

MCAS / PARCC Discussion
Commissioner Mitchell Chester
October 19, 2015

Our September discussion along with the substantial public input that we have received has helped me to hone my thinking about the recommendation that I will be making to you for our November MCAS-PARCC decision. While we purposefully designed a decision timeline that would allow Massachusetts to have two years' experience with PARCC before deciding the future of our assessment system, over the past several months I increasingly have been concerned that in our effort to gather both deep and broad analysis and perspective on MCAS and PARCC, it could be easy to lose the forest for the trees. There is the danger that substantial and extensive input, sometimes contradictory, can lead to decision paralysis wherein the status quo becomes the default position. It is my goal to pull us out of the trees so that we can appreciate the forest.

Three core understandings have emerged for me:

- 1) current MCAS has reached a point of diminished returns in terms of driving more ambitious curriculum, instruction, and learning;
- 2) in important ways, PARCC is a substantial advancement over MCAS in terms of a) elevating expectations for student performance, b) signaling more ambitious curricular and instructional expectations of our schools, c) providing a more engaging assessment experience, and d) aligning with expectations of colleges and employers; and
- 3) the path we take must ensure that Massachusetts ultimately controls our testing program.

I've been thinking about 2 doors -- #1, MCAS or #2, PARCC. I'm now exploring Door #3 – MCAS 2.0.

I will spend a minute or two on each of these three understandings.

Current MCAS and the point of diminished returns

MCAS has served the Commonwealth well. I can't imagine that the success of the last two decades – as Massachusetts's K-12 achievement has reached the tops among states and competitive internationally – would be possible without a high quality assessment that provides feedback on student, school, district, and state achievement and progress. In 2015, MCAS was administered for the 18th year. MCAS was a terrific 20th century assessment. We have better

understandings now than one or two decades ago about learning progression in mathematics, text complexity and the interplay of reading and writing, and the academic expectations of higher education and employers.

Now that we have the benefit of two decades of experience and we have upgraded our learning expectations (curriculum frameworks and content standards), it is time to upgrade our assessments to a new generation. As we look to the Commonwealth's next generation assessment, we have the opportunity to build on these understandings. Perhaps my greatest concern about continuing with MCAS as it exists now is that we have reached a point of diminished returns. The time I spend in schools as well as the considerable attestations we have heard from many educators and citizens have led me to realize that, too often, the response to MCAS is instruction designed to teach students to succeed on the test rather than instruction designed to meet the learning standards.

Started down MCAS 2.0 path in 2008 – performance-based components, online

PARCC is a substantial advancement over MCAS

Able to access USDE funding to build PARCC – now have 2 years results – over \$100 M in development -- MA leadership & imprint

As our discussion today and tomorrow will illustrate, in important ways PARCC sets a higher bar than MCAS for student performance. This is particularly true as students move up the grades into middle and high school. This higher bar is not simply about being harder. At least equally important is that PARCC provides more opportunity for critical thinking, application of knowledge, research, and connections between reading and writing. As I travel the Commonwealth, I see more and more schools that are upgrading curriculum and instruction to be consistent with our 2010 frameworks, which in turn are represented in the PARCC assessments. At this point, the effort I am observing – and that you have heard testimony regarding – is not about succeeding on the test, but rather, about aligning curriculum and instruction to the expectations for critical thinking, application of knowledge, research, and connections between reading and writing.

As well, the online experience is a qualitatively different assessment experience than taking a paper-and-pencil test. The online environment is a more engaging experience (students prefer the online environment by almost a two to one margin); the introduction of video and audio increases accessibility for many students, not least of all English language learners; and the online setting mirrors the digital world that is ubiquitous in students' lives and futures. Finally, the PARCC development effort we have been involved in is designed to assess our updated

understanding of learning progressions in mathematics, text complexity and the interplay of reading and writing, and the academic expectations of higher education and employers.

Ensuring the Commonwealth's control of our standards and assessments

Public comment, as well as the Board's discussion, have helped me to understand the importance of ensuring the Commonwealth's control over our standards and assessments as we move forward. While Massachusetts has exercised a leadership role among the consortium states, any path forward to MCAS 2.0 that includes PARCC must be a direction over which we control.

To be confident that a course that involves PARCC is one in which we exercise ultimate agency over the direction of the Commonwealth's assessment program, I am considering a new model – Door #3 – that takes advantage of our access to PARCC development in the construction of MCAS 2.0. This is a model that exists – Louisiana.

Path that involves our own contractor. PARCC as starting point for MCAS 2.0 allows us to move faster, start further along toward MCAS 2.0.