



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Education

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David P. Driscoll
Commissioner of Education

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Henry L. Johnson
Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education
U.S. Department of Education
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Assistant Secretary Johnson:

I am writing to apply for approval of two technical adjustments to Massachusetts' accountability plan, both of which would apply to Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) determinations based on data from the 2005-06 school year. In addition, this letter contains our request to extend by one year the interim flexibility granted us by the U.S. Department of Education in 2004-05 regarding certain students with disabilities, as well as a description of Massachusetts' timeline for incorporating the results of our new subject and grade-level assessments into AYP determinations.

1. Identification of Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) for Improvement

Proposal

Beginning with 2005-06 AYP determinations, we propose to use the 'Same Subject, All Grade Span' approach to identifying local school districts for improvement. Specifically, we would only identify for improvement or corrective action those Massachusetts districts that do not make AYP in the same subject and all grade spans (i.e., elementary grades 3-5, middle grades 6-8, and high school grades 9-12) for two consecutive years.

Rationale

Massachusetts currently combines the assessment results of all students enrolled in district schools or otherwise educated at district expense when making district AYP determinations and identifying districts for improvement, by subject area but regardless of grade level. While this approach is relatively simple to explain and report, we have found that it does not reliably discriminate between districts that exhibit pervasive and widespread student performance problems and those that do not.

In 2005, 155 (64%) of Massachusetts' 242 districts are identified for improvement and 189 districts (78%) failed to make AYP in 2005 for one or more student group. Ten districts (4%) are identified for improvement for students in the aggregate; the remaining 145 districts (60%) are identified for improvement based on the failure of one or more subgroups to make AYP in subsequent years. Of the 155 districts identified for improvement, 93 districts (38%) are in their second year of improvement status and poised to enter corrective action in 2006-07. Depending on subject area, between 28 (30%) and 31 (33%) of these 93 districts failed to make AYP in 2005 for only one student group.

To more appropriately identify districts with pervasive and widespread student performance problems, we examined the grade span approach to identifying districts for improvement that have been approved by the U.S. Department of Education (USED) for adoption by the majority of the States. The results of our 'Same Subject, All

Grade Span' approach simulation studies indicate that this new approach more accurately discriminates between districts that have widespread student performance problems and those do not. If we had applied this methodology in 2005, 44 districts (18%) would not have made AYP for all grade spans.

Background

- For the purposes of accountability, we consider school districts that comprise two or more schools separately from those that comprise a single school. Currently in Massachusetts there are 242 districts comprising two or more schools and 144 single-school districts.
- Our approach to making accountability determinations for single-school districts is described in Elements 2.3, 3.1, and 3.2 of our Consolidated State Application Accountability Workbook. We propose no change to our current approach to making accountability determinations for these single-school districts.

Proposal Details

We will make AYP determinations for Massachusetts districts separately for students in three grade spans. The elementary grade span will consist of students assessed in grades 3 through 5, the middle school grade span will consist of students assessed in grades 6 through 8, and the high school grade span will consist of students assessed in grades 9 through 12. The method of making these individual grade span AYP determinations will not differ from the method currently described in our Consolidated State Application Accountability Workbook; the method will, however, be applied separately to each of the three grade spans. In order to make AYP, a student group must meet the 95 percent participation target, the additional indicator target, and the state performance target or safe harbor. The additional indicator at the elementary and middle school levels is student attendance in all grades; at the high school level, our additional indicator for 2006 is the Competency Determination, our USED-approved proxy for the graduation rate. We propose no change to minimum group size requirements or confidence interval calculations at this time.

Only when a district fails to make AYP at all grade spans for two consecutive years will we identify the district for improvement. If the district fails to make AYP at all grade spans for two subsequent years, we will identify the district for corrective action.

2. Inclusion of Limited English Proficient Students in AYP Determinations

Proposal

Beginning with 2005-06 AYP determinations, we propose to change our method for assigning reading/language arts index points to certain Limited English Proficient (LEP) students. For LEP students who are in their second year of U.S. schooling, we propose to assign reading/language arts index points according to the students' progress toward achieving English language proficiency as measured by the Massachusetts English Proficiency Assessment (MEPA). These index points would be incorporated into the Composite Performance Index (CPI), which is the basis for school and district AYP performance and safe harbor calculations.

Rationale

Prior to the 2004-05 school year and per federal rules, all LEP students in Massachusetts were assessed using the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). MCAS is designed to measure the academic performance of students who can demonstrate sufficient English language proficiency to engage in regular classroom work in an English language environment, and as such is not an appropriate instrument for assessing the academic performance of students who are not yet able to demonstrate that level of English language proficiency.

In 2004-05, we utilized the flexibility offered by USED for LEP students in their first year of U.S. schooling, providing such students the option of participating in reading/language arts MCAS tests and allowing us to exclude those students' MCAS results from school and district AYP performance and safe harbor calculations. In 2004-05, and as described in Element 5.4 of our Consolidated State Application Accountability Workbook, we

also began administering to all Massachusetts LEP students a custom-designed English language proficiency assessment system, known as the Massachusetts English Proficiency Assessment (MEPA).

2005 statewide MEPA results indicate that by grade level between 70 and 80 percent of LEP students at the end of their second year of U.S. schooling do not yet demonstrate sufficient English language competence to perform grade-level classroom work in English. These students who score at the lower MEPA performance levels do not render valid and reliable results on MCAS reading/language arts tests. When making school and district accountability decisions, we seek the authority to use our most valid and reliable measures of student performance.

2005 MEPA results also show that, depending on grade level, between 39 and 65 percent of students in their second year of U.S. schooling who were not yet proficient in English did meet their individual growth targets toward achieving English proficiency.

Through providing flexibility for the way students in their first year of U.S. schooling are treated in AYP determinations, the U.S. Department of Education has expressed an understanding of the particular challenges that students with very low English proficiency face. Our proposal includes in school and district accountability determinations an appropriate measure of the English language proficiency of students who are still new to this country and who are not yet able to produce meaningful results on MCAS tests. Further, our proposal strengthens our MEPA accountability provisions by providing schools and districts an additional incentive to ensure that students new to the country receive the English language education that is essential for their further academic progress.

Background

- MCAS results are reported for individual students as scaled scores and according to four performance levels: *Advanced*, *Proficient*, *Needs Improvement*, and *Warning/Failing*. Student MCAS scaled scores also correspond to a 100-point index scale, known as the Composite Proficiency Index (CPI). CPI points are assigned in increments of 25, and serve as the basis of school and district AYP performance and safe harbor calculations.
- MEPA results are reported for individual students as scaled scores and according to four performance levels: *Beginning*, *Early Intermediate*, *Intermediate*, and *Transitioning*. Students scoring at the *Transitioning* performance level on MEPA are considered to have attained sufficient English language proficiency to fully participate in grade level classroom work with instruction that is delivered in English.
- All LEP students in Massachusetts are assessed using both MCAS and MEPA. The exception to this rule is for LEP students in their first year of U.S. schooling, who may be exempted from MCAS reading/language arts tests.
- LEP students between grades 3 and 12 are assessed annually through MEPA. LEP students previously assessed through MEPA are re-assessed each year in the spring. Students new to Massachusetts or to grade 3 are assessed in both the fall and spring of the same school year.
- In establishing our Annual Measurable Achievement Objectives (AMAOs) for the English language acquisition of LEP students as required under Title III of the No Child Left Behind Act, Massachusetts has defined progress toward acquiring English language proficiency as advancing two or more performance level steps on subsequent administrations of the MEPA, with each of the first three MEPA performance levels consisting of two steps.
- In spring 2005, 1,947 students in their second year of U.S. schooling were assessed statewide in MEPA in the MCAS reading/language arts tested grades (grades 3, 4, 7, and 10).

Proposal Details

When a student in the second year of U.S. schooling scores in the *Beginning, Early Intermediate, or Intermediate* performance levels in the spring MEPA administration, we will compare the student’s current results with results from the previous year’s administration to determine the extent of progress made toward achieving English language proficiency, if any. We will assign the student MEPA index points and incorporate those MEPA index points into school and district CPI calculations for reading/language arts as per the table below.

<i>Change in MEPA Scaled Score* (MEPA Administration A to MEPA Administration B)</i>	<i>MEPA Index Points</i>
Declined one or more performance level steps	0
Unchanged	0
Increased within same performance level step	25
Increased one performance level step	50
Increased two or more performance level steps	75

*For students in their second year of U.S. schooling. Change measured in excess of standard error of measurement.

When a student in the second year of U.S. schooling scores in the *Transitioning* performance level in the spring MEPA administration, we will assign the student reading/language arts CPI points based on the student’s MCAS results and incorporate those points into school and district CPI calculations for reading/language arts.

3. Interim Flexibility Regarding the Inclusion of Certain Students with Disabilities in AYP Calculations

We request a one-year extension of the interim flexibility granted us last year regarding the inclusion of certain students with disabilities in AYP calculations. Our ‘Interim 2% Flexibility Rule’ is described in detail in Element 5.3. of our Consolidated State Application Accountability Workbook. For 2006 AYP determinations, we propose no change to our approach to exercising this flexibility.

4. Timeline for Incorporating Results of New Assessments into AYP Determinations

In spring of 2006 we are implementing additional MCAS tests in English language arts and mathematics in certain grades, as below.

<i>Grade</i>	<i>English language arts</i>	<i>Mathematics</i>
3	Ongoing	New in 2006
4	Ongoing	Ongoing
5	New in 2006	New in 2006
6	New in 2006	Ongoing
7	Ongoing	New in 2006
8	New in 2006	Ongoing
10	Ongoing	Ongoing

Massachusetts operates in two-year accountability cycles, and averages two years of performance data when making AYP determinations in even-numbered years. As such, we will only include in 2006 AYP CPI calculations the results of those assessments that were also given during the 2004-05 school year.

We will report data for all grades assessed in 2006 and include this information in all school, district, and State report cards. We plan to incorporate the results from all English language arts and mathematics assessments, in grades 3 through 8 and 10, beginning with 2007 AYP calculations.

Attached for your reference are a series of documents evidencing the data that we have reviewed and considered in generating the two proposed adjustments to our accountability plan. If you have questions or would like to discuss any aspect of this letter, please contact Associate Commissioner Juliane Dow by e-mail at jdow@doe.mass.edu or phone at 781-338-3500. Thank you for your consideration of our proposed adjustments.

Sincerely,

David P. Driscoll
Commissioner of Education
Massachusetts Department of Education

Attachments:

- 1: MA Districts Not Making AYP in 2005 for All Grade Spans
- 2: MA Districts Identified for Improvement in 2005
- 3: 2005 MCAS and MEPA Score Comparison (All Grades)
- 4: Years in U.S. by MEPA Improvement by Grade Crosstabulation
- 5: 2005 Massachusetts MEPA Results
- 6: 2005 MA MEPA Participation by Years in U.S.