

Alternate Assessment
for Students with Disabilities



*MCAS Alternate Assessment:
Summary of 2001 and 2002
State Results*

Massachusetts Department of Education
November 2002



Massachusetts Department of Education

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Commissioner's Foreword

Dear Interested Parties:

I am pleased to present you with a summary of the performance of students with significant disabilities who participated in MCAS through the MCAS Alternate Assessment. This report provides a comparison of statewide results in 2001 and 2002 for students who took alternate assessments in order to indicate the progress being made by these students, as well as to identify challenges in providing these students with the same educational opportunities and benefits as other students.

The alternate assessment is an annual collection of student work samples, instructional data, and other products organized into a portfolio in the content area for which the student was scheduled for statewide assessment. IEP Teams determine how each student will participate in MCAS, either by taking standard MCAS tests with or without accommodations, or through an alternate assessment. When the IEP Team determines that a student is unable to take standard MCAS tests in a particular subject, even with accommodations, he or she must participate in an MCAS Alternate Assessment.

It is important and necessary that all students with significant disabilities participate in MCAS and that their results be reported publicly. When results on these statewide assessments are visible in school, district, and state reports, there is a greater tendency to provide students with disabilities the resources and instruction that holds them to higher standards and expectations. The MCAS Alternate Assessment monitors the annual performance of these students on state standards in a way that is both meaningful and appropriate, and provides parents and teachers with vital information on improving their education.

Sincerely,

David P. Driscoll
Commissioner of Education

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MCAS Alternate Assessment Summary of 2001 and 2002 Results

State Report

Background

The MCAS Alternate Assessment (MCAS-Alt) was administered statewide for the first time in 2001. According to state and federal laws, all students with disabilities are required to participate in statewide assessments, either by taking the test with or without accommodations, or through an alternate assessment. Alternate assessments are intended for a very small number of students who are unable to take MCAS tests, even with accommodations, due to the nature and complexity of their disability(ies). Decisions as to *how*, not whether, a student participates in MCAS are made by a student’s IEP Team and must be documented in his or her IEP.

The MCAS Alternate Assessment consists of a portfolio of work samples and data collected throughout the school year on the student’s performance on skills and content described in the learning standards in the Massachusetts *Curriculum Frameworks*. Additional information on MCAS Alternate Assessments can be found in the *2003 Educators Manual for MCAS Alternate Assessment* available on the Department’s web page at www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/alt. Participation in alternate assessment has remained steady at about 1% of all students scheduled for assessments across grades 3-10 (see Table 1 below).

“Massachusetts is leading the way in the assessment and reporting of students with significant disabilities who require alternate assessments. The strength of their MCAS-Alt program is the direct result of strong state leadership, and participation in the development process by parents, educators, and community members.”

-Dr. Martha Thurlow,
Director, National Center on Educational Outcomes,
University of Minnesota

Table 1. Participation in MCAS Alternate Assessment

	All Students Tested by MCAS	Students with Disabilities Tested by MCAS	Students who took MCAS-Alt	Percent of All Students who took MCAS-Alt	Percent of Students with Disabilities who took MCAS-Alt
2001	521,748	77,172	4,975	0.95	6.5
2002	526,614	78,675	5,286	1.0	6.7

Over the past five years, the Department has maintained a contract with Measured Progress, a private, not-for-profit firm specializing in development and implementation of statewide alternate assessments.

Scoring Student Portfolios

Portfolios were scored during each of the last two summers by certified Massachusetts educators and licensed related-service providers who were recruited by the Department for their experience in conducting alternate assessments and their familiarity with adapting general education curriculum for this student population. Scorers were trained by Department staff and other national experts in the field of alternate assessment and were continually monitored for their ability to score portfolios accurately and consistently. Scorers were also expected to “qualify” in order to score actual student portfolios. All grade 10 portfolios were scored by at least two qualified scorers, as were 25% of portfolios from other grades, with the remainder scored by one scorer.

Beginning in 2001, MCAS Alternate Assessment scores were reported to parents, schools, and districts in each content area for which the student took an alternate assessment. Numerical scores were provided to schools and parents in the following areas of the state’s scoring rubric (see Table 2 on page 5):

- ◆ *Level of Complexity* (i.e., alignment with and level of difficulty of learning standards addressed by the student)
- ◆ *Demonstration of Skills and Concepts* (i.e., accuracy of the student’s performance)
- ◆ *Independence* (i.e., assistance given to the student in the form of cues and prompts)
- ◆ *Self-Evaluation* (decision-making, self-monitoring, and reflection by the student)
- ◆ *Generalized Performance* (i.e., use of different contexts and instructional approaches)

In addition, overall performance was reported at the following *performance levels* in each content area on the *MCAS Alternate Assessment Parent/Guardian Report*, the *School Roster*, and the *District Roster*:

- ◆ *Awareness*: The student demonstrates *very little understanding* of learning standards in the Massachusetts *Curriculum Frameworks* in this content area.
- ◆ *Emerging*: The student demonstrates a *simple understanding of a limited number* of learning standards in the Massachusetts *Curriculum Frameworks* in this content area, and addresses these *below grade-level expectations*.
- ◆ *Progressing*: The student demonstrates a *partial understanding of some* learning standards in the Massachusetts *Curriculum Frameworks* in this content area, and addresses these *below grade-level expectations*.
- ◆ *Needs Improvement*: The student demonstrates a *partial understanding* of subject matter in the Massachusetts *Curriculum Frameworks* in this content area *at grade-level expectations* and solves some simple problems.
- ◆ *Proficient*: The student demonstrates a *solid understanding* of challenging subject matter in the Massachusetts *Curriculum Frameworks* in this content area *at grade-level expectations* and solves a wide variety of problems.
- ◆ *Advanced*: The student demonstrates a *comprehensive and in-depth understanding* of subject matter in the Massachusetts *Curriculum Frameworks* in this content area *at grade-level expectations* and provides sophisticated solutions to complex problems.

“MCAS-Alt provides a way to showcase the accomplishments of my students. The process has led to true participation in the general curriculum. My expectations are now higher, my teaching better, and my students more successful, involved, and excited about their own learning”

-Massachusetts special educator

Portfolios were given a score of *Incomplete* when at least two of three required strands in a content area do not contain information sufficient to allow a scorer to provide a score for those materials in that rubric area.

Reporting Results

There are many reasons for including the results of students who take alternate assessments in the MCAS reports for all students, among them to:

- ◆ promote higher standards and expectations for students with disabilities at the school in which they receive instruction

- ♦ increase teachers' knowledge of the Massachusetts *Curriculum Framework* learning standards and use of a range of assessment strategies
- ♦ encourage decisions that consider the needs of all students in the school or district, particularly as it pertains to the use of resources
- ♦ meet legal requirements for including these students in assessments and reporting

Results of MCAS Alternate Assessments have been incorporated since 2001 in school and district reports of MCAS results for all students, as the law requires. For students receiving instruction in out-of-district placements, these results are counted in district-level reporting only.

State Graduation Requirement

Beginning with the class of 2003, all Massachusetts publicly-funded students must “pass” the grade 10 English Language Arts and Mathematics assessments by scoring at the Needs Improvement performance level or higher on each test in order to receive a high school diploma. Students have multiple opportunities each year beyond grade 10 to take these tests when they do not score sufficiently well the first time. Likewise, students may use the MCAS Alternate Assessment to satisfy the state’s graduation requirement, by scoring Needs Improvement or better on the grade 10 English Language Arts and Mathematics alternate assessments. To meet the state’s graduation requirement through the MCAS Alternate Assessment, the student must address comparable learning standards at a comparable level of difficulty to a student who passed the grade 10 MCAS tests. They simply need an alternate method to demonstrate the same knowledge and skills. Portfolios may also be resubmitted on an annual basis beyond grade 10 when the student’s IEP Team determines that, by doing so, the student is likely to meet the level of performance required to earn a diploma before they exit school either at, or before, the age of 22. Specific portfolio components required for a student to meet the state’s graduation requirement are described in the *2003 Educators Manual for MCAS Alternate Assessment*.

“When I first heard about the MCAS-Alt, I couldn’t imagine how my students could participate in the standards. Through (Department of Education) trainings and by using the Resource Guide (to the Curriculum Frameworks), my enthusiasm grew. Since incorporating the standards, my teaching has become more creative and exciting, and learning has flourished as a result. We are given additional professional development and resources to assist us and our students, and our classes are given more consideration now that our students’ scores are included in the results of our school.”

-Massachusetts special educator

2001 and 2002 Performance Data

Results from the first two years of administration of the MCAS Alternate Assessment suggest that teachers are becoming more familiar with the process of managing student portfolios, and in designing instruction for their students with significant disabilities that is based on state learning standards. Improvements in student performance are evident, though several challenges remain (see Table 3 on page 6). The following trends in student performance are apparent on MCAS Alternate Assessments after two years:

- ♦ The number of student portfolios that scored at the lowest performance level (Awareness) dropped dramatically from 2001 to 2002, while this number increased in the next higher performance levels of Emerging and Progressing. This may signify that more students are now receiving instruction based on state learning standards, though they also reflect changes in how results were reported in 2002.

In 2001, portfolios at the lowest level of student performance were reported in the Awareness performance level, together with portfolios that contained insufficient documentation, and were therefore unscorable. Of portfolios submitted in 2001, 75% were scored in this lowest performance level. In 2002, however, portfolios at the lowest level were reported as Awareness, while those with insufficient documentation were reported as Incomplete. Only 5% were reported as Awareness in 2002, while 44% were judged to be incomplete. Had these been reported in 2002 as they were in 2001, this would have represented a combined decrease of 26% of portfolios in the lowest performance level from the previous year's results. This indicates that the Department's strong commitment to professional development and teacher support for the alternate assessment has yielded a dramatic rise in the quality of portfolios in the second year of implementation, and an increase in the number of students receiving standards-based instruction that is both challenging and achievable.

- ♦ About one-third of all portfolios (34%) scored Progressing in 2002, compared with 13% in 2001. The number at the Emerging level rose from 12% to 16%. This suggests that, for about half the students taking alternate assessments, they are provided with standards-based instruction (the general curriculum) at a level that is both challenging and achievable.
- ♦ The number of students who scored at Needs Improvement or higher, though increasing slightly, remains low compared with those who attain this level on standard MCAS tests. At grade 10, for example, only 12 students scored Needs Improvement or higher on the ELA and/or Math alternate assessments in each of the first two years. It is to be assumed, however, that many, if not most, students who require alternate assessments are those with significant cognitive impairments who are not yet addressing learning standards at grade-level expectations as is required to score Needs Improvement, Proficient, or Advanced.

Rate and Method of Participation in MCAS

Massachusetts students with disabilities have participated in MCAS in each of the last two years at an average rate of 96-97% (see Tables 4 and 5 on pages 8-9). The number of students who received at least one test accommodation has increased in each of the last four years, indicating that IEP Teams are making determinations that allow an increasing number of students with disabilities to participate in these tests using necessary accommodations rather than taking alternate assessments. The number of students who take alternate assessments remains constant at about 6-8%, or about 1% of the total who participate each year in MCAS. Since implementation of the MCAS Alternate Assessment, a small but significant number of students who were previously excluded from statewide assessments are now able to participate.

Available Resources and Materials

Materials and resources are available to assist teachers, parents, and administrators in understanding the purpose and requirements of the MCAS Alternate Assessment. The Department's *MCAS Alternate Assessment Educators Manual* has been updated annually and given to all teachers who conduct alternate assessments along with Department-sponsored training throughout the year. *The Resource Guide to the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks for Students with Significant Disabilities* (2001) was developed to assist teachers in aligning their instruction with state standards. Other materials and information are available on the Department's alternate assessment web page found at www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/alt.

The Department has also trained a network of teachers who are available to assist colleagues in learning to conduct alternate assessments. Please contact the Department at (781) 338-3625 to obtain additional information and assistance.

Table 2
MCAS Alternate Assessment
RUBRIC for Scoring Portfolio Strands

	1	2	3	4	5
Level of Complexity	Portfolio strand reflects little or no apparent basis on the Massachusetts <i>Curriculum Frameworks</i> learning standards in this subject.	Portfolio strand documents instruction in primarily social, motor, and communication “access skills” within the context of activities based on the Massachusetts <i>Curriculum Frameworks</i> learning standards in this subject.	Portfolio strand documents instruction that addresses Massachusetts <i>Curriculum Frameworks</i> learning standards in this subject at modified levels of difficulty and complexity (i.e., through “entry points”).	Portfolio strand documents instruction that addresses a narrow sample of Massachusetts <i>Curriculum Frameworks</i> learning standards (i.e., one or two) in this subject at grade-level expectations.	Portfolio strand documents instruction that addresses a broad sample of Massachusetts <i>Curriculum Frameworks</i> learning standards (i.e., three or more) in this subject at grade-level expectations.

	M	1	2	3	4
Demonstration of Skills and Concepts	Portfolio strand contains insufficient information to determine a score for Demonstration of Skills and Concepts.	Portfolio strand indicates that student’s performance is primarily inaccurate (0–25% accurate) with minimal understanding of learning standards in this subject.	Portfolio strand indicates that student’s performance is limited and inconsistent with regard to accuracy (26–50% accurate) and understanding in this subject.	Portfolio strand indicates that student’s performance is mostly accurate (51–75% accurate), and demonstrates some understanding in this subject.	Portfolio strand indicates that student’s performance is accurate (76–100% accurate), and demonstrates a high-level of understanding in this subject.
Independence	Portfolio strand contains insufficient information to determine a score for Independence.	Student requires extensive verbal, visual, and physical assistance to demonstrate skills and concepts in this subject (0–24% independent).	Student requires frequent verbal, visual, and physical assistance to demonstrate skills and concepts in this subject (25–49% independent).	Student requires some verbal, visual, or physical assistance to demonstrate skills and concepts in this subject (50–74% independent).	Student requires infrequent assistance to demonstrate skills and concepts in this subject (75–100% independent), and initiates responses under appropriate conditions.
Self-Evaluation	Evidence of self-evaluation (self-correcting, monitoring, goal-setting, and reflecting on performance) does not exist in the student’s portfolio in this subject.	Student infrequently self-corrects, monitors, sets goals, and reflects on performance in this subject (i.e., evidence of self-evaluation exists in only one portfolio strand).	Student occasionally self-corrects, monitors, sets goals, and reflects on performance in this subject (i.e., evidence of self-evaluation exists in two portfolio strands).	Student frequently self-corrects, monitors, sets goals, and reflects on performance in this subject (i.e., evidence of self-evaluation exists in three portfolio strands).	Student self-corrects, monitors, sets goals, and reflects on performance all or most of the time in this subject (i.e., multiple examples of self-evaluation exist in all three portfolio strands).
Generalized Performance		Student demonstrates knowledge and skills in one context (i.e., using one instructional approach) in each portfolio strand in this subject.	Student demonstrates knowledge and skills in two contexts (i.e., using two instructional approaches) in each portfolio strand in this subject.	Student demonstrates knowledge and skills in three contexts (i.e., using three instructional approaches) in each portfolio strand in this subject.	Student demonstrates knowledge and skills in four or more contexts (i.e., using four or more instructional approaches) in each portfolio strand in this subject.

Table 3
 Performance Levels on MCAS Alternate Assessments

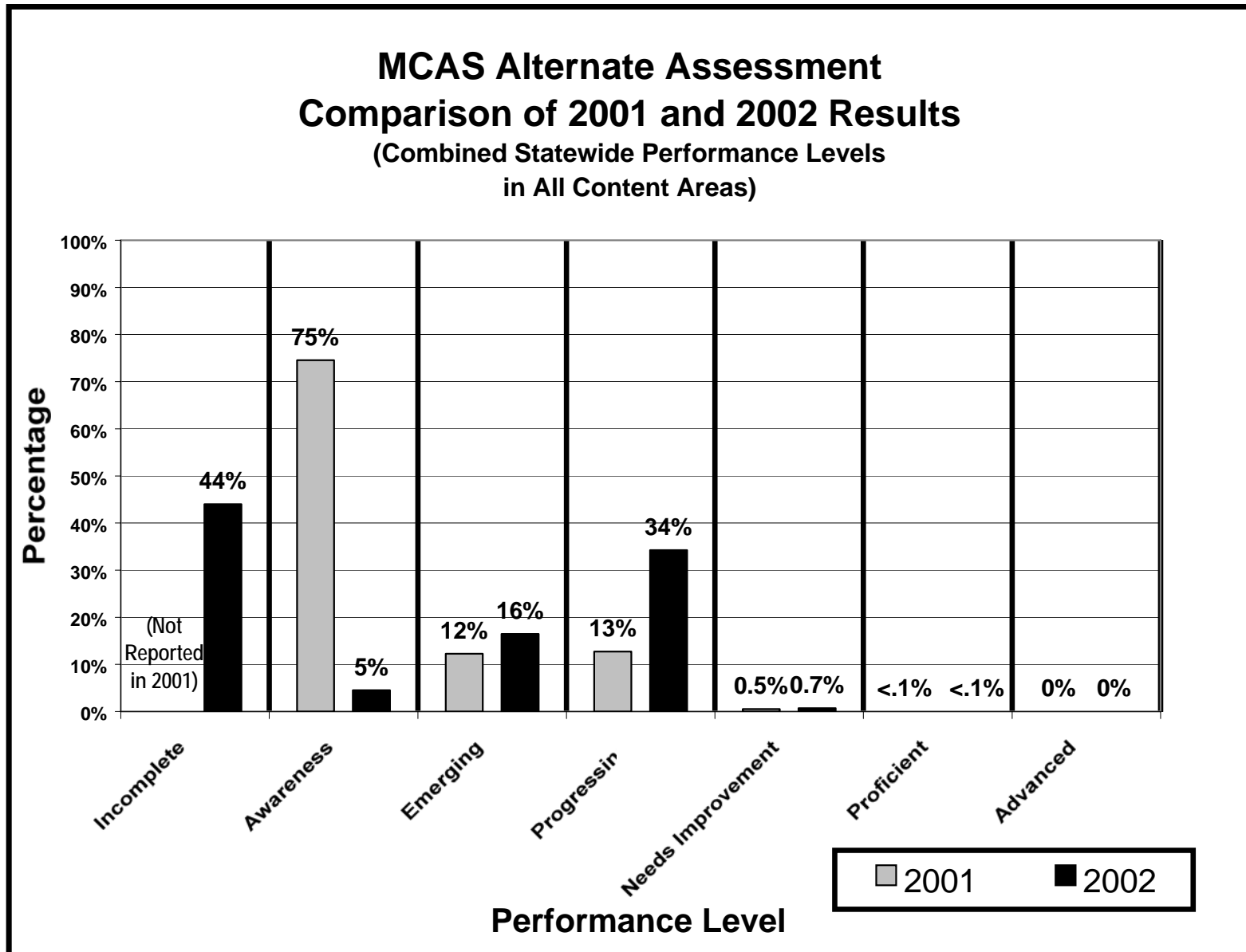


Table 4
2001 MCAS Tests
Rate and Method of Participation by Students with Disabilities

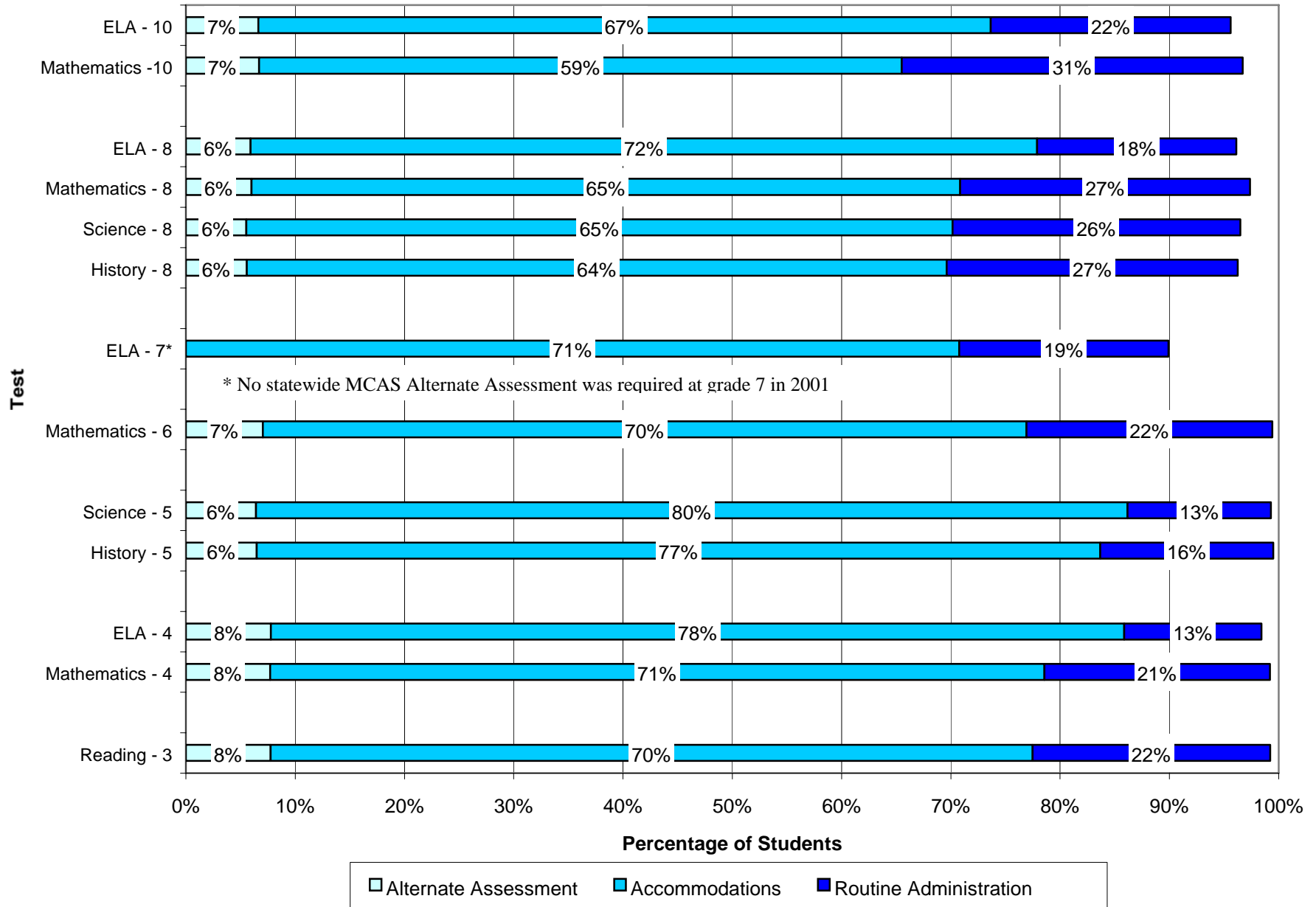


Table 5
2002 MCAS Tests
Rate and Method of Participation by Students with Disabilities

