*****Massachusetts Department of***

***Elementary and Secondary Education***

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| Mitchell D. Chester, Ed.D.  *Commissioner* |  |

# MEMORANDUM

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| **To:** | Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education |
| **From:** | Mitchell D. Chester, Ed.D., Commissioner |
| **Date:** | November 8, 2013 |
| **Subject:** | Two-Year MCAS-to-PARCC Transition Plan: Continuing Discussion and Board Vote |

At the November 18, 2013 special meeting of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, we will continue our discussion of the proposed transition of the student assessment program from MCAS to PARCC. At this special meeting we will review PARCC English language arts (ELA) and mathematics assessment items and Board members will have the opportunity to discuss the PARCC assessment and the proposed transition plan in more detail.

At the regular meeting of the Board on November 19, I will ask the Board to vote to endorse the two-year MCAS-to-PARCC transition plan that I proposed at the September meeting. This vote is to adopt the transition plan, and is not a vote on whether to adopt PARCC as our new assessment program for ELA and mathematics. That decision on adoption will take place in the fall of 2015.

My recommendation for a two-year transition period is consistent with the resolution that Mary Jo Rossetti, President of the Massachusetts Association of School Committees and Chair of the Somerville School Committee, brought to the Board at our October 2013 meeting. Based on a vote of the Somerville School Committee, the recommendation states “that the Massachusetts Board of Education delay the vote to accept the PARCC test for one year until after the field tests have been completed and the results analyzed …”

A Recap of our Discussions to Date

At the Board’s September 24, 2013 meeting, I provided a brief history of MCAS and the high school graduation requirement, an overview of the transition to the content standards contained in the English language arts (ELA) and mathematics curriculum frameworks that the Board adopted in December 2010, an overview of the PARCC consortium and the PARCC assessment design, and my proposal for a two-year MCAS-to-PARCC transition plan (my September memo to the Board is posted at: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/bese/docs/fy2014/2013-09/>.).

We continued the discussion at the October 22 Board meeting (my October memo is posted at: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/bese/docs/fy2014/2013-10/item1.html>.). The presentation included a comparison of MCAS assessments with the assessments emerging from PARCC. We reviewed the processes the Department uses to ensure that MCAS lives up to its reputation as a rigorous and high-quality assessment and how PARCC has adopted these and other “best practices” in developing our next generation of ELA and math assessments. Three PARCC Educator Leader Fellows illustrated the advantages of integrating “college and career readiness” into the design and development of the PARCC assessments and how extended performance tasks will provide more comprehensive and rigorous measures of 21st century skills than MCAS. The Fellows described their engagement with other educators in the field as well as the importance of doing more outreach over the coming months. We closed by providing a brief summary of the PARCC-aligned tools that teachers, schools, and districts will be able to use to support more effective instruction that is targeted to closing proficiency gaps and increasing the academic achievement and growth of all students.

November 18 Special Meeting of the Board

At the special meeting, I will provide additional information on the emerging PARCC assessment with the goal of reserving most of our time together for discussion of the proposed transition plan. Board members will be able to compare and contrast MCAS and PARCC items with the added support and insights afforded once again by two PARCC Fellows. We will also review and discuss:

* the degree of readiness of our schools to administer an online assessment,
* the impact of the proposed transition on accountability determinations, and
* the steps we are taking to engage and listen to all sectors of the education community, parents, policy leaders, and the broader public in the proposed changes to our student assessment system.

We will review the two-year MCAS-to-PARCC transition plan that I have proposed, including decision points for the Board. At the November 19 regular meeting of the Board, I will ask the Board to vote on the transition plan.

Proposed Two-Year Transition Plan for MCAS and PARCC

I have heard a great deal from school superintendents and others about the importance of pacing ourselves so that schools can implement PARCC and other reform initiatives in a thoughtful way. As a result, I have proposed a two-year transition period to move from MCAS to PARCC. If we were adhering to the original Race to the Top timetable, spring 2014 would be the final administration of MCAS and PARCC in its entirety would constitute the Commonwealth’s testing program in the 2014/2015 school year. I believe this would be too precipitous a transition.

The two-year transition approach will provide for a robust comparison of MCAS and PARCC, so that the Board can decide in the fall of 2015 whether to sunset the MCAS ELA and math assessments for grades 3-8 and employ PARCC as our state testing program for these subjects beginning in spring 2016. This two-year transition plan will provide teachers and schools with additional time to refine their implementation of the frameworks in ELA and mathematics that the Board adopted in December 2010 and to become familiar with new online test administration procedures before full-scale implementation of PARCC. In addition, the two-year transition will provide sufficient opportunity to compare and contrast MCAS and PARCC, including the content, format, quality, and standards of performance for the two assessments. The opportunity this comparison provides also will permit us to transition our accountability uses of the assessment results while maintaining trend lines that link back to pre-PARCC performance. This transition approach is responsive to the field; it allows us to take PARCC for a “test drive” before the Board decides whether to adopt PARCC as our state assessment program for ELA and mathematics; and it provides a roadmap and timetable to the field so that educators and students will know what to expect.

Following is a time line of major milestones, with anticipated Board actions indicated by a check mark.

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| **2013–2014 School Year** | |  |
| **🗸** | November 19, 2013: | Board votes on plan for two-year transition from MCAS to PARCC |
|  | Spring 2014: | PARCC field test administered in randomly selected Massachusetts schools/classrooms (and in 13 other states) |
| **2014–2015 School Year** | |  |
|  | Early fall 2014: | Analysis of PARCC field-test data by Department staff |
| **🗸** | Late fall 2014: | Board receives update on PARCC field test and operational test that includes an assessment of whether PARCC is on track to be better than MCAS |
|  | Winter/spring 2014–2015: | Massachusetts schools administer first operational PARCC **or** MCAS assessments, pending Board approval of plan for districts to choose between the two; all grade 10 students will continue to take MCAS in order to qualify for the Competency Determination |
| **2015–2016 School Year** | |  |
|  | Summer/early fall 2015: | Standard-setting for PARCC tests; analysis of operational data |
| **🗸** | Late fall 2015: | Board votes on full adoption of PARCC based on a determination of it being better than MCAS |
|  | Spring 2016: | Administration of PARCC operational tests for grades 3-8; grade 10 students will continue to take MCAS to qualify for the Competency Determination |

Additional Information Regarding the Spring 2014 PARCC Field Test

In spring 2014, approximately two-thirds of the Commonwealth’s schools representing most districts in the state will participate in the PARCC field test. The Department is allowing districts to waive the MCAS testing requirement for those students who take the Performance-Based Assessment (PBA) component of the field test; this applies to grades 3-8 and only in the same subject as the PARCC PBA. I provided this option because the schedule for the administration of the PARCC PBA field test overlaps substantially with the administration of the MCAS ELA exams. The MCAS waiver option allows districts to avoid “double-testing” students and limits the amount of time taken from instruction to administer the assessments.

Districts that take advantage of the MCAS waiver option will, however, have less assessment data available to inform accountability determinations. The random selection of classes to participate in the field test also raises concerns that the students in these classes may not be representative of all students in their grade level; the field tested student could be the highest or lowest performing students in their grade. These impacts will most often be contained to a single grade level in a school although the random selection process has also identified more than one grade for the PARCC PBA field test in several cases.

In response to questions and recommendations received from district leaders related to exercising the MCAS waiver option, I have committed that no school will have its accountability rating disadvantaged by participating in the PARCC field test. On October 13, 2013, the Department convened two regional meetings of superintendents and sent a memorandum to districts participating in the field test that solicited their feedback for how we may best deliver on this commitment. I am pleased to announce that I have approved the following “district choice” protocol, recommended by the majority of district leaders who weighed in on this option.

The district will select the *higher achievement score* (CPI, percent Proficient, etc.) of the following two calculations made by the Department for each school participating in the PARCC PBA field test:

1. Calculations **including** the field-tested grade(s).
2. Calculations **excluding** the field-tested grade(s).

This straightforward and uncomplicated solution to district concerns enables them to participate in the PARCC field test knowing that they will have the opportunity to mitigate any disadvantages that may result from the random selection of classes in each school in the district.

Considerations for the Board

Some of the major factors that the Board will need to consider include the following:

* **Budget:** Administering both MCAS and PARCC in spring 2015 based upon district choice will require additional funding (depending upon a combination of options selected and the terms of a contract extension with our MCAS vendor) and thus will have implications for our FY 2015 budget recommendation.
* **Competency Determination:** At least through the class of 2018 (this year’s eighth graders), students in high school will continue to take MCAS tests to meet the CD requirement. Any changes to the CD requirement will be determined at a later time in the transition process; I anticipate beginning this discussion with the Board in early 2014. We will need to determine the combination of PARCC assessment(s) that high school students will take to earn their CD for the classes of 2019 and beyond.
* **Accountability:** We are developing strategies for maintaining a valid and reliable system of district, school, and educator accountability during the transition period, as well as the ability to establish trends tied to legacy MCAS as we transition to the next generation assessments in ELA and mathematics.
* **Technology:** We are advocating for funding to ensure that the Commonwealth’s classrooms reflect 21st-century learning technologies, and, as a result, that our schools and districts have the capacity to administer online assessments in the coming years.

Senior Associate Commissioner Bob Bickerton and other members of the Department’s assessment team, as well as two of the PARCC Fellows, will join us at the Board meetings to review the PARCC assessment respond to your questions. We look forward to discussing the proposed transition plan with the Board on November 18 and 19.