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Mitchell D. Chester, Ed.D.
Commissioner

MEMORANDUM

To: Members of all advisory councils to the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education

**From: Mitchell D. Chester, Ed.D.
Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education**

Date: November 3, 2008

Subject: Charge to the Advisory Councils, 2008-2009

When I came to Massachusetts this past May, I already knew that the state's public school students were among the highest performing in the nation. We ranked or tied for first on all four reading and math exams on the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), our SAT scores rose in 2008 at a time when results nationally were relatively flat, and our annual MCAS results showed continued overall progress.

But as data outlined in this memo will show, we still face two major challenges: Overcoming an achievement gap and an expectations gap. In this memo I will detail some noteworthy data, outline the challenges ahead, map out the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education's goals and priorities and describe my charge to the Board's 17 Advisory Councils.

Noteworthy Data

The evidence has convinced me that the Commonwealth's investment in education and commitment to a reform agenda focused on standards and results has yielded major dividends for all students.

No statistic better reflects this outcome than the 2008 grade 10 MCAS results. In 2002, the average score for white students and those from middle and upper income families was barely in the Proficient range, while the average score for students of color and students from low income families was 15 to 20 points below Proficient.

Scores have risen steadily since then: In 2008 the average score for white and middle income students is 15 to 20 points above Proficient; the average score for minority or low income students is at or close to Proficient.

Overall the 2008 results reflect both progress and areas where we need to sharpen our focus. Math results in every grade tested reached the highest levels we have seen in the history of the

state's assessment program, but English language arts (ELA) results in the elementary grades declined slightly and were flat in middle school.

Statewide 80 percent of students in the class of 2010 have passed the ELA, Math and Science exams required for a high school diploma. In all, 93 percent passed the ELA exam, 88 percent passed the Math exam, and 83 percent passed the exam in Science and Technology/Engineering (STE). Of those who passed all three exams, about 60 percent scored Proficient or above on the ELA and math exams. The remaining students will be required to complete an Educational Proficiency Plan prior to graduation.

Under the federal accountability system established under No Child Left Behind, the state is required to assess schools annually based on their progress toward moving all students to Proficient by 2014. Each school is required to meet an annual performance target in the aggregate and for all subgroups in both ELA and Math.

Districts and schools that fail to meet their targets in ELA and/or mathematics in the aggregate or for any of their subgroups for two or more consecutive years receive an accountability status and are required to take steps to focus efforts on improving student performance. Districts and schools face consequences that grow in intensity each year they remain on the list.

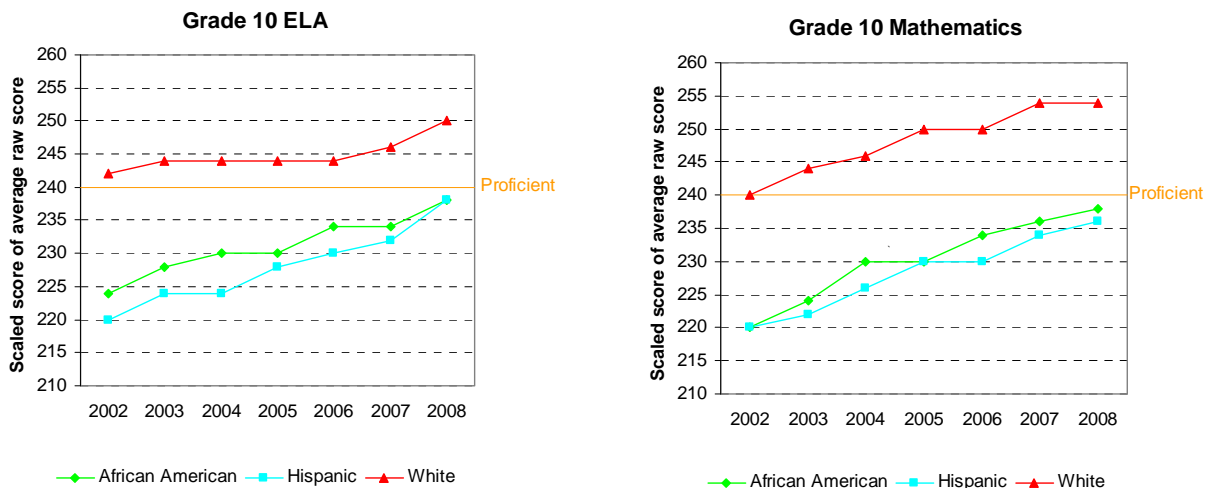
This year's results show that 50 percent of all Massachusetts public schools have been identified for improvement, corrective action, or restructuring under the federal accountability system.

It is important to note that we do not take the accountability status of any school or district lightly. That said, we do not consider them to be failures. Across the Commonwealth are examples of districts and schools that have not met their federal targets but are still clearly making progress and are moving in the right direction.

According to the preliminary 2008 results, 88 districts (23 percent) and 828 schools (50 percent) are on the state's 2008 list of districts and schools in need of improvement because they did not make AYP for two or more consecutive years. The 828 schools are spread across 243 districts. In 2007, 82 districts (21 percent) and 672 schools (approximately 37 percent) received an accountability status by not meeting performance or improvement targets.

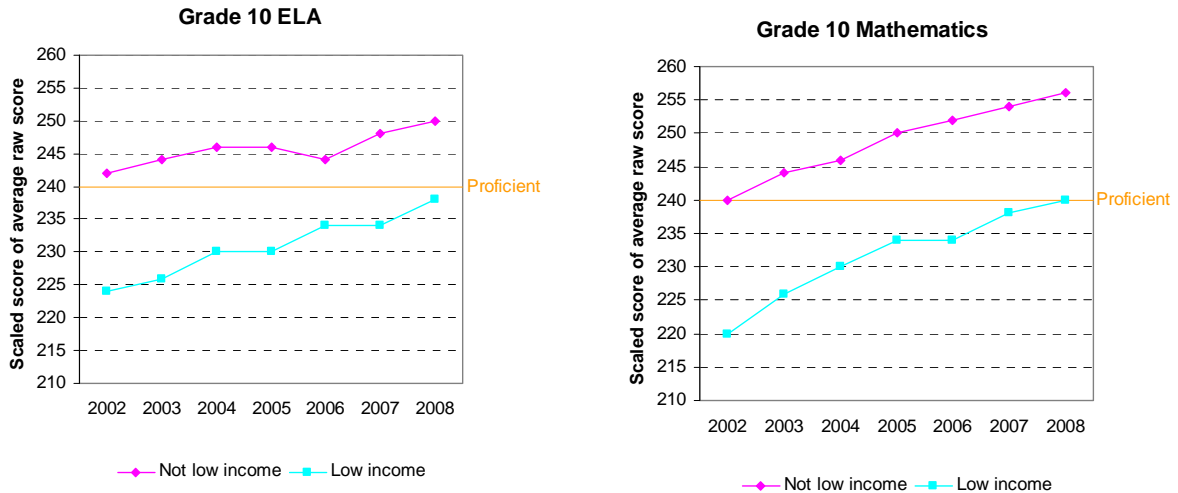
Challenges Remain

Grade 10 MCAS Performance, 2002 to 2008: Race and ethnicity



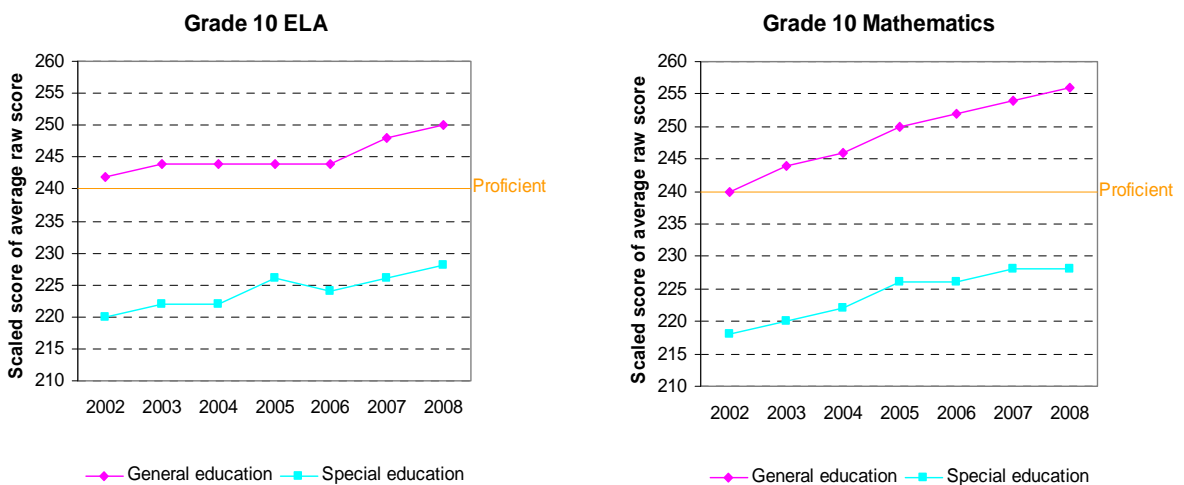
- At grade 10, the performance differences between white and African American and Hispanic students have declined, more so on ELA than on mathematics.
- The performance of African American and Hispanic students on the grade 10 ELA and mathematics exams has improved, and both groups are now performing near Proficient on average.

Low income status



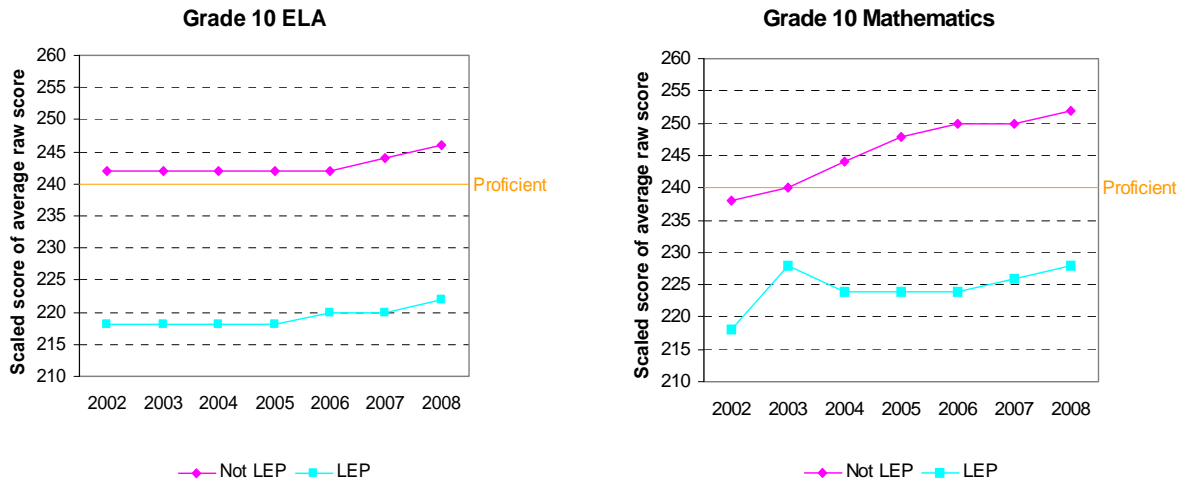
- Grade 10 students classified as low income have also improved substantially since 2002. They are now scoring near Proficient on ELA and at Proficient on mathematics.
- Performance gaps have narrowed on both exams but are smaller on ELA than mathematics.

Special education



- Special education students improved by 10 scaled score points on both the ELA and mathematics exams and are now performing at about the same level on both tests.
- Gaps between special education and general education students have held constant on ELA and increased in mathematics.

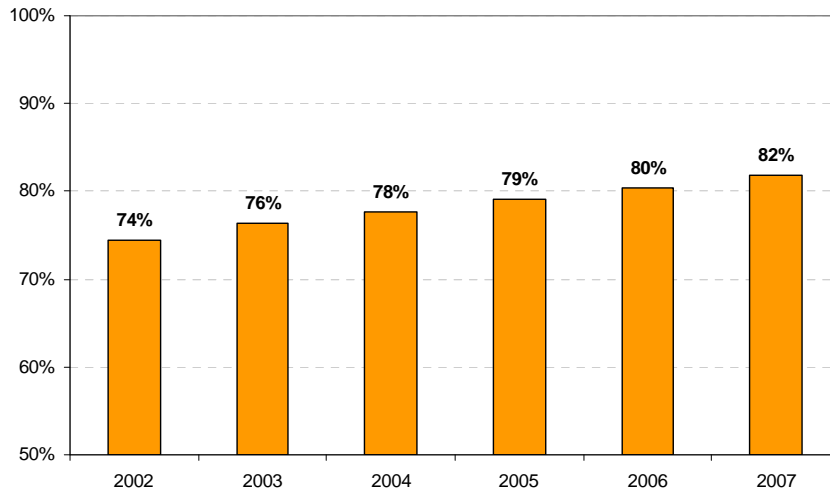
Limited English proficient students



- Grade 10 LEP students have seen greater improvement on mathematics than ELA between 2002 and 2008.
- Performance gaps have remained constant in ELA and grown in mathematics.

Our achievement gaps are moderate to large compared to other states, but performance is high. For instance, on grade 4 NAEP there is a 25 point gap between Massachusetts African American and white students, about average nationwide. Yet African Americans in Massachusetts perform second-highest nationwide. Similar patterns exist for Hispanics and low-income students.

College-Going and Success Rates



As this chart illustrates, the percentage of our graduates going on to a 2- or 4-year college has risen from 74 percent in 2002 to 82 percent in 2007.

Where our expectation gap is seen is in the data on students leaving high school and going on to college.

For instance, college outcomes for the Class of 2005 show:

- 33% of the high school Class of 2005 (about 19,000 students) enrolled at a Massachusetts public institution of higher education in fall 2005. Of those students:
 - 30% enrolled at a UMass campus
 - 25% enrolled at a state college
 - 45% enrolled at a community college

- 37% took at least one remedial (developmental) course in their first semester. Of that total:
 - 29% took remedial math
 - 11% took remedial reading
 - 15% took remedial writing

State Board and Commissioner's Working Goals and Priorities, 2008-2010

The Board and senior staff held a retreat this summer to focus our work over the course of the next couple of years. The following were established to guide our work.

- **Educator Development:** Work in partnership with key stakeholders to establish an effective educator workforce development system, including recruitment, preparation, licensure, license renewal, induction, mentoring, supervision, evaluation, and career enhancement.
- **Curriculum and Instruction:** Work in partnership with key stakeholders to build capacity of schools and districts to provide high quality curriculum and instruction for all students and prepare them for college and careers.
- **Accountability Redesign:** Work in partnership with stakeholders to develop the processes for district and school review and assistance that will produce an efficient, integrated, transparent, fair, and effective system for building the capacity of districts and schools to ensure high level teaching and learning.
- **Supports for Students and Families:** Work in partnership with stakeholders to provide students and families with access to the school- and community-based social, health, nutrition, and other supports they need to benefit from educational opportunity.
- **State Leadership and Operations:** Organize and build capacity within the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to assist schools and districts.

Our work will also be informed by two major initiatives:

Task Force on 21st Century Skills

Last spring Secretary Reville convened a Task Force on 21st Century Skills to assist the Board in considering how to infuse 21st century learning into the work of the state's public schools. Specifically, the Task Force was asked to recommend how the Board might supplement its work on standards, assessments, accountability, curriculum, professional and teacher development to signal educators across the Commonwealth that 21st century skills should be infused into the curriculum.

The Task Force on 21st Century Skills was charged with: reviewing the literature on 21st century skills; making recommendations on how 21st century skills can be integrated into or used as a supplement to the state's existing educational program; identifying appropriate standards, assessment and accountability components as well as curriculum, professional and teacher development that will lead to successful inclusion of 21st century skills; and preparing a white paper to assist the Board in giving further consideration to these issues. The report is expected at the November Board meeting.

The Governor's Readiness Project

The Governor in June issued the Readiness Final Report: Ready for 21st Century Success The New Promise of Public Education outlining a short term and long vision to meet the challenges of international competition, an outdated curriculum, a stubborn achievement gap, inadequate external supports, an education workforce crisis and a century-old system. The four readiness goals are:

- To transform public education in the Commonwealth, we must meet the learning needs of each student and provide the understanding, encouragement, support, knowledge and skills each requires to exceed the state's high expectations and rigorous academic standards.
- To transform public education in the Commonwealth, we must ensure that every student is taught by highly competent, well-educated, strongly supported and effective educators.
- To transform public education in the Commonwealth, we must prepare every student for postsecondary education, career and lifelong economic, social and civic success.
- To transform public education in the Commonwealth, we must unleash innovation and systemic change throughout the Commonwealth's schools, school districts, colleges and universities as well as in the partnerships and collaborations among education institutions, communities, businesses and nonprofits.

Charge to the Advisory Councils

Your feedback and input will be invaluable to us as we move forward in our work, and we thank you in advance for your commitment and dedication to public education in the Commonwealth.

My charge to you today is to focus your work this year on the challenges facing us all:

- Use the talent and expertise you have within your council to make suggestions for closing the achievement gap and the expectation gap
- Make suggestions on relevant aspects of:
 - The Board's and Commissioner's Working Goals and Priorities
 - The Board's Task Force on 21st Century Skills recommendations, and/or
 - The Governor's Final Readiness Report recommendations

Given the Commonwealth's current fiscal conditions, I ask that you limit your meetings to four this year, unless you are specifically asked to meet more frequently. Annual reports should be submitted to the Department **no later than June 30, 2009.**