the opportunity to learn prior to children being held accountable for learning. However, in Massachusetts, “adult accountability” has lagged behind the student accountability represented by the MCAS and its use as a graduation requirement.

MERA requires that accountability determinations be based on the results of the state student assessment. Largely because MCAS was not administered until 1998, the Board of Education did not approve student achievement-based accountability regulations until late in 1999. With limited

³⁸ Chapter 69 Sections 1J and 1K of the Massachusetts General Laws

resources, the state accountability system has emphasized 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.

Compounding the resource problem, several state-level organizations have claimed roles in accountability, producing overlapping mandates and inter-agency conflict. In 1997 then-Governor Weld established the Education Management Audit Board (EMAB) by Executive Order 393. At least three other state entities, including the Department of Education, also had accountability roles between 1997 and 2000. EMAB, which primarily resided within the Department of Revenue, was established as an independent entity (outside of the DOE) mandated to conduct audits of schools and school districts in order to understand and verify the use of MERA funds as they align with MERA objectives. Twenty-three out of 372 operational districts were audited by EMAB in 1999 and 2000 (Massachusetts Department of Revenue, 2001). By December of 2000 approximately 6% of the operational school districts and the adults in these districts within Massachusetts had been audited.

EMAB was dismantled in December of 2000 and replaced by the Education Management Audit Council (EMAC), which, like EMAB, is a governor-appointed board that oversees the “Commonwealth’s system of school and district accountability.” Chaired by the Governor’s Advisor on Education, James Peyser (also the Chair of the Board of Education), EMAC consists of five members and oversees the Office of Educational Quality and Accountability (EQA).³⁹ By law, EMAC’s mandate is to:

- Establish and review the annual goals for EQA,
- Review and approve the protocols for the audit and inspection of schools and districts,
- Review school and district audit/inspection findings, and
- Make recommendations to facilitate the improvement of schools to the governor, board of education, general court, and local school committees.

Still in its infancy, the EMAC board and its EQA office are phasing in their responsibilities. EMAC has developed draft indicators for auditing and inspecting school districts. The EQA piloted an audit in two school districts in fiscal year 2001. Future plans are for a three-tiered analysis of districts, including detailed analysis of 60 districts per year, as follows:

- **Tier 1** – an analysis of all districts’ MCAS data at the district and school level by gender, race/ethnicity, English proficiency and trends for a three-year period. These results would be combined with other information on the district and presented in an Annual Report on Student Progress for School Districts in Massachusetts.
- **Tier 2** – based on the MCAS data, 60 districts (approximately 15 high-achieving and 45 under-achieving) would be selected for closer review. Districts could also submit non-MCAS information, such as scores on other tests or portfolios of student work.
- **Tier 3** – on-site visits to the 60 districts. The visiting teams will be 5 people, including experts in assessment, finance and asset management, leadership and governance, curriculum

³⁹ Statutory authority of EMAC, EQA and its predecessor is found in Section 55A of Chapter 15 of the Massachusetts General Laws.

Part III. STANDARDS-BASED REFORMS

and instruction, and student academic services. The visits will last from 5-8 days and generate a written report.

Under current and planned practices, schools can be declared “under-performing” based upon MCAS data and site visits. Between 2000 and Spring 2002, eight schools have been declared under-performing out of 32 visited. Massachusetts is also one of 15 states that have the authority to take over and reconstitute a school. However, no schools have been reconstituted because of MCAS test results since the passage of MERA.

TABLE 3.3: MERA “ADULT ACCOUNTABILITY” SUMMARY STATISTICS

School Accountability	# of Schools	% of Total	Total #
Total #of schools selected for review	32	1.7%	1903
Reviewed in 2000	8		
Reviewed in 2001	12		
Reviewed in 2002	12		
Type of School			
Secondary Schools	2	0.6%	318
Middle/Jr. High Schools	26	9.2%	282
Elementary Schools	3	0.2%	1270
k-8/other configurations	1	3.0%	33
Public (non-charter) Schools	31	1.7%	1862
Charter Schools	1	2.3%	43

TABLE 3.3: MERA “ADULT” ACCOUNTABILITY SUMMARY STATISTICS (CONTINUED)

School Accountability	# of Schools	% of Total	Total #
-----------------------	--------------	------------	---------

Schools within District Income Category⁴⁰:

Category 5 (50% + students eligible for free or reduced lunch)	23	71.9%	32
Category 4 (24-49% students eligible for free or reduced lunch)	8	25.0%	32
Categories 2-3 (less than 24% students eligible for free or reduced lunch)	0	0.0%	32

Post-Review Status

Under-performing	8	25.0%
Under Review	15	46.9%
Not Under-performing	9	28.1%

District Accountability	# of Districts	% of Total	Total #
-------------------------	----------------	------------	---------

Total Number of Audited Districts	25	6.7%	372
Number of Districts Audited by the Education Management Audit Board (EMAB) 1999-2000	23	6.2%	372
Reviewed in 2002 (EMAC and EQA)	2	.5%	372

Districts Audited by District Income Category:

Category 5 (50% + students eligible for free or reduced lunch)	4	40.0%	10
Category 4 (24-49% students eligible for free or reduced lunch)	5	10.0%	50
Category 3 (11-23% students eligible for free or reduced lunch)	5	5.0%	101
Category 2 (5-10% students eligible for free or reduced lunch)	7	7.5%	93
Category 1 (less than 5% students eligible for free or reduced lunch)	4	5.5%	73

In fiscal year 2002, the EMAC/EQA budget was cut from \$3.5 million to \$2.5 million⁴¹ by the legislature, diminishing the ability for EMAC and EQA to implement the state’s adult accountability plan beyond the FY2001 school-district audit pilots. As it stands now, the adult accountability

⁴⁰ The total adds up to 31, because the district income categories do not include charter schools. One charter school was visited in 2002.

⁴¹ Gehring, J. “Swift Work Helps Get Massachusetts A Budget” *Education Week* Dec 12, 2001.

system is still in the planning and pilot phase, while the student accountability system (MCAS) is high-stakes for the class that will be graduating in 2003.

Compass Schools

Another aspect of the school accountability system in Massachusetts is the identification of exemplary schools, identified by the DOE Targeted Assistance Office as Compass Schools. The Compass School program is intended to recognize and celebrate improvement in Massachusetts schools, and to facilitate the sharing of information on promising practices and effective strategies. Compass Schools receive special recognition and a \$10,000 grant to support the participation of their administrators and staff in information sharing and dissemination activities over the next year.

In Spring 2002, 175 schools were invited to apply based on significant improvement in student performance on MCAS tests in English Language Arts and Mathematics. Eighty-four schools completed applications describing the improvement initiatives they had implemented over the past four years that they thought were having the most positive impact on student achievement. Eighteen finalist candidates were selected for visits by a review panel, and 15 were selected: 6 high schools, 2 middle schools, and 7 elementary schools. Compass schools for 2002-2003, the second year of the program, are:

- Balliet Elementary School (Springfield Public Schools)
- Bentley School (Salem Public Schools)
- Brighton High School (Boston Public Schools)
- Brockton High School (Brockton High School)
- Clyde Brown Elementary School (Millis Public Schools)
- Cobbet Elementary School (Lynn Public Schools)
- East Bridgewater High School (East Bridgewater Public Schools)
- Frank M. Sokolowski School (Chelsea Public Schools)
- Fuller Middle School (Framingham Public Schools)
- Methuen High School (Methuen Public Schools)
- Norrback Avenue School (Worcester Public Schools)
- Richard J. Murphy School (Boston Public Schools)
- Somerset High School (Somerset Public Schools)
- Uxbridge High School (Uxbridge Public Schools)
- Veterans Memorial Middle School (Melrose Public Schools)