MCAS Grade 8 Civics Standard Setting Meeting Executive Summary

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) partnered with Cognia to convene a panel of Massachusetts educators from August 5–7, 2025, to set achievement levels for the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) assessment for grade 8 civics. Twenty-four panelists from around the state participated in three days of training and decision-making with DESE content and Cognia standard setting specialists. The standard setting panelists reviewed test content and achievement level descriptors and followed the Modified Angoff standard setting method.

This report summarizes the process and results of collecting panelists' cut score recommendations and setting achievement levels for the MCAS Civics Grade 8 assessment.

MCAS Civics Standard Setting Process

Achievement levels are used to classify student achievement on an assessment. MCAS assessments have four achievement levels: Not Meeting Expectations, Partially Meeting Expectations, Meeting Expectations, and Exceeding Expectations. To classify student achievement into the four different levels, the following components are required: (1) policy-level definitions, (2) Achievement Level Descriptors (ALDs), and (3) cut scores. Policy-level definitions provide general descriptions of the knowledge, skills, and abilities students must demonstrate to be classified into each achievement level and apply to all courses or subject areas. ALDs illustrate the achievement levels in terms that are specific to a grade level within a course or subject area. Cut scores represent the lowest boundary of each achievement level on the scale.

The process of recommending performance standards for the MCAS tests was based on standard setting procedures that were used for the other MCAS tests, was in line with national best practice, and was conducted with review and approval of the MCAS Technical Advisory Committee (TAC). Results and details of the process are presented in the following sections.

Policy-level Definitions

Policy-level definitions for the MCAS achievement levels are shown in Table 1. The titles and descriptions of the achievement levels were defined as part of a cohesive assessment system. The achievement levels indicate a student's ability to demonstrate proficiency in relation to subject- and grade-specific expectations, as indicators of a student's readiness for the next grade level or college and career, as defined in the Massachusetts curriculum framework.

The Commissioner and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education approved the final policy-level definitions for MCAS assessments in March 2017.

Table 1. Policy-level Definitions for MCAS Achievement Levels

Achievement Level	Policy-level Definition
Exceeding Expectations	A student who performed at this level exceeded grade-level expectations by demonstrating mastery of the subject matter.
Meeting Expectations	A student who performed at this level met grade-level expectations and is academically on track to succeed in the current grade in this subject.
Partially Meeting Expectations	A student who performed at this level partially met grade-level expectations in this subject. The school, in consultation with the student's parent/guardian, should consider whether the student needs additional academic assistance to succeed in this subject.
Not Meeting Expectations	A student who performed at this level did not meet grade-level expectations in this subject. The school, in consultation with the student's parent/guardian, should determine the coordinated academic assistance and/or additional instruction the student needs to succeed in this subject.

Achievement Level Descriptors (ALDs)

The ALDs, shown in Appendix A, indicates the knowledge and skills that students performing at a given achievement level should be able to demonstrate with respect to grade 8 civics. Descriptors were developed for Partially Meeting Expectations, Meeting Expectations, and Exceeding Expectations only. A student classified as Not Meeting Expectations was defined as not having demonstrated the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to achieve Partially Meeting Expectations.

A multi-step process was used to develop, review, and approve the ALDs. Prior to the standard setting meeting, the DESE civics test developers created the ALDs based on the grade 8 civics standards in the 2018 Massachusetts History and Social Science Framework. Educators from the Grade 8 Civics Assessment Development Committee then met to review and edit the draft ALDs. A final summary report for the ALD meeting will be included in the full standard setting report.

Educators who participated in the standard setting meeting had the opportunity to provide suggestions and edits to the draft ALDs. To produce the final ALDs, DESE civics test developers edited the draft ALDs based on suggestions generated by the standard setting meeting panelists.

Cut Scores

The cut scores that were recommended for adoption for the MCAS Civics assessment are based on a standardized set of procedures implemented during the standard setting meeting. General methods used during the meeting for obtaining the recommended cut scores are provided below.

MCAS Civics Standard Setting Meeting and Results

From August 5 to August 7, 2025, after the first year of operational administration in spring 2025, a standard setting meeting was conducted to obtain cut score recommendations for the MCAS Grade 8 Civics test. There was one panel composed of 24 individuals, including teachers and non-teacher educators (e.g., administrators, curriculum specialists, professors of higher education). The participants were selected for the standard setting meeting to provide content expertise and to be representative of the state teaching population, including geographic region, gender, ethnicity, educational experience, community size, and community socioeconomic status.

The Extended Modified (Yes/No) Angoff method was used for the standard setting meeting (Davis & Moyer, 2015; Plake, et al. 2005). This is a content- and item-based method that leads participants

through a standardized process through which they consider student expectations, as defined by ALDs, and the individual items administered to students to recommend cut scores for each achievement level.

The process started with participants experiencing the test from the spring 2025 administration within the online testing system. Based on their experience with the test items and a review of the draft ALDs, panelists created borderline descriptions. During this process, participants worked together to modify the draft ALDs to create descriptors of the knowledge, skills, and abilities that "borderline" students, or those students who just barely enter an achievement level, would be expected to demonstrate.

During the judgment process, participants reviewed each item on the test, referencing the borderline descriptions, and answered the following question for each of the three achievement levels: *"How many points would a student with performance at the borderline of the [specific] achievement level likely earn if they answered the question?"*

The cut score recommendation for each individual participant was the expected raw score a borderline student at the respective achievement level would likely earn, calculated as the sum of the individual item judgments. For the purposes of the standard setting, "likely" was defined as two out three students at the borderline level. Each recommended cut score from the standard setting panel was the median of the recommendations from the individual panelists.

Additionally, the percentage of students who would be classified at each achievement level based on the panel's recommendations (i.e., impact data) was calculated. The impact data were determined using student data from the spring 2025 test administration. As part of the discussion of the round 2 judgments, the impact data based on the round 2 recommendations were presented, so the participants could see the resulting student achievement level classifications prior to making their round 3 recommendations. This information was also presented after the round 3 cut score recommendations were calculated.

Standard Setting Recommendations and Results

The results (round 3 recommendations) from the standard setting meeting for the Civics panel are presented in Table 2. Three raw score cut recommendations along with the associated standard errors are presented in the second and third column, while the last column shows the percentage of students classified into each of the four achievement levels. Figure 1 presents the impact data from the final recommendations (round 3) of the standard setting meeting as a stacked bar graph.

Table 2. MCAS Grade 8 Civics Test Standard Setting Recommendations from Round 3

Achievement Level	Raw Cut Score	Standard Error	Raw Cut Score Range	% Students
Not Meeting Expectations	N/A	N/A	0—14	16
Partially Meeting Expectations	15	0.844	15—32	51
Meeting Expectations	33	1.014	33—44	29
Exceeding Expectations	45	0.691	45—50	4

Figure 1. Impact Data for MCAS Grade 8 Civics Test based on Standard Setting Recommendations from Round 3
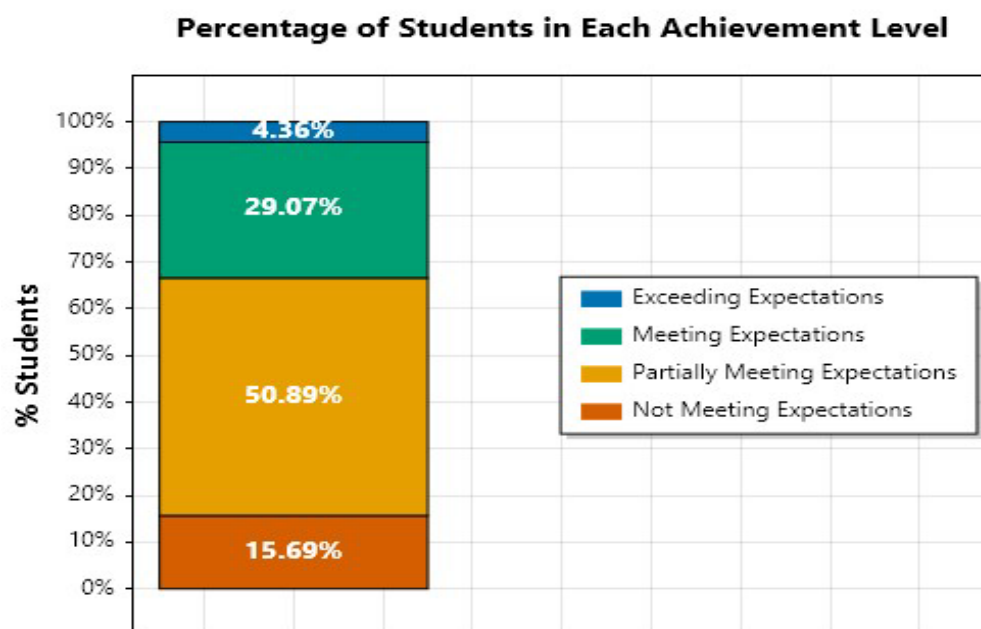
Discussion after Round 3

Once panelists concluded the third and final judgment round, the recommended cut scores and associated impact data were presented for feedback and discussion. During this final discussion, panelists considered the round 3 cut score recommendations alongside the impact data and provided feedback on the percentage of students in each achievement level based on their knowledge of the content and their experience as educators for grade 8 civics in Massachusetts. Panelists also considered their experience, judgments, and discussions from previous rounds. After some discussion, panelists were verbally prompted to indicate whether they thought the percentage of students in each achievement level should be higher, remain the same, or be lower. Panelists also had the option of indicating that they were undecided. Facilitators and support staff took notes on the discussion and recorded panelists' responses.

Post-Meeting Activities and Final Recommendations

Following the standard setting meeting, DESE conducted a policy review of the standard setting panel's cut score recommendations, including the results from the discussion after round 3 and the data from panelists' evaluations. A scaling process was implemented to determine the final cut scores, as described below.

Scaling

The process of determining the rules for transforming the raw scores to the final MCAS reporting scale was guided by several principles identified by DESE:

1. The cut score recommendations provided by the standard setting panel should be respected while considering information from panelists' discussions and evaluation survey responses.

2. The impact data from the final scaling solution should reflect a coherent assessment system across the content areas.

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3. The MCAS scaled score cuts for the three achievement levels should be the same across grades and tests.

4. The scaling solution should involve a single linear transformation, from the underlying IRT scale to the reporting MCAS scale.

5. The MCAS scaled score range should be the same across grades and tests.

The LOSS (i.e., lowest observable scale score) of 440 and HOSS (i.e., highest observable scale score) of 560 were held constant to maintain consistency in all MCAS assessments across grades and content areas. Additionally, to create common points of reference across the *assessments*, the same cuts on the MCAS scale for each achievement level were defined, with a Partially Meeting Expectations cut of 470, a Meeting Expectations cut of 500, and an Exceeding Expectations cut of 530. These requirements were established through discussion between DESE and Cognia psychometric staff after the 2017 standard setting, and a similar process was implemented to determine the final reporting scale and transformation rules for all MCAS standard settings since 2017.

Final Cut Scores

After the standard setting meeting, DESE considered the panelists' post-round 3 discussion as well as impact data from the MCAS tests in grade 8 English Language Arts, mathematics, and science and technology/engineering. DESE also reviewed data from panelists' evaluation survey responses. Based on their reviews, DESE determined that adjustments were needed to bring the Meeting Expectations and the Exceeding Expectations more in line with panelists' expectations and the other grade 8 MCAS tests. As a result of these discussions, the Meeting Expectations and Exceeding Expectations cuts were adjusted to 31 and 44, respectively. Table 3 presents the final cut scores in terms of raw scores and IRT scores, along with the raw score range and percentage students in each achievement level. Table 4 presents the final scaling constants, and Figure 2 presents the impact data from the final cut scores as a stacked bar graph.

Table 3. Final Cut Scores for the MCAS Grade 8 Civics Test

Achievement Level	Raw Score Cut	Raw Score Range	IRT Cut Scores	% Students in Level
Not Meeting Expectations	N/A	0–14	N/A	16
Partially Meeting Expectations	15	15–30	-1.1263	45
Meeting Expectations	31	31–43	0.2416	33
Exceeding Expectations	44	44–50	1.6091	6

Table 4. Scaling Constants

Scaling Constant	Value
Slope	21.9314
Intercept	494.7014

Figure 2. Impact Data for MCAS Grade 8 Civics Test based on Final Cut Scores

Percentage of Students in each Achievement Level

- Exceeding Expectations: 6.15
- Meeting Expectations: 32.84
- Partially Meeting Expectations: 45.32
- Not Meeting Expectations: 15.69