2025 District and School Accountability Reporting: Establishing the Lowest Performing Students Group

# Introduction

In 2018, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) began reporting accountability results under its new framework for district and school accountability and assistance. The new accountability system, which was approved by the U.S. Department of Education as part of Massachusetts’ Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) state plan, places a greater emphasis on improving the performance of each district’s and school’s lowest performing students in addition to improving the performance of the district or school as a whole.

# Background

From 2012 to 2017, DESE reported on each district’s, school’s, and student group’s progress in narrowing proficiency gaps. Each school’s accountability determination, reported using accountability and assistance levels 1 through 5, was based in part on the progress of the school as a whole and of the school’s high needs students.[[1]](#footnote-2) While including the High Needs student group allows DESE to hold more schools accountable for the performance of historically underserved students, transitioning to an accountability model that looks at each school’s lowest performing students encourages districts and schools to focus on closing gaps by raising the achievement floor.

To measure gap closing, two distinct groups need to exist to measure improvement – for example, comparing the performance of all students and high needs students. However, not all schools in Massachusetts have a measurable High Needs student group (20 or more students). In other schools, the All Students and High Needs student groups are identical. In either case, measuring gap closing would be impossible using this approach. Measuring the performance of the lowest performing students, as identified by assessment scores, means that almost every district and school will have a Lowest Performing student group.

# Methodology

To control for student transiency, DESE measures the performance of each school’s lowest performing students who have been enrolled in the same school for multiple years. Schools are still responsible for the annual performance of all students, as aggregate school and student group results include all students enrolled in the school since the beginning of the school year. However, results for the Lowest Performing student group include only those students who have been enrolled in the same school for two consecutive years.

The Department uses one of two possible approaches to measure the performance of each district’s or school’s lowest performing students, depending on the grades served by the district or school: the *cohort model* or the *year-to-year model*.

## Cohort model

Within the accountability system, DESE reports on the performance of all student groups. However, the majority of Massachusetts’s districts and schools receive an accountability determination based on an overall measure of the district’s or school’s performance against targets for All Students and for the Lowest Performing student groups.

The cohort model can be used in most non-high schools and in middle/high and K-12 schools and districts that have more than one tested non-high school grade. For DESE to use the cohort model, the school must have more than one tested grade (3 through 8), have at least 40 *eligible* students who were enrolled and tested in the school in the previous year, and test enough students in the current year for the lowest performing students to represent a reportable group (the greater of 25 percent of eligible students, or 20 or more students).

Eligible students were enrolled and tested in the school in the previous year and remain enrolled in the same school in the current year. To be identified as a member of the Lowest Performing student group, a student must be among the district’s or school’s lowest performing students when comparing the average of the English language arts (ELA) and mathematics MCAS scaled scores of eligible students across all non-high school grades. The Department compares the results of this group of students in the current year to the results of the same students in the previous year and reports on performance accordingly.

## Year-to-year model

For most schools, DESE can use the cohort model to measure the performance of the lowest performing students in each school. However, the cohort model does not work in schools with certain grade configurations, since students are not tested in two consecutive years: high schools serving grades 9 through 12 and middle/high schools serving only grades 8 through 12. In those cases, a year-to-year comparison of data is used to measure the change in performance for the Lowest Performing student group. This group is composed of students that have been enrolled in the same school or district for more than one year and is established by ranking the average of each student’s most recent ELA and mathematics MCAS scaled scores. In this model, data from the current year is compared to data from the previous year, which may mean comparing data from two different groups of students. This is similar to the approach used when comparing aggregate school results over time and still provides valuable information about school performance.

The year-to-year model’s Lowest Performing student group is established using MCAS data from each student’s most recent tested grade. The Department uses slightly different criteria when establishing this group using the year-to-year model, depending on the grades served by the school.

* *Scenario 1: High schools (serving grades 9 through 12)*. The Lowest Performing student group for high schools that serve grades 9 through 12 is established in late fall 2024, using each student’s spring 2023 MCAS results. The school’s accountability results still compare grade 10 results in the current year to grade 10 results from the previous year; however, student-level data from grade 8 are used to establish the Lowest Performing student group’s membership.
* *Scenario 2*: *Middle/high schools (serving grades 8 through 12 only).* Because grade 10 MCAS data cannot be combined with MCAS data for grades 3 through 8, these schools have two separate Lowest Performing student groups – one in grade 8 and one in grade 10. The grade 8 Lowest Performing student group was established in late fall 2024, using the spring 2024 MCAS results for current grade 8 students who were in the same district in the previous year. The grade 10 Lowest Performing student group is established as described in *Scenario 1* above. In both grades, the school’s accountability results still compare grade-level results in the current year to grade-level results from the previous year; however, student MCAS scores from their most recent tested grade are used to establish each group’s membership.

## Districts and schools with no Lowest Performing student group

If a district or school does not have test results for enough students to establish a reportable Lowest Performing student group, the district’s or school’s accountability determination is based on the performance of all students.

# Establishing the Lowest Performing students group for schools serving more than one grade 3 through 8 (cohort model)

The procedure described below is used to identify the Lowest Performing students group in non-high schools serving a combination of grades 3 through 8. These schools:

* Administer MCAS tests in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics in more than one grade 3 through 8; and
* Do not enroll or test students in grade 10.

## Procedure

### Fall 2024

1. Identify eligible students. There must be at least 40 eligible students to establish the cohort. Eligible students:
   1. Were enrolled in the current school in the 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 school years (based on data from the Student Information Management System (SIMS));
   2. Participated in the standard administration of both the ELA and mathematics MCAS tests in 2024 in the current school. Students who participate in the MCAS Alternate Assessment (MCAS-Alt) in one or more subjects (ELA and/or mathematics), or otherwise only have achievement results in one subject are not eligible to be included in the Lowest Performing student group;[[2]](#footnote-3) and
   3. Are not first- or second-year English Learners in 2025 (SIMS).
2. Calculate a 2024 combined MCAS ELA and mathematics average scaled score for each eligible student (*[2024 ELA scaled score + 2024 mathematics scaled score] ÷ 2*).
3. Rank eligible students using the 2024 average scaled score identified in Step 2 (e.g., sort combined 2024 average scaled scores from highest to lowest).
4. Identify the greater of the lowest performing 20 students or the lowest performing 25 percent of students from the sorted list in Step 3.
5. Calculate results for the Lowest Performing student group for the achievement, growth, and chronic absenteeism accountability indicators separately using 2024 data for the students identified in Step 4. These data will serve as the baseline for 2025 targets and related reporting.

### Summer/Fall 2025

1. Use 2025 MCAS data to verify cohort membership. There must be results for at least 20 students to report data for this group.
2. Measure improvement for the Lowest Performing student group by comparing the 2025 results for each accountability indicator for this group of students to the 2024 baseline data calculated in Step 5 above.

# Establishing the Lowest Performing student group for high schools (year-to-year model)

The procedure described below is used to identify the Lowest Performing students group in high schools. These schools:

* Administer MCAS tests in ELA and mathematics in grade 10; and
* Do not enroll or test students in any grades 3 through 8.

## Procedure

### Fall 2024

1. Identify eligible students to establish the baseline group. There must be at least 40 eligible students to establish the baseline. Eligible students:
   1. Were enrolled in the current school in the 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 school years (based on data from SIMS);
   2. Were enrolled in grade 10 in the 2023-2024 school year (SIMS);
   3. Participated in the standard administration of the grade 10 ELA and mathematics MCAS assessments in 2024. Students who participate in the MCAS-Alt in one or more subjects (ELA and/or mathematics) are not eligible to be included in the Lowest Performing student group;
   4. Were not included in the school’s 2023 accountability results; and
   5. Were not first- or second-year English Learners in 2024.
2. Calculate a 2024 grade 10 combined MCAS ELA and mathematics average scaled score for each eligible student *([2024 ELA scaled score + 2024 mathematics scaled score] ÷ 2*).
3. Rank eligible students using the 2024 grade 10 average scaled score calculated in Step 2 (e.g., sort combined 2024 average scaled scores from highest to lowest).
4. Identify the greater of the lowest performing 20 students or the lowest performing 25 percent of students from the sorted list in Step 3.
5. Calculate results for the lowest performing students baseline group for achievement, growth, and chronic absenteeism accountability indicators using 2024 data for the students identified in Step 4. These data will serve as the baseline for 2025 targets and related reporting.
6. Identify eligible students for the 2025 reporting group. There must be at least 40 eligible students to establish the reporting group. Eligible students:
7. Were enrolled in any Massachusetts public school during the 2022-2023 school year (SIMS);
8. Were enrolled in the current school on October 1, 2023 and October 1, 2024 (SIMS);
9. Were enrolled in grade 10 in the 2024-2025 school year (SIMS);
10. Participated in the standard administration of the grade 3-8 ELA and mathematics MCAS assessments in 2023. Students who participate in the MCAS-Alt in one or more subjects (ELA and/or mathematics) are not eligible to be included in the Lowest Performing student group;2
11. Were not included in the school’s 2023 or 2024 accountability results; and
12. Are not first- or second-year English Learners in 2025.
13. Calculate a 2023 combined MCAS ELA and mathematics average scaled score for each eligible student (*[2023 ELA scaled score + 2023 mathematics scaled score] ÷ 2*).
14. Rank eligible students using the 2023 average scaled score calculated in Step 7 (e.g., sort combined 2023 average scaled scores from highest to lowest).
15. Identify the greater of the lowest performing 20 students or the lowest performing 25 percent of students from the sorted list in Step 8.

### Summer/Fall 2025

1. Use 2025 grade 10 MCAS data to verify group membership. There must be results for at least 20 students to report data for this group.
2. Calculate results for the Lowest Performing student group for the achievement, growth, and chronic absenteeism accountability indicators separately using 2025 data for the students identified in Step 9.
3. Measure improvement for the Lowest Performing student group by comparing the 2025 results for each accountability indicator calculated in Step 11 to the data from the baseline group calculated in Step 5 above.

# Establishing the Lowest Performing student group for districts and schools serving only grades 8 through 12 (year-to-year model)

The procedure described below is used to identify the Lowest Performing students group in middle/high schools serving only grades 8 through 12. These schools:

* Administer MCAS tests in ELA and mathematics in grade 8;
* Administer MCAS tests in ELA and mathematics in grade 10; and
* Do not enroll or test students in any other grades 3 through 7.

## Procedure

The lowest performing students are identified separately for grade 8 and grade 10 in these schools and districts.

### Fall 2024 (Grade 8)

1. Identify eligible students to establish the baseline reporting group. There must be at least 40 eligible students to establish the baseline. Eligible students:
2. Were enrolled in the current district in the 2022-2023 school year (based on data from SIMS);
3. Were enrolled in grade 8 in the current school in the 2023-2024 school year (SIMS);
4. Participated in the standard administration of the grade 8 ELA and mathematics MCAS assessments in 2024. Students who participate in the MCAS-Alt in one or more subjects (ELA and/or mathematics) are not eligible to be included in the Lowest Performing student group;2
5. Were not first- or second-year English Learners in 2024.
6. Calculate the 2024 combined MCAS ELA and mathematics average scaled score for each eligible student (*[2024 ELA scaled score + 2024 mathematics scaled score] ÷ 2*).
7. Rank eligible students using the 2024 average scaled score identified in Step 2 (e.g., sort combined 2024 average scaled scores from highest to lowest).
8. Identify the greater of the lowest performing 20 students or the lowest performing 25 percent of students from the sorted list in Step 3.
9. Calculate results for the lowest performing students baseline group for the achievement, growth, and chronic absenteeism accountability indicators separately using 2024 data. These data will serve as the baseline for 2025 targets and related reporting.
10. Identify eligible students for the 2025 reporting group. There must be at least 40 eligible students to establish the reporting group. Eligible students:
11. Were enrolled in the current district on October 1, 2023 (SIMS);
12. Were enrolled in grade 8 in the current school on October 1, 2024 (SIMS);
13. Participated in the standard administration of the grade 3-8 ELA and mathematics MCAS assessments in 2024. Students who participate in the MCAS-Alt in one or more subjects (ELA and/or mathematics) are not eligible to be included in the Lowest Performing student group;
14. Are not first- or second-year English Learners in 2025.
15. Calculate a 2024 combined MCAS ELA and mathematics average scaled score for each eligible student (*[2024 ELA scaled score + 2024 mathematics scaled score] ÷ 2*).
16. Rank eligible students using the 2024 average scaled score identified in Step 7 (e.g., sort combined 2024 average scaled scores from highest to lowest).
17. Identify the greater of the lowest performing 20 students or the lowest performing 25 percent of students from the sorted list in Step 8.

### Summer/Fall 2025 (Grade 8)

1. Use 2025 MCAS data to verify group membership. There must be results for at least 20 students to report data for this group.
2. Calculate results for the Lowest Performing student group for the achievement, growth, and chronic absenteeism accountability indicators separately using 2025 grade 8 data.
3. Measure improvement for the Lowest Performing student group by comparing the 2025 grade 8 results for each accountability indicator calculated in Step 11 to the 2024 data from the baseline group calculated in Step 5.

### Grade 10

To establish the group for students in grade 10, follow the procedure described in the section called [Establishing the Lowest Performing student group for high schools (year-to-year model)](bookmark://_Establishing_the_lowest_1). For district reporting, students must be enrolled in the same district for two years.

# Establishing the Lowest Performing student group for districts and schools serving a combination of grades 3 through 8 and 10

The procedure described below will be used to identify the Lowest Performing students group in middle/high schools, K-12 schools, and districts. These schools and districts:

* Administer MCAS tests in ELA and mathematics in more than one grades 3 through 8; and
* Administer MCAS tests in ELA and mathematics in grade 10.

## Procedure

The lowest performing students will be identified separately for high school and non-high school grades in these schools and districts.

1. To establish the group for students in grades 3 through 8, follow the procedure described in the section called [Establishing the Lowest Performing student group for schools serving more than one grade 3 through 8 (cohort model)](#_Establishing_the_lowest_3). For district reporting, students must be enrolled and tested in the same district for two years.
2. To establish the group for students in grade 10, follow the procedure described in the section called [Establishing the Lowest Performing student group for high schools (year-to-year model)](bookmark://_Establishing_the_lowest_1), above. For district reporting, students must be enrolled in the same district for two years.

1. The High Needs student group is comprised of students who belong to one or more of the following student groups: Students with Disabilities, English Learners (ELs) and Former ELs, and students from low income families. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Students who take the MCAS-Alt in one or both subjects (ELA and/or mathematics) are not eligible to be included in the Lowest Performing group. However, data for students who are assessed using MCAS-Alt will still be included in the results for the All Students group and for each additional group of which the student is a member. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)