



Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

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Mitchell D. Chester, Ed.D.
Commissioner

MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education
From: Mitchell D. Chester, Ed.D., Commissioner
Date: September 13, 2013
Subject: Initial Discussion of Plan for Administering MCAS and PARCC Student Assessments

At the September 24, 2013, meeting of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, I will update the Board on our progress in transitioning our English language arts (ELA) and mathematics tests from our current assessments, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), to the next generation of student assessments being developed by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) consortium. This memorandum provides the following information:

- a brief history of MCAS and the high school graduation “Competency Determination”
- a summary of the adoption of content standards and curriculum frameworks in the Commonwealth
- an overview of the PARCC consortium and PARCC assessment design
- a summary of our two-year transition plan from MCAS to PARCC, including decision points for the Board

This presentation is the first in a series of presentations on this topic that we will be conducting throughout the fall. In October we will provide an in-depth look at the PARCC assessments and the details of the transition plan; we may hold a special meeting during October as well. In November we will be asking the Board to endorse the two-year transition plan from MCAS to PARCC. This transition approach will provide for a robust comparison of MCAS and PARCC, the basis of which will inform the decision by the Board in fall 2015 about sunsetting some of our legacy assessments and employing PARCC as our state testing program for ELA and mathematics beginning in spring 2016.

With regard to the Competency Determination required for high school graduation, 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.

History of the MCAS Program

The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) was developed to fulfill a major component of the Education Reform Act of 1993. The act established a foundation budget supported by significantly increased state funding, with accompanying provisions that the state, through the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, would assume a greater role in establishing standards and a system of accountability for public K–12 education to meet the standards. The act specifies the adoption of a testing program that must:

- test *all* students who are educated with Massachusetts public funds, including students with disabilities and limited English proficient students;
- measure performance based on learning standards in the Massachusetts *Curriculum Frameworks*; and
- report on the performance of individual students, schools, and districts.

MCAS is a custom-designed program owned by the Commonwealth. The ongoing development and implementation of MCAS is managed by staff of the Department with assistance and support from an assessment contractor.

MCAS tests have been administered to students in Massachusetts since 1998, when students were assessed in ELA and mathematics at grades 4, 8, and 10. In subsequent years, additional grades and content areas were added to the testing program. To fulfill the requirements of the federally reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act (a.k.a., “No Child Left Behind” – NCLB), tests for several new grades and content areas were added in 2006. As a result, all students in grades 3 through 8 are assessed in both ELA and mathematics. Operational testing in science and technology/engineering began in 2003 in grades 5 and 8 and in 2007 for high school. Tests in history and social science were developed and piloted, but the testing component was suspended for budgetary reasons in 2009. The table below lists MCAS tests offered in 2013 by grade and subject.

MCAS Tests Offered by Grade and Subject, 2013							
Grade Tested	ELA	Math	Science & Tech/Eng	HS Biology	HS Chemistry	HS Intro Physics	HS Tech/Eng
3	✓	✓					
4	✓*	✓					
5	✓	✓	✓				
6	✓	✓					
7	✓*	✓					
8	✓	✓	✓				
9				✓	✓	✓	✓
10	✓*	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Retest	Retest		✓**	✓**	✓**	✓**
12	Retest	Retest		✓**	✓**	✓**	✓**
* Includes assessment of writing							
**Additional testing opportunities are offered in all four HS STE content areas in grades 11 and 12.							

Student performance on MCAS tests is reported based on the general performance level descriptors listed in the table below.

Performance Level	General Description of Associated Student Performance
Advanced <i>(scaled score of 260 or higher)</i>	Students at this level demonstrate a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of rigorous subject matter, and provide sophisticated solutions to complex problems.
Proficient <i>(scaled score from 240 to 258)</i>	Students at this level demonstrate a solid understanding of challenging subject matter and solve a wide variety of problems.
Needs Improvement <i>(scaled score from 220 to 238)</i>	Students at this level demonstrate a partial understanding of subject matter and solve some simple problems.
Failing/Warning <i>(scaled score of 218 or below)</i>	Students at this level demonstrate a minimal understanding of subject matter and do not solve simple problems.

Competency Determination

The Massachusetts Education Reform Act also stipulates that meeting a “Competency Determination” (CD) standard must be among the requirements for students to qualify for a high school diploma:

The “competency determination” shall be based on the academic standards and curriculum frameworks for tenth graders in the areas of mathematics, science and technology, history and social science, foreign languages, and English, and shall represent a determination that a particular student has demonstrated mastery of a common core of skills, competencies and knowledge in these areas, as measured by the assessment instruments described in section one I. Satisfaction of the requirements of the competency determination shall be a condition for high school graduation.

M.G.L. c. 69, §1(d)(i)

Through the regulations adopted by the Board in 1999–2000, students in the graduating class of 2003 were the first students required to earn a CD in ELA and mathematics as a condition for receiving a high school diploma. In the years preceding the implementation of the CD as a graduation requirement, the Board and the Department ensured that school districts, educators, students, and their families had sufficient notice to prepare for this new requirement, and provided assistance to school districts to strengthen teaching and learning. The Board also recognized the importance of providing additional academic support to students struggling to meet the new standards. This additional support was realized in FY 1999 when the Governor and Legislature authorized such a program with an appropriation of \$20 million and that increased to \$50 million by FY 2002.¹ In addition, students are provided with retest opportunities throughout and beyond high

¹ The Academic Support program has continued through today although the amount of funding appropriated has gradually been reduced to the current level of \$9 million in FY 2014.

school to help them earn a CD. The Board also established an MCAS performance appeals process so that eligible high school students who have been unable to pass the required tests have an additional opportunity to demonstrate through their coursework that they meet or exceed the CD standard.

The implementation of a graduation requirement based on assessments was opposed by some individuals and groups, particularly when the first MCAS ELA and mathematics tests for “high stakes” were administered to 10th grade students in 2001, and only 68% of students qualified for the CD by scoring at the *Needs Improvement* level or higher. With the full support of the Board, the Governor, and leaders of both houses of the legislature, the CD requirement remained in place. By their senior year, 95% of the class of 2003 had earned a CD in ELA and mathematics.

The Board has amended the regulations at various times since 2000 to strengthen the standards and the performance appeals process. Beginning with the class of 2010, to earn the CD students must meet a requirement in science and technology/engineering (STE) and also score at the *Proficient* level or higher (scaled score ≥ 240) in ELA and mathematics.² In 2013, 88% of students earned their CD in ELA, mathematics, and science and technology/engineering by the end of grade 10, and 96% of students in the graduating class of 2013 had earned their CD in all three subjects by the end of grade 12.

Adoption of the Common Core State Standards and New Curriculum Frameworks in ELA/Literacy and Mathematics

In 2007–2008, the Department convened teams of educators and other content experts to revise our existing curriculum frameworks in ELA and mathematics. In 2009, these efforts were merged with a concurrent effort, led by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Governors Association (NGA), to develop multi-state standards. The new standards call on students to have not only solid content knowledge but also the skills to apply their knowledge in ways demanded by colleges, careers, and citizenship in the 21st century.

After review and discussion by the Board, a period of public comment, a third-party review by the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education, and analyses by teams of Massachusetts educators, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were initially adopted by the Board on July 21, 2010. Subsequently, the Massachusetts curriculum frameworks were revised to incorporate the CCSS as well as incorporate a limited number of Massachusetts-specific augmentations, and the new Massachusetts frameworks in ELA/literacy and mathematics were adopted by the Board in December 2010 and widely disseminated to K–12 educators across the state.

Following the adoption of the new curriculum frameworks, the Department developed and disseminated its plan for schools and districts to transition to the new standards beginning in fall 2011 and culminating in full adoption by the 2013–14 school year. Districts and schools were provided with information on how MCAS would transition (e.g., which standards would be assessed in each year of the transition period), culminating in the 2014–15 school year when the

² Students in the class of 2010 and beyond who fall short of the 240 (*Proficient*) standard on the grade 10 tests have been required to fulfill an Educational Proficiency Plan (EPP) in ELA and Mathematics during 11th and 12th grade (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/ccr/epp/qa.html>).

MCAS tests will assess a full range of the 2011 standards.

The PARCC Consortium

In the fall of 2008, with our assessment contract coming to a conclusion, we executed a procurement process to secure the next multi-year assessment contract. Among the components that we included in the Request for Proposals were a number of new development efforts to augment the existing MCAS. These included the development and piloting of online assessment administration, expanded performance-based components, and implementation of a history/social studies assessment. The fiscal downturn of FY 2009 and beyond resulted in substantial cuts to DESE's budget, including the MCAS budget. The resulting diminished budget was just enough to support the core MCAS assessment and was not sufficient to support the development of new components or expanded performance tasks.

A priority of the CCSS effort was to develop a set of common standards so that states could make use of an unprecedented opportunity to use federal funds for assessment with the Race to the Top assessment grant program. Two multi-state consortia were launched: PARCC and Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (known as "SBAC").

In 2010, after a careful review of both consortia and the needs of the state, Massachusetts joined PARCC as a "governing state" through a memorandum of agreement (MOA) jointly signed by Governor Patrick, former Secretary of Education Reville, and myself as Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education.

PARCC is a multi-state alliance working to create next-generation assessments in English language arts/literacy and mathematics aligned to the CCSS and anchored in what students need to be ready for college and careers. The consortium's work is funded by a four-year, \$186 million federal Race to the Top Assessment Grant.

PARCC is a state-led enterprise composed of "governing states" and "participating states." Governing states are committed to active involvement in the governance of the consortium and the development of the PARCC assessments. Massachusetts is a governing state in PARCC, and I serve as the chair of the PARCC Governing Board. The MOA we submitted stipulated that Massachusetts will adopt the PARCC ELA and mathematics assessments provided they are at least as comprehensive and rigorous as our current MCAS assessments, if not more so.

PARCC Assessment Design

The PARCC assessment system has several components. Each component will be computer-based and will use technology to incorporate innovations:

- **SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENTS:** A **performance-based assessment** administered after three quarters of the school year has been completed and a **computer-scored end-of-year assessment** for both ELA and mathematics in grades 3–11 designed to:

- make college- and career-readiness (CCR) and on-track-to-achieve-CCR determinations;
 - measure the full range of standards and the full continuum of student performance;
 - provide data for accountability uses, including measures of growth.
- **NON-SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENTS:** Three non-summative assessment components designed to generate timely information for informing instruction, interventions, and professional development during the school year:
 - a required assessment of students' speaking and listening skills
 - an optional diagnostic assessment
 - an optional mid-year performance-based assessment

Particularly significant for Massachusetts is that PARCC will assess writing at all grade levels (compared to grades 4, 7, and 10 with MCAS) and will include rigorous performance-based assessments that will better measure the knowledge, skills, and practices required for success in college and the workplace.

Because the PARCC assessments will be computer-based, they will provide opportunities to include innovative constructed-response items that promise to be more authentic and engaging for students. PARCC will produce more timely results for educators, and have the potential to reduce our costs for English language arts and mathematics assessments.

Time Line for Two-Year Transition from MCAS to PARCC

The Department envisions a two-year transition period to move from MCAS to PARCC. This will afford our teachers and schools additional time to refine their implementation of the 2011 frameworks in ELA and mathematics and to become acclimated to new online test administration procedures prior to the full-scale implementation of PARCC.

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

2013–2014 School Year	
✓ October or November 2013:	Following discussion in September, 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 as good as or 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 “as good as or better than” MCAS
Spring 2016:	Administration of PARCC operational tests, with the exception of grade 10 students who will continue to take MCAS to qualify for the Competency Determination

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 have implications for our FY 2015 budget recommendation.
- **Competency Determination:** 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. The current plan calls for students at least through the class of 2018 to continue to take MCAS for their CD.
- **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, first and foremost, 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 Associate Commissioner Elizabeth Davis will be at the Board meeting on September 24 to answer your questions. I look forward to discussing these issues with you on September 24 and throughout the fall.