Massachusetts Study on Assessment Practices in Districts

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## Introduction

State standardized assessments for every child in reading and mathematics in Grades 3–8, and once in high school, have been a centerpiece of federal education law since 2002 when the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) mandated annual testing in all 50 states. At the same time, many districts have increased the number of locally administered assessments they conduct in order to better track student performance and progress and to improve instruction. Testing, however, has lately become a topic of increased scrutiny and conversation. Many people, including parents, educators, researchers, and policymakers, are questioning the number of tests that students are taking, the quality of the assessments, reasons they are taking them, and how test taking is ultimately affecting teaching and student learning.

### Study Overview

To gain a better understanding of the assessment practices in Massachusetts districts, in November 2014, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) contracted with American Institutes for Research (AIR) to conduct a study examining assessment preparation, practices, and supports in districts. The study consisted of two interrelated phases. The first phase, which took place from December 2014 through February 2015, built on the findings from a 2014 ESE-administered statewide survey of district leaders on their assessment practices.[[1]](#footnote-1) Phase 1 of the study gathered preliminary qualitative information from a representative sample of 35 districts across the state about their practices, procedures, and strategies related to districtwide assessments given to most or all students.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The information collected in Phase 1 informed the selection of a smaller sample of districts for more comprehensive data collection in Phase 2, which took place from March to June 2015. In this phase, the study was focused on student preparation for and scheduling of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) within the state-determined testing window. This report is based on the findings from Phase 2.

#### Phase 2 Sample

Phase 2 districts were chosen partly based on their reported test preparation or scheduling activities.[[3]](#footnote-3) Also, districts chosen were either in accountability level 3 or 4; these districts tended to administer similar amounts of assessments to their students (based on Phase 1 data). One district each (identified as Districts 1–4) was selected to meet the following conditions of interest to this study:

* Average achievement and growth with relatively less effort expended on MCAS test preparation (District 1)
* Average achievement and growth with relatively greater effort expended on MCAS test preparation (District 2)
* Effective practices related to the scheduling of MCAS (District 3)
* Weaker practices related to the scheduling of MCAS (District 4)

The districts also were selected to be broadly representative of districts in Massachusetts. The four districts that participated in Phase 2 are located in different regions of the state: Pioneer Valley, Central, Northeast, and Southeast. Each district oversees five or six schools, with total student enrollment ranging from a low of approximately 2,700 to a high of nearly 7,000 students. In terms of performance on MCAS English language arts (ELA) and mathematics assessments, Districts 1 and 2 were comparable as were Districts 3 and 4. About 60 percent of students in Districts 1 and 2 were proficient or higher on the spring 2014 tests, and about 50 percent scored proficient or higher in Districts 3 and 4.

#### Data Collection and Analysis

Phase 2 entailed a closer examination of these districts’ assessment structures, practices, and tools and provided a chance for participating districts to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of their required assessments and to share promising practices or strategies related to the preparation for and timing of state and local assessments so that instructional time is not compromised. Data collection included completion of an assessment inventory for each grade span and in-depth interviews with a purposive sample of district and school staff members. Across the four districts, a total of 30 district and school administrators or coordinators and 32 teachers or instructional coaches were interviewed (Table 1).

Table 1. Interviews Conducted

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| District | District and School Administrators or Coordinators | Teachers or Instructional Coaches |
| 1 | 8 | 9 |
| 2 | 11 | 9 |
| 3 | 6 | 8 |
| 4 | 5 | 6 |
| **Total** | 30 | 32 |

Data analysis for this study involved a systematic data-reduction approach. Using this approach, AIR researchers thoroughly reviewed interview transcripts and inventories for each district and constructed a matrix that provided a concise summary for the topics of interest for this study from each data source. This type of matrix construction and analysis allowed researchers to obtain a quick understanding of major findings for each district as well as which data sources to explore in greater detail for additional information or evidence.

Based on the data collected, key findings related to MCAS preparation and scheduling are presented in this report, including descriptions of district practices. Also reported are findings related to district assessment programs, including the number and types of assessments administered at each grade level and overall perceptions of the programs. By describing how districts approach MCAS preparation and scheduling as well as the structure and content of their assessment programs, a key objective of this report is to share relevant and potentially useful information with other districts and schools in Massachusetts.

### Limitations

The results presented in this report are based on information collected from stakeholders in a small sample of districts and their respective schools. Only interview and assessment inventory data were collected, limiting opportunities to triangulate findings across different methods, such as surveys and observation data. Finally, although districts were selected to meet predetermined conditions related to MCAS preparation and scheduling practices as suggested by Phase 1 results, data collected and analyzed during Phase 2 resulted in a more nuanced picture of each district’s practices, and less clarity in the relationship between districts and their assigned types. For example, districts were selected, in part, to allow for an exploration of stronger and weaker practices for scheduling state exams. However, in all four case studies, district offices were found to have a very small role in scheduling decisions, as they defer to building administrators. This finding, along with the specifics about scheduling shared by respondents, has shifted the question from a comparison between districts with stronger and weaker scheduling practices to an exploration of the factors influencing scheduling decisions in individual schools.

## Focus on MCAS

At the core of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) are a number of provisions requiring states to have comprehensive student testing programs in place. MCAS is Massachusetts’ response to this federal requirement. MCAS tests are administered annually to students in Grades 3–8 and Grade 10 to assess standards achievement for students, schools, and districts. At the high school level, passing MCAS tests in ELA, mathematics, and science and technology/engineering is a state graduation requirement.

### Student Preparation for MCAS

According to data gathered for this study, preparation of students for MCAS involved a number of strategies and activities at the district, school, and classroom levels. All case-study districts prepared their students by focusing attention on curricula and instruction that are aligned with state standards, and all spent at least some time on review of subject-area content and test-taking strategies. The breadth and depth of test preparation activities, however, varied among districts, as did the level of district involvement.

For example, a district that placed relatively less emphasis on MCAS test preparation while achieving solid test results (District 1) did not give schools any specific instructions concerning student preparation and generally downplayed the importance of MCAS among staff, particularly the use of MCAS results in educator evaluation. Preparing students for MCAS in this district was largely teacher-determined and did not involve an overt set of activities organized by the school or district to purposely prepare students for the tests. Several educators expressed the opinion that, in their experience, explicit MCAS test preparation was not useful and could be counterproductive if students feel overwhelmed. According to respondents in this district, the greatest challenge was adequately preparing students who are below grade level in tested subject areas.

Conversely, in a district that placed greater emphasis on MCAS preparation while also achieving solid test results (District 2), the district encouraged and supported intensive school-based preparation initiatives during the school day, before school, and after school in the weeks leading up to MCAS. The district also actively disseminated resources and advocated the use of specific instructional methods to boost student performance in areas of weakness based on previous MCAS results. District 2 respondents reported the lack of time to sufficiently integrate test preparation activities into regular instruction as a major challenge in effectively preparing students. This may be related to the perceived need for targeted test-preparation activities and strong district involvement.

Table 2 contrasts Districts 1 and 2. District 1 demonstrates a more flexible teacher-determined strategy, whereas District 2 employs a more intensive district-led approach to test preparation.

Table 2. MCAS Test Preparation

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| District 1 | District 2 |
| **Less Effort on MCAS Test Preparation** | **Greater Effort on MCAS Test Preparation** |
| * District leaders deemphasize achievement on MCAS as a “hallmark of a good school.” * Teachers and teacher teams are given the autonomy to decide what strong standards-based instruction looks like and how best to prepare their students for MCAS. * Respondents described instruction that challenges and engages their students but is grounded in what students need to learn based on state standards. * In the weeks before MCAS, teachers may review academic content and test-taking strategies with their students, but content, format, and timing of these preparation activities are determined by individual teachers. | * A key districtwide initiative is intensive MCAS preparation camps in ELA and mathematics. Schools are mandated by the district to use the two weeks prior to MCAS to prepare their students, but schools have the flexibility to structure the camps as they want. The camps address content and test-taking strategies and focus on increasing students’ endurance for the lengthy tests. All students in Grades 3–10 participate in MCAS camps, but high-need students are specifically targeted. * Recognizing that open-response questions are a weakness based on previous MCAS results, the district disseminated instructional materials and information about strategies for improving students’ performance on such questions. |

MCAS preparation activities in the two other case-study districts were neither strongly district-led nor teacher-directed; they fell approximately in the middle. Preparation activities in these districts included the following:

* District-mandated half days throughout the school year are devoted to MCAS preparation, particularly to types of questions that were identified as a weakness throughout the district.
* An intervention block in the daily schedule is used to support students in standards achievement and, in some grades, for administering periodic mock MCAS exams.
* In classrooms, teachers review test-taking strategies and assign or create MCAS-type questions that align with current units of study.

### Scheduling and Administration of MCAS

A notable finding of this study is that district offices did not, in policy or practice, influence MCAS scheduling practices in their individual school buildings. District administrators in all four cases indicated that they defer to the knowledge and experience of building administrators to create their own MCAS administration schedules.

This finding was substantiated by building-level administrators, who consistently indicated that although support is available, they do not receive direction from the district office, nor do they typically seek district guidance about scheduling.[[4]](#footnote-4) Thus, the study shifted to examine scheduling practices at the school level instead of the district level.

#### School-Level Scheduling Decisions

With autonomy from district offices, scheduling is approached differently across buildings in the case-study districts. Data from the case studies suggest several parameters within the state- determined window, during which administrators, with input from teachers, may schedule state exams. These parameters impact the time frame for MCAS testing in each school as follows:

* Administering MCAS at the beginning, middle, or end of the state-determined window
* Whether to test grade levels on different days or simultaneously
* Whether MCAS sections are administered on consecutive days or if rest days between sessions will be included

Respondents in all four case-study districts said that providing accommodations for students with individualized education programs (IEPs), in addition to the required testing conditions for general education students, is the main factor driving a school team’s decisions on these parameters. Limited space and properly qualified staff to fill required proctoring roles also shape scheduling decisions for each building. School administrators review the parameters and available options in terms of staff and space when developing an assessment schedule that will provide an appropriate assessment experience for all students. Each of the scheduling parameters is explored below.

**Scheduling Within the State Window**. Schools try to strike a workable balance when choosing when to administer MCAS exams within the state-defined window. Many teachers commented that pushing the assessment later in the window would provide more time for review or content coverage, which they said they need. Administrators, however, pointed out that families have been known to pull students out for travel in the spring even while testing is under way. This pushes administrators to seek a time in the middle of the window, which provides teachers with a few additional days for instruction while also minimizing the risk of high rates of student absence that may occur toward the end of the window. Administrators also must ensure that sufficient make-up days are included in the schedule. Finally, a few individuals said that testing at the beginning of the window has the benefits of getting the assessment “out of the way as soon as possible” and ensuring sufficient time to return MCAS test materials to the state.

**Testing Grades Simultaneously or on Different Days.** Schools may choose to focus on assessing one grade at a time, several together, or all grades simultaneously, with valid reasons for choosing each. Electing to assess a smaller number of grade levels at a time may be more common in elementary schools. In one elementary school, teachers reported that by focusing on the testing needs of individual grade levels, first-time testers (in Grade 3) are more likely to have a familiar teacher or paraprofessional educator proctoring their exam, which educators see as a valuable support for students. When the school tested all grades simultaneously, coverage requirements meant that some students were paired with unfamiliar educators as their proctors, which could make certain students anxious or uncomfortable. In another school, a teacher said that the school “doesn’t stand still” when MCAS testing is under way; most students experience a normal day while other grades are testing. Elsewhere, teachers said they prefer proctoring on days when fewer grades are being assessed, as the “chaos” of teachers collecting testing materials is reduced. Finally, in some buildings, testing one or two grades at a time is necessary, due to space or staff limitations. The drawbacks of testing only one or two grades per day, according to respondents, include living with the underlying tension of testing in the building for a longer period of time, and having less potential time available at the beginning of the testing window to teach or review content or less time at the end for make-up testing.

Some schools in the study assess all grades simultaneously. This approach is possible in buildings with sufficient staff and space to meet all required accommodations at once. Middle schools, often in stand-alone buildings with all grade levels participating in MCAS, are more likely to assess all grades on the same days. Respondents said whole-school testing allows everyone to be focused on the assessment and creates an atmosphere of solidarity. It also results in faster completion of MCAS testing and return to normal instruction and schedule of school activities.

**Administering MCAS Sections on Consecutive Days or With Rest Days.** Whether students take the different sections of MCAS on consecutive days is mainly determined by educators’ perceptions of the benefits of finishing the test process quickly versus providing students with a rest day. Although concentrating exam days results in fewer days in “MCAS mode,” many respondents are concerned that students may be “exhausted” and will perform below their abilities on the second day. For example, an administrator described a current experiment involving adding rest days between administering MCAS sections, saying that although teachers and students prefer to get MCAS done more quickly, rest days in between testing sessions might improve results. In most locations, rest days are scheduled before the third day of testing for Grade 4 students taking the long composition exam and Grade 5 students taking the science exam.

**Teachers’ Perceptions of MCAS Scheduling.** Teachers’ responses were consistent across districts regarding the efficiency and effectiveness of the scheduling performed by their building administrators. Several teachers noted that their school has experimented with different approaches over the years and has identified smooth processes. Although admitting that it is not easy, one respondent said, “After you do it for a while, you just kind of know what you have to do.” Others commented that their school has recently tried changing how MCAS exams are scheduled in response to ongoing teacher input into test scheduling decisions. No respondents indicated they are unsatisfied or frustrated with their building administration’s scheduling approach or the minimal role taken by their district in MCAS administration.

Overall, findings from the study suggest that many districts have a limited role in state assessment scheduling and that scheduling practices in schools are determined mainly by limits imposed by physical space and staff availability for meeting required accommodations. The next section further explores differences in autonomy among case-study schools in making their scheduling decisions.

#### Autonomy in Scheduling State Assessments

Initially, this study sought to compare stronger and weaker scheduling practices. However, as described above, findings have indicated that scheduling practices are made in response to a range of constraints, with few parameters available to building administrators as they attempt to optimize the assessment environment for all students. Decisions are generally made in response to building-specific conditions, including the grades and number of students served, the number and specific requirements for special-needs accommodations, and the separate spaces and trained staff needed for test proctoring. As such, these decisions cannot be normatively compared across sites. In exploring differences in state assessment scheduling across case-study districts, however, building-level autonomy to meet each building’s needs emerged as a noteworthy factor.

Comparing Districts 3 and 4 illustrates the role of building-level autonomy in scheduling practices. District 4 stands out with an additional constraint not observed by other case-study districts. District 4 administrators described that they coordinate testing schedules across the four elementary schools in the district, to ensure test security. This approach causes the constraints of each elementary school building to be felt in the other three schools. For example, one building does not have enough space to meet all the special-needs accommodations required for their students at one time, so the school can test only a few grades at a time. Thus, schedules for the other three elementary schools—which may have sufficient space to meet their accommodation requirements—also must test only a few grades at a time. Furthermore, staff in one District 4 elementary school would like to try including rest days in its testing schedule, but they need to convince the administrations of the other three schools to incorporate this change. In contrast, as previously described, one school administrator in District 3 elected to add a rest day between test sections to see if student scores would improve as a result. This type of autonomy was echoed by other school-level respondents in the district, who also expressed appreciation for the flexibility.

### Student Time During MCAS

As described above, both preparation of students for MCAS and scheduling of MCAS can impact instructional time and quality. To further understand instructional time as it relates to MCAS, student time during MCAS testing also was explored in this study, particularly the extent to which instructional time is maintained for tested and non-tested students.

#### Tested Students

Respondents in all four districts reported that tested students return to their regular classrooms after testing. Because MCAS tests are untimed, students may take as long as they need to finish (up to the end of the entire school day if necessary). Teachers are uncertain how many students they will have in their classrooms and are, therefore, reluctant to introduce new content or concepts with some students missing. Also, even if all students are present, respondents pointed out that most students are mentally exhausted after MCAS testing, so introducing new material is pointless. According to respondents, instruction typically involved reviewing or reinforcing previously taught content.

Maintaining Instructional Time of Tested Students

After MCAS testing, students at a middle school in District 1 attend all their classes in succession as they would on a normal school day. The only difference is that classes are shorter and instruction tends to be more project- or activity-based to keep tired students engaged. This strategy was instituted “to make sure instruction continued” to some degree in all classes despite the disruption in the school day due to MCAS.

#### Non-Tested Students

For most non-tested students across districts, there is minimal disruption in their school day. Educators explained that the major change is that lunch and specials, such as music and art, may be scheduled earlier for non-tested students. This is to give tested students uninterrupted and longer blocks of time for testing. Also, supplemental services for non-tested students may be disrupted, as these staff members—such as guidance counselors, instructional coaches, and special education teachers—may be needed for test proctoring.

In two districts, non-tested high school students experience a later start in their school day when MCAS testing takes place. This is to give tested students an undisturbed testing environment (and, presumably, a better chance of performing well). Thus, for the days that MCAS testing occurs, non-tested students miss half of their school day.

Maintaining Instructional Time of Non-Tested Students

In high schools in which non-tested students have a delayed start to the school day, students are presented with options to preserve some level of study while their peers are taking MCAS. In one District 1 high school, students are given the option of going to school in the morning for an extended study period in the cafeteria. These students also may be assigned extra homework by their teachers. In a District 2 high school, non-tested students in Advanced Placement classes are offered the opportunity to take a practice AP exam while other students are testing. This was reportedly well received by students.

### Usefulness of MCAS

Across all districts, administrators and teachers interviewed identified multiple uses for MCAS data, although administrators tended to see MCAS data as more useful than teachers did. Administrators described multiple uses for MCAS data, from reviewing curriculum to forming professional development plans to creating school and district improvement plans. Teachers use MCAS data to select critical standards to focus on, form initial instructional groups of students based on scores, and plan the scope and sequence for instruction across the year, saving topics not likely to be on the MCAS for after the exam. Teachers in several districts described valuing MCAS for setting clear standards for students to achieve at each grade level and, by extension, providing clear guidance on what teachers should be teaching to support their students’ achievement. They described moving away, over the years, from teaching content from curriculum packages to conceptualizing the learning standards and thinking actively about how to build students’ skills to meet them.

## District Assessment Programs

Although preparation of students for and scheduling of MCAS was a primary focus of this study, MCAS is but one set of multiple assessments administered in districts. Recent studies have shown that for students across all grade spans, district tests consume more time than state-required assessments (Lazarin, 2014; Nelson, 2013). Thus, district assessment programs also were examined to understand how state and district assessments fit together to inform teaching and student learning.

Overall, substantial variation was found in assessment programs across the four case-study districts, in terms of the overall design and specific components of each program. Patterns and variations in each are explored in the sections below.

### Program Design

District assessment program design considers attributes of the program as a whole, including the distribution of assessments across grade spans, the amount of time assessments require, and educators’ perceptions of the program.

**District Assessments and Time.** The amount of time absorbed by district assessment programs varied widely across cases. The time estimates provided in Table 3 are approximate. Estimates provided by respondents in minutes for each assessment have been multiplied by the number of sessions each assessment is administered per year and rounded into days to allow for comparing district programs proportionally.

Table 3. District Assessments and Approximate Time

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Grades | District 1 | District 2 | District 3 | District 4 |
| K–5 | 1 day | 5 ½ days | 1 ½ days | 8 ½ days |
| 6–8 | 1 day | 0 days | 1 day | 6 ½ days |
| 9–12 | 4 days | 1 day | 6 ½ days | 3 days |

Districts 1 and 3 are the most similar, with a relatively small amount of time devoted to assessment in the elementary and middle schools and more time required in the high schools as they require regular assessments in each academic course. Information collected in District 2 shows that in the 2014–15 school year, the bulk of assessments were administered in the elementary school, with no required assessments in the middle school and few in the high school. It is important to note that District 2 is developing common unit assessments (which assess all students in the same course, districtwide, as each curriculum unit is completed) for middle and high school courses. District 4 stands out as requiring the largest time commitment across grade spans. In addition to a K–12 benchmark system, the district requires weekly common assessments in Grades K–8 and monthly writing prompts in Grades 2–5 as well as diagnostic screens in the elementary grades every six weeks.

**Perceptions of District Assessment Programs.** Educators’ opinions across all case studies were balanced between viewing the amount of required testing as “about right” and “too much.” No respondents in any district said their district does not test enough.

Overall, most educators agree with the direction and general parameters of their district’s assessment program. No respondents expressed strong disagreement with their district’s program. At the same time, most respondents could identify specific changes they would make to the assessments they use. Suggestions for changing district assessment programs included eliminating or reducing administrations of some diagnostic screens, reducing the number of administrations of some exams by eliminating midyear or summative test sessions, and streamlining certain exam processes.

Perceptions of specific assessments can vary widely in districts. Within each district, consensus regarding the usefulness of individual assessments across district administrators, building administrators, coordinators, and teachers is rare. Disagreement regarding the utility of an assessment frequently divides across job lines, with administrators sharing a view that is different from the teachers’ perspective. For example, in one case, district and school administrators speak highly of the new districtwide benchmark exam, noting its potential to support the district’s efforts to align instruction. Teachers, however, viewed the benchmark more skeptically, mainly noting insufficient professional development to understand the data generated.

Differing Views About Assessments

A high school in District 2 administers the PSAT to all Grade 10 students, through grant funding. Administrators indicated the assessment is useful because, in their eyes, the demands of the PSAT help to guide planning for Grades 9 and 10, and the results can be used to nominate students for Advanced Placement courses. Teachers, however, consistently described the assessment as not useful, indicating they do not use results for making placement decisions. One teacher commented, “I don’t think [results] are as clear of an indicator of performance as other assessments.”

Finally, teachers in several case-study districts pointed to barriers to fully using the data generated by their district’s assessment program. In one district, teachers described needing more professional development about the new districtwide benchmark exam to understand what it can tell them about students’ needs. In another, teachers commented that an assessment used to inform teachers about students’ reading levels is not useful because their reading curriculum does not incorporate instruction to students in leveled reading groups. In a third district, teachers stated that data from a particular assessment are not included on the agenda for team meetings; without team support, teachers were not using the data to inform instruction. Finally, several teachers across districts commented that although interim assessments show student weaknesses, teachers lack time to reteach topics.

### Program Components

Each district in the study has incorporated different components in its assessment programs for determining student progress. Three of the four districts use districtwide benchmark exams to track student progress on academic standards in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics. Only District 2 does not use a districtwide benchmark exam. Among the three districts using K–12 benchmarks, District 1 is distinct in its use of locally written exams, while the other two use purchased assessment systems. All four districts also incorporate writing prompts in their programs, although across different grade spans. Only District 1 requires teachers to administer common writing prompts across Grades 1–12. Districts 2 and 4 administer prompts in the elementary grades, and District 3 requires common open responses only in Grades 9–12.

At the elementary level, all four districts use additional diagnostic screening assessments to track progress in reading, and three of the four use more than one screening tool. The use of these reading assessments is contentious in all four districts, with no consensus on which, if any, of the screening assessments the district should keep.

Use of Diagnostic Screening Assessments

District 4 has been using two early literacy assessment tools for about five years. As other components of the assessment program have evolved, the role for these two diagnostic screens has become less clear. Portions of each screening tool test the same skills, and the individual screens also test the same skills as those assessed by the new districtwide benchmark. Each assessment is valued by some educators and dismissed by others. The district is deciding whether to keep both, one, or neither of the assessments.

At the high school level, three of the four districts require quarterly or midterm exams and finals for academic courses. Only District 2 does not currently require regular exams in high school courses, but common unit tests were under development for high school courses in the 2014–15 school year.

The assessment program in each district features a mix of purchased assessment systems and district-written assessments. Each type of assessment has its supporters and skeptics, though district-written assessments are seen as more useful than purchased systems. In several districts, educators indicated that teachers trust locally written assessments more than purchased systems. The practice of involving teachers in writing exams is recommended by assessment experts as a way for teachers to deepen their understanding of academic standards as they maintain alignment between the standards, curriculum, and assessment (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Districts using teacher-written assessments could be viewed as in line with this recommendation.

Purchased Assessment Systems Versus District-Written Assessments

District 1 has developed locally written benchmark exams in mathematics and writing that are administered districtwide. Teachers described greater confidence in the validity of student results from assessments that teachers contributed to developing. However, teachers and administrators also are concerned about the strength of the districts’ overall writing program, and are considering purchasing a writing curriculum package, complete with aligned writing prompts and rubrics for scoring them. Similarly, the district is considering a new mathematics program for the 2015–16 school year, complete with aligned assessments. Hence, the district may require teachers to administer the assessments included in the program, making the future for the locally written mathematics benchmark assessments unclear.

Finally, a component of all assessment programs is the ongoing formative assessments used by teachers to check for understanding. The depth of this assessment practice varies by teacher, is difficult to capture, and is outside the scope of this study on district assessment practices. However, assessment experts emphasize the value of assessments that are frequent and embedded in daily curriculum (Nelson, 2013) to deepen teachers’ understanding of curriculum, assessment processes, and student needs. Among the case-study districts, teachers in District 4 described searching for a new balance between formative assessments and the new districtwide common mathematics assessment, as teachers pulled their formative tools together to develop the common assessment. Districts seeking to support teachers in writing districtwide assessments will need to be aware of this potential tension between formative assessments used by individual teachers and common, locally written assessments that will be used by all grade-level teachers within the district.

## Conclusion

The results of this study, based on data collected from four case-study districts in Massachusetts, suggest that preparation and scheduling practices are highly context-driven and can evolve given local priorities, conditions, and leadership. Strategies to prepare students were largely determined at the school level, although some degree of district involvement in the form of guidance or expectations was evident in districts. In the district selected for greater efforts on MCAS test preparation (District 2), the district office took a more active role in shaping preparation activities for the district as a whole, including advocating for the use of specific instructional strategies and materials. Conversely, in the selected for less effort on MCAS preparation (District 1), district leadership took a more hands-off approach, leaving it up to schools and teachers to determine the best preparation activities to use with their students. Although different, both approaches were accepted by respondents in each district and undertaken with good intentions to support students and teachers.

Scheduling practices were even more context-driven at the school level. The study found that district offices in the case-study districts did not influence MCAS scheduling practices in their school buildings. Rather, district leaders defer to the knowledge and experience of building administrators to create their own MCAS administration schedules, taking into account staffing to support students in need of accommodations, space, teacher input, and other factors. In the case-study districts, building administrators work with their faculties to respond to constraints while adjusting what they do each year to optimize testing conditions for their students. As multiple respondents in all four districts described, the process is not easy, but “schools find a way” to make it work each year. By all accounts, this approach, although idiosyncratic, works for each district and its schools.

### Improving Assessment Practices and Programs

Based on recent research about assessment practices, districts and schools may want to consider the following suggestions as they contemplate how best to prepare students for assessments and increase educator understanding of assessment data:

* Ensure coherence and clarity in assessment programs by communicating the purpose and value of all required assessments across district and school administrative levels (Davidson & Frohbieter, 2011).
* Refrain from test preparation and other practices and activities that may increase anxiety among teachers and students (Lazarin, 2014). These practices include (but are not limited to) administering practice versions of tests and holding school assemblies that elevate the importance of tests. Test preparation should center on and be embedded in high-quality instruction aligned to rigorous academic standards—not be an all-important one-time- only event that schools build toward for the greater part of the school year.
* Establish professional learning communities and provide training and time for educators to understand different assessments and make effective use of assessment data (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Herman, Osmundson, & Dietel, 2010; Nelson, 2013; Northwest Evaluation Association [NWEA], 2012). Improving assessment literacy is important for teachers as well as school and district administrators.
* Engage teachers in assessment development and scoring as it enables teachers to deeply understand the standards, thereby improving their professional practice and capacity to support student learning and achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2013; Rosemartin, 2013).

For districts who wish to critically evaluate their assessment programs, the following are principles of effective assessment systems supported by research to keep in mind:

* Ensure that feedback from assessments is timely, specific, understandable to the receiver, and actionable (McTighe & O’Connor, 2005; NWEA, 2012).
* Consult teachers about the assessments they find most useful to their instructional practice (Lazarin, 2014; Nelson, 2013; NWEA, 2012).
* Consider the costs of assessments, including test preparation and lost instructional time (Nelson, 2013).
* Prioritize quality over quantity when it comes to required assessments (Darling-Hammond, 2010).
* Incorporate different kinds of data to evaluate students (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2013; Kamenetz, 2015; Nelson, 2013, Rosemartin, 2013). Examples include data from rapid assessments that are curriculum embedded, performance- or portfolio-based assessments that provide evidence of students’ higher-order thinking skills on authentic and challenging tasks, and social and emotional skills surveys that measure qualities such as grit, perseverance, and curiosity.

In a recent report by NWEA (2012), the authors point out that no single assessment can provide the breadth and depth of information needed to understand student learning and support improved instruction. They distinguish assessments *for* learning—formative and interim assessments used to track progress over time, diagnose student needs, and inform everyday teaching and learning—and assessments *of* learning—annual state assessments and end-of-course or subject exams that measure student performance at a specific moment during the school year. They further state that a balance of both types of assessments is needed to create a sensible and coherent assessment system.

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## Appendix. District Assessment Reports

### District 1: Review of Assessment Practices

August 2015

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The Assessment Program in District 1

In District 1, the district requires the use of district-developed mathematics and writing assessments in Grades K–12. On the other hand, the district requires the use of a purchased system for assessing English language arts (ELA) at the elementary and middle school levels. In the high school, the district requires midterms and finals to be administered for each academic course.

Respondents consistently said that little has changed in the district assessment program in recent years. One notable exception mentioned by nearly all respondents is the move from more individual teacher-developed formative assessments to common exams in mathematics and writing, as teachers have pooled their quick, in-class assessment questions into common exams. These exams were then developed further for use as the District-Determined Measures (DDMs) required by the state in teacher evaluations. Several administrators and teachers discussed positive outcomes from these developments; educators consider the common assessments to be more useful than purchased systems and say they have richer data discussions in team meetings with results from common assessments. Some teachers, however, indicated that the role of flexible, in-class formative assessments is less clear now that mathematics and writing assessments have become more formalized.

Current Assessments

The student assessment inventory completed by participating districts was adapted from the *Student Assessment Inventory for School Districts* with permission from Achieve, Inc. ([www.achieve.org/assessmentinventory](http://www.achieve.org/assessmentinventory)). According to Achieve, the inventory “supports a process to evaluate the assessment students currently take and then determine the minimum testing necessary to serve essential diagnostic, instructional and accountability purposes.” For this study, AIR and ESE asked districts to list all state- and district-required assessments across subjects for each grade span. Districts completed the inventory prior to interviews with district and school staff. During interviews, respondents were asked to describe how data from each assessment were used in the school or district and rate the usefulness of each assessment.[[5]](#footnote-5) Based on the information provided, Table 1 includes state- and district-required assessments for each grade span per month.

Table 1. Assessments in District 1 by Grade Span and Month

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Sept | Oct | Nov | Dec | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | June |
| K–5 | TS Gold  BAS  Writing Prompt | DMA |  | TS Gold | BAS (some schools)  SRI/SMI  Writing Prompt | DMA  ACCESS\* |  | MCAS ELA\* | TS Gold  SRI/SMI  MCAS Math\* | DMA  BAS  Writing Prompt |
| 6–8 | SRI | DMA  Writing Prompt |  |  |  | DMA  ACCESS\* | Writing Prompt | SRI  MCAS ELA\* | MCAS Math\*  MCAS Sci\* | DMA |
| 9–12 | Writing Prompt | DMA  PSAT |  | Midterms |  | DMA  MCAS Bio\*  ACCESS\* | MCAS ELA\* |  | MCAS Math\* | DMA  Writing Prompt  Finals  MCAS STE\* |

Notes: Placement of some assessments is approximate. Not all assessments are required for each grade within a grade span. BAS is used three times per year in some schools and two times annually in others. Some grades administer Writing Prompts more frequently.

\* Denotes state-required assessments. All others are district-required.

District- Required Assessments

Teaching Strategies Gold (TS GOLD).TS Gold, an assessment tool for tracking development through the kindergarten year, was available to the district as a recipient of a Race to the Top kindergarten grant. All respondents said the assessment is used as intended but described it as time consuming and insufficiently rigorous. Respondents consistently ranked TS Gold as *not useful*. Several respondents reported that the district is discontinuing it.

Benchmark Assessment System (BAS).BAS is used in Grades K–5 to measure fluency, accuracy, and reading comprehension. Elementary educators use the assessment to inform classroom instruction, plan reteaching, form leveled reading groups, and identify interventions for individual students. Data from the BAS are the main source of information for data team discussions about reading development. An administrator mentioned that teachers have had a lot of training in using BAS data. All respondents agreed that it is used as intended and is seen as *very useful*.

Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) and Scholastic Math Inventory (SMI). SRI and SMI are used in Grades 2–3, and some Grade 4 and 5 classrooms. SRI also is used in all middle school grades. The assessments screen for needed interventions in reading and identify student reading levels. At the elementary level, all respondents said the SRI and SMI are not used as intended. An administrator specified that they are not detailed enough, and additional screenings are needed to gain sufficient information to make decisions for individual students.

Most elementary-level respondents said the assessments are *not useful*, although two qualified their responses to say that the SMI is *somewhat useful*. Most respondents stated that the data collected through the BAS are more detailed and the SRI or SMI should be used only as a secondary screen, to determine Tier 3 placements. Several respondents reported that the district may stop administering them to the general population and use them only for additional data when needed.

In the middle school, the SRI is used as a diagnostic tool to track student reading levels, and as a pre- and post-benchmark test to show student growth. Middle school respondents said the SRI is used as intended, and administrators and teachers rated it as *useful*.

Midterms and Finals. At the high school level, teachers are required to administer midterm and final exams in every course to assess mastery of course material. The assessments are developed by department. Teachers use midterms as a progress check and finals in calculating course grades and to determine eligibility for graduation. Administrators noted that midterms and finals also are used to assess instruction. A teacher said that scoring the assessments together in team meetings allows for more discussion about meeting academic standards in each department.

All respondents said the midterms and finals are *useful*. An administrator commented that teachers’ involvement in developing the assessments increases their utility.

Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test (PSAT).The PSAT is required for all Grade 10 students as preparation for the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and Advanced Placement (AP) exams. In this district, the PSAT has been required, as part of a grant, for the past two years. The general purpose of the assessment is to predict performance on the SAT and AP exams, although an administrator said that it also drives the curriculum for Grades 9 and 10. Respondents said it is used as intended.

Responses to the assessment were mixed. Several respondents said they are not yet sure about how useful the PSAT is, as the 2014–15 school year is the second year it has been required. An administrator said it is *very useful* for planning curriculum. Teachers were less enthusiastic, with responses ranging between *not useful* and *useful*. One teacher said the results do not yet inform instruction and that the material is above grade level, so lower scores are to be expected. In contrast, another teacher said that analyzing results can help teachers determine if students’ weaknesses stem from particular question types or gaps in their academic development.

District Math Assessment (DMA). The district has been developing its own mathematics assessment in recent years. Teachers in several grade spans have chosen the DMA for use as DDMs for teacher evaluation; this additional purpose has prompted some teacher teams to revisit the assessment. The intended use of the DMA is to inform instruction, form instructional groups, and track student growth in mathematics. Results also are used in common planning meetings to discuss curriculum. All respondents said the assessment is used as intended.

Nearly all educators find the assessment to be *useful*, although in upper elementary grades, teachers said their DMA is not yet useful, as they are modifying it to meet assessment and teacher evaluation purposes. These teachers anticipate improvement as the assessment develops.

Writing Prompts.District teachers have developedcommon writing prompts in each grade level. The prompts are administered in Grades 1–12, usually three times per year in elementary and middle school grades, and twice per year in high school courses, although some grades assess writing more frequently. It appears that writing prompts have been in place for several years in earlier grades, and have only recently been developed at the high school level. In Grades 1–8, prompts are intended to assess writing skills in ELA. In the high school, writing prompts are administered in all core courses and some special subjects. Writing prompts are used to set a baseline and track progress toward the standards throughout the year, focusing on one genre to allow teachers to track development of specific skills. Teachers also discuss results in common planning time to determine a departmental focus for developing writing skills. In the high school, the second administration is given two months before the ELA MCAS to identify weaknesses that teachers can “attack as a team.” All respondents said the writing prompts are used as intended.

Most respondents said the writing prompts are *very useful*, with a few administrators and teachers in elementary and middle schools rating them as *somewhat useful*. One elementary-level respondent said a scoring rubric used is above grade level, reducing the accuracy of results. However, the respondent also noted that the use of writing rubrics has improved in recent years. A middle school teacher said that in the middle of the year, teachers know where their students are in writing, and suggested that the midyear prompt is not needed. Many respondents said the introduction of a writing program, complete with assessments, may be an improvement to make writing data more useful.

State-Required Assessments

Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State to State for English Language Learners (ACCESS for ELLs).This federal- and state-required assessment of ELLs replaced Massachusetts English Proficiency Assessment (MEPA) tests in the 2012–13 school year. It is based on World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) English Language Development Standards and is a comprehensive test measuring proficiency in reading, writing, listening, and spoken English. ELLs in Grades K–12 take the test once per year in the winter. The general purpose of the exam is to monitor students’ progress in acquiring academic English. The intended use of the exam in the district is to determine students’ placement for the next year and evaluate the ELL program. All respondents said the assessment is used as intended, although a district respondent said the data may not be used as fully as possible.

Most respondents who commented on the ACCESS exam rated it as *useful*, although many respondents said ACCESS data are mainly used by the ELL team. Most teachers also commented that they have few ELL students. One principal said that receiving the results sooner would allow for making program changes for ELL students in the current year.

MCAS.MCAS is administered annually to students in Grades 3–8 and Grade 10 to assess standards achievement for students, schools, and districts. At the high school level, passing MCAS tests in ELA, mathematics, and science and technology/engineering is a state graduation requirement. Administrators described using MCAS results in school improvement planning. Teachers use results to form initial instructional groups to start the next year and to modify curriculum. Several teachers noted the recent example of providing students with more opportunities to read and respond to nonfiction text as a response to problem areas on the ELA MCAS.

Nearly all respondents in the elementary and middle schools described data from MCAS as *somewhat useful*. An administrator noted improvements in recent years in acting on MCAS results; the team is now focused on meeting the standards, instead of drilling on specific skills that showed weaknesses. Several respondents said that MCAS data can help with planning for the next year, but they are seen as “just one data point” for individual students. In addition, elementary administrators and teachers said that MCAS results from Grade 3 do not always correlate with the strengths and weaknesses shown by the same students upon entering Grade 4, reducing the data’s usefulness for planning the next year. A point raised by many respondents in this district focused on the timing of MCAS administration. Respondents spoke about teachers struggling to teach the standards before each subject-area assessment, and then struggling to engage students in a subject area after the exam has been administered:

You see for the third marking period, the fourth marking period, you can demonstrate the fact that kids have checked out. You live in an environment where the perception is that the critical thing is about tests, so once the test is done, I can just sit back and relax. Well, that’s not necessarily true, and one of the things that we try to impress upon the kids here is that the test is a piece of the picture. It’s not the picture.

Related to assessment timing is when results are returned; many administrators and teachers said that the data might be more useful if they were received sooner.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Several teachers in the high school rated MCAS data as *very useful*, indicating that they look at the data closely to improve instruction. One teacher noted that seeing the comparisons across the state and in district cohorts also is helpful.

Perceptions of the District’s Assessment Program

Most respondents said the district requires about the right amount of assessments. Administrators and teachers discussed valuing the data gained through the assessment program. A few respondents identified areas where they feel the district is testing too much, while noting that changes appear to be planned to address these overlaps. The TS Gold assessment was described as overlapping with other district tests and will be discontinued. Similarly, teachers see duplication in the district-developed common mathematics and writing assessments and the SRI and SMI tests. Several teachers indicated they prefer the common exams, and some respondents suggested that the use of the Scholastic products should be reduced or eliminated. In a final example, several teachers said that repurposing their own embedded, formative assessments as common exams has resulted in uncertainty about the amount of in-the-moment, formative assessing teachers should perform. Some teachers say that performing quick, in-class assessments and administering common exams would be duplicative.

Several respondents emphasized that although they regard the amount of assessments to be appropriate, they have concerns about the timing of the assessments. A number of teachers and administrators noted that at the end of the year, the school is “in testing mode” and the students are “getting bombarded” with assessments: “At this point in the year, they [assessments] are every day for a couple of weeks straight.” In addition to this concern about the concentration of assessments at a particular time in the school calendar, several respondents also commented on when MCAS assessments are administered. As described above, administrators and teachers find the testing windows for all MCAS exams to be too early in the school year.

Ways to Improve

Respondents discussed several different ideas about ways to improve assessment in the district. The most common theme in improving the district assessment program is focused on the ongoing conversation regarding using packaged curricula, and their included assessments, or using curricula and assessments developed by district teachers. Many respondents said that the district is considering purchasing a writing curriculum, and their comments indicated that this change would be positive. A few respondents mentioned that the district also is considering purchasing a mathematics curriculum package. Although some educators anticipate gaining more aligned, continuous mathematics instruction from such a change, others are unsure about eliminating the district mathematics assessment that teachers have recently finished developing.

Several respondents identified ways to reduce the amount of testing in the district. A few teachers called for eliminating the SRI and SMI, stating they are less useful than the common exams; other teachers suggested using these assessments on an individual basis as a secondary screen only. In addition, several administrators and teachers suggested eliminating the midyear administrations of the BAS and DMA, allowing the fall and spring administrations to stand as pretests and posttests. A teacher commented that most teachers know where students are at the midyear point, so the assessments are rarely informative.

In addition to these themes for improving assessments, about a third of the educators from the district responded that no changes in the assessment program are needed.

Focus on MCAS

This section focuses on MCAS, particularly how students are prepared for the tests, scheduling and administration of MCAS, and the use of student time during and after testing as shared by respondents interviewed.

Student Preparation for MCAS

According to respondents, preparing students for MCAS in District 1 is teacher determined and generally involves teaching to the state standards rather than an overt set of activities organized by the school or district to specifically prepare students for the test.

District Involvement

Although the district may alert teachers of the availability of practice materials from the state or other sources, their use is not mandatory. In fact, the district does not give any specific instructions and tries to “deemphasize MCAS,” particularly the “accountability feature that creates stress” among educators. A district administrator said:

We would rather them use the information from the MCAS to guide their curriculum. I don't like the idea of them spending days or weeks preparing for an assessment that's supposed to be assessing student's knowledge. So, the only preparation is making sure they understand the format of the test and that’s primarily for those third and fourth graders for whom it's pretty new. The older kids know what the format is like. So, if they've been prepared with curriculum we don't really give them any other expectations for prepping kids.

A school administrator confirmed that the district “doesn’t give us a lot of mandates about how instruction is supposed to support MCAS or what the expectations are in terms of how you use data and so on and so forth.” Referring to the flexibility allowed by the district, a teacher added:

I think the district is happy with what we’ve done. You know, we’ve obviously talked to them about our approach and wanted to try it, and they were willing to let us do that, so I think that’s a great thing about our district in particular. You know, there are these materials. The district does provide support, but you’re not required.

Preparation Activities

Multiple respondents across grade spans emphasized that preparing students for MCAS is about good instruction throughout the school year. One respondent shared that she involved her students in more direct MCAS preparation activities (e.g., developing MCAS practice questions related to the current unit, dissecting previous MCAS questions to make sure kids know what is asked) in the past, but realized several years ago that it was not effective. Likewise, another respondent suggested that mock MCAS exams overwhelm students, and “and it’s not something necessarily that they’re learning from.”

Within schools, teachers and teacher teams are given the autonomy to decide what strong standards-based instruction looks like. As one principal stressed:

I’m not interested in micromanaging my faculty to the degree that I not only tell them what they need to be focusing on, structure on, but how they’re supposed to do it. I want them to do what they do best. I want them to address things according to their styles, according to the needs of the kids that are sitting in front of them.

Teachers talked about working in teams (e.g., by subject, grade, or focus of data) “to make sure students are prepared.” One teacher described a school-level data team that meets monthly and created an action plan to prepare students for MCAS several months prior to the tests.

In terms of instruction that also prepares their students for MCAS, teachers interviewed spoke about challenging students while also teaching in a “fun and engaging way,” with a firm focus on “what students need to learn” and “instilling in them that they have it within themselves to achieve.” One ELA teacher said, “I tell my kids every year, the skills that the MCAS is looking for is reading well and writing well, and we’ve been practicing that all year.” Another teacher described meticulous attention to proper expository writing format and structure throughout the year so that students, “without having to think about the organization of your writing, are able to focus on the content of the information in your answer so that the quality of your answer can be better.” This respondent noted that this was “the extent of my preparation for students for MCAS this year.”

Although rigorous standards-based instruction is the priority and the primary student preparation strategy, more specific MCAS preparation does figure into the school day as the dates of testing near. As explained by several teachers, the general preparation strategy is to build students’ knowledge of and confidence with standards-based concepts and skills throughout the year and, a few days prior to MCAS, review the test format and test-taking strategies, especially with younger students for whom MCAS is “a great mystery.” One teacher shared:

We try not to put it over their heads like, oh, the MCAS is coming. We kind of try and teach it into our core normal business. And then when it gets closer to the testing time, then we start bringing in more like strategies specific for MCAS and kind of talking about how things might be setup on that test, what to be looking out for, what to be aware of.

Another teacher described “lessons on doing your work in your test booklet and transferring your answer onto the answer booklet and the proper way to bubble in,” as younger students have never had to do this before. A math teacher also talked about regular coursework that requires students to “do a lot of thinking and problem solving” and a review three to four days prior to MCAS to “get the big ideas again” from previous units. This respondent states “that’s pretty much it” in terms of direct MCAS preparation activities.

Impact on Instruction

The prevailing opinion in District 1 is that “the curriculum does a really good job of supporting MCAS instruction.” Although one respondent called MCAS “a cloud” that hangs over everyone, according to most respondents, the impact of preparation activities on instruction is minimal.

Several elementary school respondents, however, stated that instruction is influenced by content covered or stressed on MCAS tests. For example, MCAS does not include grammar-related questions, so grammar instruction is not provided until after MCAS testing is over. According to one respondent, such manipulation of the curriculum does not make sense from an instructional point of view as grounding students in proper grammar should come before instruction on writing, particularly “long composition” writing. Another teacher made the point that MCAS, to some extent, promotes homogenization of instruction and expectations of students, ignoring the differences in knowledge and abilities among students: “On one hand you say, every kid is different. Every kid has their own strengths. Every kid has their own ability. But yet, hey, everybody’s going to be compared the same to the same test at the end.”

Finally, one high school respondent said that as much as teachers, the school, and the district try to downplay the importance of MCAS, for high school students, “there’s a lot attached to it.” Thus, teachers are very attentive to covering what they need to in the curriculum to help students do well.

Challenges

According to respondents, the greatest challenge is adequately preparing students for MCAS who have below-grade-level knowledge. Gaps in student learning, especially in mathematics and below-grade reading levels were specifically cited as challenges. Two respondents suggested a need to review curricula at each grade to ensure that students are ready for the next level, particularly the jump from middle to high school.

Elementary and middle school teachers cited as challenges “trying to alleviate fear and nerves,” particularly in younger students who are unfamiliar with MCAS and the mental stamina required, and “teaching the students that they have to put 100 percent effort in from beginning to end,” even though “nothing really happens if they do bad on the MCAS.”

Other challenges mentioned by respondents include:

* Obtaining more specific information from the state, down to the question level, about where students performed poorly on MCAS so that preparation activities can be more targeted. The suggestion is that the state is not releasing enough test questions for educators to pinpoint what students were struggling with—such as conceptual understanding, content, question wording, question format, or something else.[[7]](#footnote-7)
* Teaching concepts or topics for a subject in an order that aligns with MCAS coverage of subjects rather than in a way that naturally builds students’ understanding and skills.
* Schools that have declined in performance (as evidenced by a rise in accountability level[[8]](#footnote-8)) experience a heightened sense of urgency for students to do well on MCAS, putting greater pressure on preparation activities.

Scheduling and Administration of MCAS

According to respondents, MCAS scheduling and administration decisions are made at the school level. The district “makes no demands” and only advises that schools “leave enough time at the end for the make-ups obviously to be done so that they're not stressed packing up the boxes and sending them along.” Scheduling looks different at each school in District 1, which attests to the autonomy the district allows schools in scheduling MCAS.

Two school administrators reported a preference for scheduling earlier in the state-determined testing window for each subject. Reasons for this preference include ensuring enough time for retesting, “to get everything packed and shipped in advance of the deadline,” and confirming that all students are tested in case their parents take them out of school for an earlier spring break.

Another respondent suggested that the best time to administer each test is about halfway into the testing window, which, according to this respondent, allows adequate time for instruction and review as well as make-up testing at the end. Also, to put less strain on staffing and space, each tested grade was assessed on separate days this school year (grades were tested simultaneously last year). A respondent noted that students at this age are more comfortable testing with an administrator or teacher they know, which contributed to the staffing difficulties and the decision to test one grade at a time.

In the district’s middle school, all grades test simultaneously for each subject. This works well for the school as “they are using a structure that already exists,” and “all staff are available and all kids are testing, so it’s so easy to put the school in testing mode because it involves the whole school.”

In the district’s high school, students who are not testing (e.g., 11th and 12th graders) go to school after the vast majority of tested students are done, typically two to three hours later than the normal start time. Respondents estimated that non-tested students have a late state for five to seven days during the school year. This approach gives tested students “a really pure environment” in which “you’re not going to have bells ringing… kids moving to different place,” and makes it possible to place tested students in smaller groups. A high school teacher shared:

I like the fact that we keep the ninth, eleventh, and twelfth grades out of the school, because I can tell you that every time they had to move around the hall, that’s a distraction to the kids who are sitting there testing.

Challenges

Respondents across grade spans readily admitted that securing adequate staffing to accommodate “students who need a small group setting, a scribe, or read alouds” is the greatest challenge with scheduling MCAS. As one respondent explained:

I just didn't have enough people to take all of the groups. I didn't have enough locations to put the kids who are in small groups. So that was the biggest challenge. The advantage was that we were done quicker and we had a little bit longer, but it was really was just the scheduling nightmare.

Two administrators also mentioned that the planning and test administration process for MCAS take time. Planning includes determining “small group testing, checking IEPs, assigning proctors, and planning the space.” Test administration involves multiple steps: making sure the right tests are delivered to the right classrooms, moving students into their assigned groups, collecting and packing completed tests, and maintaining a high level of security from start to finish.

In Grade 5, which has three MCAS tests to administer—ELA, mathematics, and science—one respondent noted that “you want to make sure you give time for the teachers to have finished the curriculum they want to complete before the assessment, but also time for the kids to refresh. Otherwise if they're exhausted from too many assessments, they're not going to do well.”

Suggestions for Improvement

Respondents said that their school schedules and administers MCAS the best that it can within the parameters set by the state. They noted that, over the years, various “kinks” in the process have been worked out, and they continuously reassess and make adjustments. For example, with the many snow days in the most recent school year, some respondents said that testing started later in the window to allow more time for instruction. And, as noted previously, one school recently made the change to test grades separately rather than simultaneously to ease the stress on space and staffing for accommodations.

A respondent expressed the following viewpoint shared by others: “I think they [the school] do a really good job of administering it, and I think they have a good system down. I just think that because of what's required by the state that we're really pretty much stuck with what we have unfortunately.” Another respondent made the point that instruction will be impacted “any way you do it.” The fact is “if you have to have these tests and they have to be administered in school, then you’re going to have impact.”

Student Time During MCAS

Student time during MCAS testing is the final focus of the study, particularly the extent to which instructional time is maintained for tested and non-tested students.

Tested Students

The testing session typically starts in the morning after a brief morning snack. Depending on the grade level, testing takes from one to three hours for most students. Students who finish early stay in the room and read or rest at their desk until most students have also finished. Students who require extra time are escorted to a reserved quiet room to finish with a proctor present. All respondents said resumption of a modified class schedule occurs after testing, but there were some differences in approach by school.

In the district’s Grades 2–3 elementary school, teachers resume regular instruction after testing, but they may give their third-grade students an extra recess period “because students are very anxious about the test” (as it is their first time taking MCAS). This additional free time helps students “get relaxed and ready to learn.” Instruction thereafter follows the curriculum but is typically not “taxing” on students.

At the district’s Grades 4–5 elementary school in which both grades take MCAS on separate days, the approach is to “play it by ear” as it is not certain how long testing will take and how many students will be in the classroom. One respondent said “Sometimes, the whole grade will go all day long and other times they're done by 10:30. So, we do find it's too hard to plan for and easier to just kind of make decisions as it happens.” Teachers make those decisions and instruction often involves project work or independent reading but not new content. The last period is a “special” for all tested students (e.g., art, music, or physical education).

At the middle school, after testing, students go to all their classes in succession as they would on a normal school day, but for a shorter block of time (15–20 minutes). This strategy was instituted several years ago “to make sure instruction continued” despite MCAS. Given that their students have been testing for a few hours, respondents said that most teachers will “lean most certainly on the side of being more compassionate and trying to have a quality lesson that is less taxing on the students, less demanding of them.” They are encouraged “to do project-based or activity-based kind of activities or explorations just to get kids moving, to get them distracted. You know to try to get them and keep them in a place where they are going to be engaged while recognizing the fact that they’re exhausted.”

High school students will rotate through their classes following testing, typically three classes after lunch for shortened periods. For example, on the first day of testing, students might go to periods 1, 2, and 3 in the afternoon; on the second day to periods 3, 4, and 5; and on the third day to periods 1, 6 and 7. Thus, over the three days of testing, students will attend all classes at least once. Similar to the middle school, instruction is modified because teachers are not sure how many students they will have and because students are “worn out.” One high school respondent said, “Teachers are very sensitive to that, and they try to adapt what they’re doing to make it a little easier on the kids, because they know they just took this long composition or this really big test, and they’re trying to take it easy on them.” For example, teachers might give students a short homework-like assignment that they could do in pairs or small groups.

Non-Tested Students

Non-tested elementary students are not disrupted on testing days and proceed with a normal school day. The only change mentioned by respondents is that their lunch period may be earlier or their “specials,” such as music, art, and physical education, may be moved up to the morning so that tested students could have their specials in the afternoon. These scheduling changes are made to give tested students a longer block for testing. One respondent noted that, in the past, students would rush through the test because they did not want to miss lunch or their special. Thus, adjusting the school schedule in this way gives students one less reason to rush through MCAS.

In the high school, students not taking MCAS experience a delayed opening time. For students who must go to school in the morning due to transportation or other reasons, they have an extended “study hall” in the cafeteria during the main MCAS testing session. After testing is over for most students, all students in the school experience a modified rotating schedule of classes in the afternoon (described above).

Perceptions of MCAS

Respondents in District 1 held diverse views about MCAS and its impact on teaching and learning. Several respondents across grade spans reported that MCAS helps them to identify and understand critical standards, which, in turn, can inform instruction. One respondent said MCAS gives teachers a sense of “the level at which they [the state] expect the kids to have the knowledge. So it kind of helps me interpret the standards a little bit, because I see you’re asking about this standard. This is how you’re asking the question.” Another described the relationship between rigorous standards-based instruction and MCAS:

We have to teach all of that [the standards]. And then basically, you have the MCAS test to see whether or not you’re doing that. It’s a circle. It kind of drives everything, because we want to be performing where we should be performing. We want to get students at the levels they should be at. And without having some kind of a test like that, you don’t know how you measure up with other towns and cities. I think it drives it all.

For other respondents, however, although it may be “nice having a reference test to see how your students are doing, it does change the focus of instruction.” They suggested that MCAS limits or constrains teaching and learning in the classroom because it overemphasizes some standards at the expense of others. An administrator said:

I think that many teachers over the years have become so focused on I've got to make sure they do well on the long comp, for instance, in grade four or grade seven that they over teach that at the expense of some other really valuable standards, such as the presentation standards or public speaking standards.

Similarly, a teacher shared, “You are more or less forced to teach MCAS format and content, so you might not teach other things that you want to teach.” Respondents further implied that the timing of MCAS does not allow room for exploring tangential content or students’ interests. One teacher said, “In my mind, you know, if they [students] are showing interest in something, it seems like you should be pursuing that, exploring that with them, instead of saying, ‘No, sorry, we've got to move along.’”

Finally, respondents across grade spans made the point that assessments in and of themselves are not bad. They admit that they have a purpose, and teachers want to know the strengths and weaknesses of their students. It is the “high-stakes piece of it” or the use of MCAS data to evaluate students, teachers, schools, and districts that troubles them. Specifically for teachers, “that feeling that you [the teacher] are based off of your students’ scores is very threatening and makes us feel a little bit insecure.” One respondent articulated this fundamental concern with the use of MCAS results:

I think that many schools that have been successful have been successful because they've had good teachers that were invested in the growth of their students, and they had principals that oversaw that, and had been doing it well all along, and we didn't need the state stepping in. But, I understand that it didn't happen everywhere so I get the purpose. It's just that we want to keep our teachers motivated and prevent them from becoming discouraged and thinking that no one trusts them, because we do. That's the challenge.

These respondents contend that “there are better ways than high pressure standardized tests that take away from instructional time, there are better ways to assess and evaluate students,” including “what a teacher sees every day.”

### District 2: Review of Assessment Practices

August 2015

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The Assessment Program in District 2

In the 2014–15 school year, District 2’s assessment program included a large number of individual assessments at the elementary level, and a fairly small number of required assessments at the middle and high school levels. This disparity across grade bands results in different concerns among primary and secondary educators. District personnel are focused on creating more commonality among grade levels and consistency across the grades. According to one district administrator:

I think that having an assessment calendar stop at grade five is tricky. I think it really does need to expand up through your six through twelve system. There needs to be much more consistency of practice around assessments so everyone is responding in a similar fashion.

At the elementary level, the main components of the current assessment program have been in place for the past three or four years, but some modifications are under way. For example, the district piloted an ELA assessment called FastBridge during the 2014–15 school year, as a more efficient alternative to the current ELA common unit assessments. In addition, a respondent suggested the district’s approach to assessment is moving away from assessing students’ progress on curriculum programs to becoming more focused on instruction driven by mastery of the learning standards.

The middle and high school levels are currently developing common unit assessments to strengthen consistency, deepen the level of rigor in instruction and assessment, and prepare students for the possible shift in state-required assessments. A teacher commented, “There’s been a big push to have common assessments to … be asking more PARCC-type questions as opposed to the MCAS type questions, not the regurgitation of information.” In addition, upper grade educators observed an increase in the use of quick, formative assessments in the form of do-nows and exit tickets (short-answer questions to begin or end a class, respectively). According to one respondent, “I don’t think, five years ago, the idea of an exit ticket was something that people knew about.” These changes are described as early in their formation, but are in keeping with district goals toward more cohesion in the assessment program.

Current Assessments

The student assessment inventory completed by participating districts was adapted from the *Student Assessment Inventory for School Districts* with permission from Achieve, Inc. ([www.achieve.org/assessmentinventory](http://www.achieve.org/assessmentinventory)). According to Achieve, the inventory “supports a process to evaluate the assessment students currently take and then determine the minimum testing necessary to serve essential diagnostic, instructional and accountability purposes.” For this study, AIR and ESE asked districts to list all state- and district-required assessments across subjects for each grade span. Districts completed the inventory prior to interviews with district and school staff. During interviews, respondents were asked to describe how data from each assessment are used in the school or district and rate the usefulness of each assessment.[[9]](#footnote-9) Based on the information provided, Table 1 includes state- and district-required assessments for each grade span per month.

Table 1. Assessments in District 2 by Grade Span and Month

|  | Sept | Oct | Nov | Dec | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | June |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| K–5 |  | Words Their Way  DRA2  Literacy Group | Math Bench/Fluency  Unit Tests  On-Demand Writing |  | ACCESS\* | Words Their Way  DRA2  Literacy Group  Unit Tests  On-Demand Writing  FastBridge | Math Bench/Fluency  MCAS ELA\* |  | Unit Tests  On-Demand Writing  MCAS Math\* | Words Their Way  DRA2  Literacy Group  Math Bench/  Fluency  Fast Bridge |
| 6–8 |  |  |  |  | ACCESS\* |  | MCAS ELA\* |  | MCAS Math and Sci\* |  |
| 9–12 |  | PSAT |  |  | ACCESS\*  Framingham Writing |  | MCAS ELA\* |  | MCAS Math\* | MCAS STE\* |

Notes: Elementary-level Math and ELA Unit Tests and On-Demand Writing are based on unit completion, which varies by grade level. Frequency and timing are unclear, and placement here is approximate. Middle and high schools are developing unit assessments that are not yet required. Most courses will require 8–10 unit tests per year.

\*Denotes state-required assessments. All others are district-required.

District-Required Assessments in Elementary Schools

District 2’s elementary assessment program includes a number of assessments, sets of which are administered together. They are listed in Table 3 by grade.

Table 3: Elementary-Level Assessments by Grade

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Assessment | K | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| ELA and Math Common Unit Tests | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA2) | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| On-Demand Writing Prompt | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Words Their Way | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Math Benchmark Assessment | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |  |
| Math Fluency Assessment | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |  |
| Literacy Group: | | | | | | |
| High-Frequency Reading | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |  |
| High-Frequency Spelling |  | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |  |
| Phonological Awareness Skills Test (PAST) | ✓ | ✓ |  |  |  |  |
| Concepts of Print | ✓ |  |  |  |  |  |
| Letter and Sound ID | ✓ |  |  |  |  |  |
| Hearing and Recording Sounds | ✓ |  |  |  |  |  |
| FastBridge (ELA pilot program) | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |  |
| MCAS |  |  |  | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| ACCESS | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |

Note: Marks shown in shaded cells denote assessment used by some, but not all, students in the grade level.

Math Benchmark Assessment and Math Fluency Assessment.The Math Benchmark and Fluency Assessments are administered three times per year, on the same day, in Grades K–4. The general purpose of conducting these assessments jointly is to measure student knowledge of mathematics standards, and their intended use in the district is to predict performance and inform instructional practice. Teachers use data from the three administrations, but the district reviews only the data from the spring assessment. All respondents said the assessments are used as intended.

Nearly all respondents described the paired assessments as *very useful*, with one teacher describing them as *somewhat useful*. Respondents pointed out that the assessments’ usefulness can be hampered by the difficulty scheduling them relative to the timing of the unit assessments. Another teacher questioned the suitability of the assessments for all grade levels: “They are challenging. I’ve had some kids in tears over them. They are challenging to take. Sometimes questions exceed what a grade-level standard would be.”

ELA and Mathematics Unit TestsThe district requires unit assessments in ELA and mathematics in Grades K–5 on a varied schedule depending on the grade level. The assessments are used to predict mathematics and ELA performance, inform instructional practice, and group students. Nearly all respondents said the assessments are used as intended, with one teacher noting that results are used mostly for assigning course grades.

Regarding the utility of the unit tests, most respondents said that both assessments are *useful* or *very useful*, while an administrator and a teacher said that the ELA assessments are *somewhat useful*. A teacher reported the usefulness of the unit assessments is reduced because teacher teams have not been discussing the results in professional learning community (PLC) meetings: “probably because we have been dealing with so many other assessments that we haven’t really gotten to those.” The teacher also stated that district accountability measures for the unit tests are not in place, and teachers don’t use the results in the same way.

Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA2).DRA2 is administered three times per year to Grades K–5. The purpose of the assessment is to measure student knowledge of ELA standards in reading, and is intended to predict ELA performance, inform instructional practice, and drive district-level decision making. Most respondents agreed that the assessment is used as intended, though two teachers disagreed. One said the results are subjective, making accurate use difficult. Another stated that although the DRA provides reading levels, the current curriculum does not provide time for leveled reading instruction, reducing the utility of the assessment for making instructional decisions.

Responses about the usefulness of this assessment were mixed. Administrators described DRA2 as *useful* or *very useful*, while teachers’ responses were divided between seeing it as *very useful* or *not useful*. An administrator said “It’s very well respected in the district. Even when not required as a benchmark, teachers use it. It’s a tool they like.” Administrators and teachers emphasized that the assessment is time-consuming. According to one teacher, “It is very time consuming but it’s one of my favorite assessments because it gives results on comprehension and fluency. It’s the most beneficial.” Another teacher reiterated the issue that the curriculum does not use leveled reading, reducing the utility of the reading levels identified by the assessment. Another said that while the DRA provides reading levels, the current curriculum does not provide time for leveled reading instruction, reducing the utility of the assessment for making instructional decisions. Finally, a teacher said the DRA would be valuable as an optional supplement for pinpointing problem areas, “but I’d rather not be required to do it three times a year.”

On-Demand Writing Prompt.The On-Demand Writing Prompt is administered to students three times per year in Grades K–5 to measure student knowledge of ELA standards in writing and predict writing performance.

Nearly all respondents said the assessment is used as intended, though one teacher said its use is inconsistent. An administrator said the results are used only at the building level. Another administrator commented that the assessment is used to train teachers on how to rate students’ writing, observe schoolwide trends, and serve as a benchmark for students. Most respondents find the assessment to be *useful* or *very useful*. A district respondent stated that the writing prompt is increasing in utility as teachers become more familiar with it.

Words Their Way.Words Their Way is a spelling benchmark assessment that is administered up to three times per year in Grades K–5. The general purpose of Words Their Way is to measure student knowledge of ELA standards in reading, and the intended use of the assessment is to predict ELA performance and inform instructional practice. Nearly all respondents said that Words Their Way is used as intended, with two teachers disagreeing.

Most administrators and teachers said the assessment is *not useful*. School administrators reported that Words Their Way is time consuming. One administrator said that foundational phonics are excluded, which reduces the usefulness of the assessment. This respondent added that Words Their Way tests phonics in early elementary and spelling in middle elementary, while an assessment that spans Grades K–4 would be more helpful. Teachers reported that they do not have time to follow the Words Their Way program, so the data from the assessments are not very helpful for benchmarking. One teacher said, “I find I give it just to give it and I don’t use [the data].”

Early Literacy Assessments.Six literacy assessments are used as a group, although the grade applicability is not the same across all six assessments. Concepts of Print (K), Letter and Sound ID (K), Hearing and Recording Sounds (K), Phonological Awareness Skills Test (K–1), High-Frequency Reading (K–4), and High-Frequency Spelling (1–4) are administered on the same days, three times per year (with the two high-frequency assessments given at the beginning and end of the year; students below grade level also take it in the winter). They are all used as benchmarks for student knowledge of ELA standards in reading. The district intends to use results from this set of assessments to predict ELA performance, inform instructional practice, and place students in programs for the next year. All respondents said the assessments are used as intended.

Nearly all respondents said the assessments are *very useful*, with one teacher describing them as *useful,*but time consuming. The set may be replaced by FastBridge (described below).

FastBridge (ELA pilot assessment).This year, District 2 is piloting the ELA portion of the FastBridge universal screener. Grades 1 and 2 are assessed three times per year in most buildings, although one school is piloting the assessment in Grades K–4. The purpose of FastBridge is to measure knowledge of ELA standards. If the pilot is successful, the district may use it in place of the six assessments in the Literacy Group, and possibly DRA as well. The district intends to use the assessment to predict ELA performance, and inform instructional practice.

All respondents said the assessment is used as intended and described it as *useful*or *very useful*. Administrators and teachers said FastBridge is more efficient than the other benchmarks and DRA, and the results are available immediately.

District-Required Assessments in Middle Schools

Unit Tests. Unit assessments are developing in District 2’s middle school. Although not included on the assessment inventory, teachers and administrators reported that some unit tests have been developed, and some teachers are using them. One administrator said the assessments are typically used to provide summative grades, but they are not yet in place for discussion at grade-level or department meetings. Unit tests are not yet required, but the district may be moving in that direction. Administrators and teachers said the mathematics unit tests are now common and are generally used as intended. ELA and science unit tests are not yet common, so the assessments are not ready to be used for common planning. Most teachers said the unit tests in place are *useful*or*very useful*.

District-Required Assessments in High Schools

Framingham State Writing Placement Test.The Framingham State Writing Placement Test is administered to all 10th-grade students as a formative exam and to place students in different writing courses (e.g., College Writing or Expository Writing). All respondents said the assessment is used as it is intended, but responses regarding the test’s utility were mixed. Administrators described the assessment as *useful*, while ELA teachers said it is *not useful*. Teachers said the results are not strong predictors of student performance, and technical difficulties with the computer-based administration of the test reduce its utility.

PSAT.The PSAT exam is required for all Grade 10 students, and grant support allows students to take it without cost. The general purpose of the assessment is to measure students’ reading comprehension, mathematics, and writing skills. The intended use in the high school is to predict SAT performance, inform curriculum and instructional practice, and nominate students for Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Administrators and teachers in the ELA department said the assessment is used as intended, but teachers in the mathematics and science departments said they do not use the PSAT to nominate students for AP courses. Reports about the exam’s usefulness were not consistent; administrators described it as *useful*, while all participating teachers said it is *not useful*. One teacher specified: “I don’t think [results] are as clear of an indicator of performance as other assessments.”

Unit Tests.Unit assessments are in development for the high school level. Similar to the middle school, unit tests are not yet required by the district.

Additional Assessments for Some High School Students.The high school administers additional assessments to certain groups of students. These include a national language exam, a math competition, AP exams, and a placement exam for the STEM Early College program. These assessments are experienced by a subset of students in the high school, but are not required for all students in the affected grades, so they are not included in this analysis.

State-Required Assessments

Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State to State for English Language Learners (ACCESS for ELLs). This federal- and state-required assessment of ELLs replaced Massachusetts English Proficiency Assessment (MEPA) tests in the 2012–13 school year. It is based on World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) English Language Development Standards and is a comprehensive test measuring proficiency in reading, writing, listening, and spoken English. ELLs in Grades K–12 take the test once per year in the winter. The general purpose of the exam is to monitor students’ progress in acquiring academic English, and the intended use of the exam in the district is to target instruction for individual students and support teachers in differentiating instruction for students in the regular classroom. An administrator said that teachers use the data in forming groups, and the ELL team uses the data to track individual student growth.

All respondents said the assessment is used as intended and is *very useful*. One ELL teacher commented that the timing of the assessment is not ideal: “It is given in January, so you have only worked with the students for a few months and then the results are received in May—making the window of when teachers feel the results are useful very short.” Another teacher mentioned that, this year, ACCESS scores were made available automatically, which is an improvement.

MCAS.MCAS is administered annually to students in Grades 3–8 and Grade 10 to assess standards achievement for students, schools, and districts. At the high school level, passing MCAS tests in ELA, mathematics, and science and technology/engineering is a state graduation requirement.

All respondents said the MCAS is used as intended. All administrators and teachers in elementary and middle schools described MCAS data as *very useful*. All teachers in the high school described MCAS data as *somewhat useful*. These teachers noted that the delay in receiving the scores reduces the utility of the data for looking at individual student performance. Instead, the data are used mainly to adjust the scope and sequence of the curriculum. A teacher commented that receiving the scores before the beginning of the next year would be helpful for initial placements.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Perceptions of the District’s Assessment Program

Quantity of Assessments

When discussing the amount of required assessments, comments from elementary-level respondents differed from those made by middle- or high school-level staff. At the elementary level, nearly all teachers said there are too many assessments. Elementary-level administrators said that although they need the data from assessments, they recognize that teachers feel there are too many tests, and they agree with teachers that the testing and scoring process is often too time consuming. Administrators and teachers also identified a few points of overlap in the elementary-level assessment program. Several respondents noted that because the district is running a pilot, there is an overlap between the pilot and the benchmarks it would replace. In addition, one teacher identified an overlap between the benchmarks and unit assessments in math: “We assess addition, subtraction with multi-digit numbers at the beginning of the year, but then it gets addressed again with the benchmark assessments, but I see that value because you can see who has lost it or who needs to continue it.” An elementary staff member suggested that the two spelling assessments (Elementary Spelling Inventory [ESI] and High-Frequency Spelling) might not be needed, as spelling could be assessed through student writing.

At the middle and high school levels, nearly all respondents said the amount of testing is about right, including the common unit assessments that are currently in development. Most comments focused on choosing the right number of unit tests to require, as some teachers would like to see a maximum of eight or nine tests across the year, instead of a proposed total of 10. Two respondents said students in specific grades in their schools are overtested; a middle school teacher said eighth graders are overloaded, and a high school teacher said the same about Grade 10 students. Nearly all middle and high school respondents stated that there are no gaps or overlaps in their assessment programs, although a high school teacher reported that the demand for critical reasoning skills on AP exams is substantially higher than on MCAS, creating a gap.

Ways to Improve

The district’s focus on improving assessment appears to be determining how to provide a coherent assessment program across grade spans and a commitment to strengthening data use at every level in the district. The conversation in schools also is focused on needing more opportunities to look at data and use them effectively. One middle school administrator described how limited professional learning time pushes teams to focus on just one data source. Instead of getting a holistic view of student performance from multiple assessments, “it feels a little disjointed.” Elementary-level teachers commented that although a lot of assessments are administered, teachers are not doing much with the data. They described a need for more experience with and time to have conversations about data and adjust the curriculum accordingly.

Another area of improvement identified by respondents is increasing accuracy, reliability, and consistency in scoring common assessments. At the middle school level, teams are using a rubric to determine grades together, but a teacher commented that this is a very new approach to handling student work and that it will take time for teachers to move through the process efficiently. Similarly, an administrator in the high school observed that although common unit assessments are developing, it is clear that teachers may not yet grade the assessments in the same way.

Additional improvements discussed by elementary-level respondents focused on identifying more efficient testing tools to quickly provide results to inform instruction. A teacher commented that easier assessment scoring would allow for more time to discuss the results among colleagues. At the middle and high school levels, educators’ primary concern appears to be ensuring that the common assessments they are developing are of sufficient rigor to prepare students for AP exams and the PARCC, as opposed to MCAS, which they perceive to be less rigorous.

Focus on MCAS

This section focuses on MCAS, particularly how students are prepared for the tests, scheduling and administration of MCAS, and the use of student time during and after testing as shared by respondents interviewed.

Student Preparation for MCAS

Preparation for MCAS takes on multiple forms in District 2 and includes districtwide efforts as well as practices at the school and classroom levels.

District Efforts

To prepare students for MCAS, a key districtwide initiative is the MCAS “boost or boot camps” in ELA and mathematics that take place during the two weeks leading up to each subject-area test. These camps are run by each school, and all students in Grades 3–10 participate, but high-need students are specifically targeted. With support from the district, these sessions often take place during the mathematics or ELA block but also can occur during other times. As explained by a district administrator, the school “can structure it any way they want to, but they need to use the two weeks prior to do some sort of work up process to MCAS, two weeks before each content area.” According to school-level respondents, the camps address content, test-taking strategies, and increasing students’ endurance for the lengthy tests.

The district also provides funding for schools to run their own before-school, afterschool, or Saturday MCAS preparation program for students to build their test-taking skills and provide additional content instruction. For example, the district’s middle school runs an afterschool science preparation program as well as a Saturday ELA and mathematics preparation class. In addition, elementary administrators say they run before-school preparation programs in ELA and mathematics for their tested students. These programs are voluntary for all students or targeted for students in need of additional support based on previous MCAS performance or nominations by teachers. These preparation programs generally run for the six weeks prior to MCAS.

Last, recognizing that open-response questions are a weakness based on previous MCAS results, the district disseminated instructional materials and information about strategies for tackling such questions. One writing approach shared by the district, called *Writing with Colors*, is described as a “colorized approach to thinking about writing” (see <http://writingwithcolors.com).> As part of this district-led effort, teachers were asked to compile “anchor papers [of student writing] at different levels,” and the district hired a consultant to “score them to look at calibration.”

School and Teacher Efforts

Schools and teachers also engaged in efforts to prepare their students for MCAS. These activities are in conjunction with district initiatives or in addition to them and include the following:

* Giving students sample MCAS questions throughout the school year. In some schools, “MCAS Mondays” is an opportunity for students to practice MCAS open-response questions in place of other opening class activities.
* Developing unit tests that include MCAS-type questions.
* Embedding open-response practice into instruction and formative assessments.
* In the younger grades, building students’ “reading stamina” from the time they start school.
* Emphasizing good nutrition and plenty of sleep.

District and school respondents say the goal is to make MCAS preparation seamless with regular instruction. As one school leader commented:

I’d like us to get to the point where, like I don’t think preparation for MCAS, I don’t think instruction should look different two weeks before MCAS than the rest of the year. If our curriculum is strong enough, the test will take care of itself.

Impact on Instruction

As much as they try to embed preparation activities into regular instruction, preparing their students for MCAS takes time away from instruction, according to teachers. During the four weeks of boot camp (two weeks for mathematics and two weeks for ELA), teachers say they “have to be creative and it takes away from what you would normally do.” For example, one respondent talked about shortened mathematics classes during the ELA boot camp: “They still had math, but they might have had 40 minutes instead of an hour and science and social studies got the boot.”

Concentrating on open-response questions also disrupted regular instruction. One teacher said:

We pause our entire ELA curriculum for two weeks in January to do an open response kind of thing where the kids started doing old MCAS practice responses and then from there the teachers did them for homework or almost weekly from January to March. So it definitely took a large chunk of time out of our day-to-day instruction.

As MCAS nears, interviewed teachers also described an appraisal process in which they review curricula to make sure there are no glaring gaps in students’ knowledge. One teacher said, “It’s consistently every year we feel like we are just crunching, and what can we pull out and what do they absolutely need to know so that we can get everything in before the test. So it has a real big impact.” Another teacher added, “In my head I’m so worried about not finishing the curriculum, because as you can imagine how weird it is that the test is coming right up and then you still have the other six weeks that you’re teaching the unit.”

The need to review and prioritize content is more likely to be felt in ELA and mathematics classes as these MCAS tests are administered earlier in the testing window. In science classes, as one teacher noted, “the majority of the curriculum has already been delivered at that time,” so there is less of a “mad dash” to ensure that critical content is covered.

Challenges

Although seamlessly integrating MCAS preparation into regular instruction may be a desired goal in the district, nearly all teachers interviewed made the point that with the ELA and mathematics tests administered early in the testing window, they do not have enough time to “get through the curriculum,” never mind integrating preparation activities. As one teacher expressed, “It’s tough to fit the curriculum in and do a review and help them prepare for how do you answer open responses? How do you review skills that you may not have gotten to?” They question the timing of MCAS, which forces them to “cram those [remaining units] in bits and pieces” rather than teaching deliberately to build students’ critical thinking skills.

Another challenge mentioned by a few respondents is the academic readiness of students who need more “targeted preparation,” such as ELLs and students below grade level. For example, students with gaps in reading or writing skills will have difficulty “being able to write a coherent sentence…and that tends to slow things down. And then I guess it snowballs, because we need to re-teach a lot of things.” One teacher suggested that with more time and classroom support, “I could pull a small group that really needs some extra intervention.”

Scheduling and Administration of MCAS

According to respondents, although the district may be consulted, schools have the autonomy to make scheduling decisions. All three of the district’s elementary schools make collective decisions about dates of MCAS testing so that the same grades across schools are tested concurrently. At all grade spans, determining the testing time frame within the state window requires careful consideration of available space, the number of students needing accommodations, the availability of staff to meet accommodation needs, leaving enough time for make-up testing, and preserving as many days as possible for instruction and preparation. With so many factors to consider, one respondent said, this leaves “very little options” as “every day [of the testing window] is booked.”

Because passing MCAS is a state-mandated graduation requirement, the stakes are higher for high school students. This adds another layer of consideration for MCAS scheduling in the district’s high school. The school opted to have “a staggered opening [during testing days] to make the environment completely test conducive for those tenth graders.” That is, non-tested students arrive at school after testing is completed, typically three hours later than the start of a regular school day.

Although not every grade is tested in elementary schools, respondents from these schools indicated that there is a ripple effect felt by the entire school. As noted by one teacher:

It affects everyone else’s schedule throughout the whole building, because you may not be able to have library because kids are testing in the library and you may not be able to have other places. So it’s a very big grand scheme of how they plan on this, because they have to be able to use so many different rooms and so many different people that everything else is being affected. So they try to get it done I think as quickly and efficiently as possible, but with absences sometimes like your para educator that’s meant to be servicing IEPs in second grade might be pulled to be a one-on-one tester for third or fourth grade, or sometimes both third and fourth grade. So it impacts the entire school.

Student Time During MCAS

Student time during MCAS testing is the final focus of the study, particularly the extent to which instructional time is maintained for tested and non-tested students.

Tested Students

After a brief morning snack and a relaxation or warm-up activity, MCAS begins behind closed doors in tested grades. Hallways are quiet and classes such as gym and music may be suspended during testing, both to keep the noise level down and because teachers are needed to proctor tests. Most students complete the test by lunch time, at which point they are released for lunch and a resumption of the school day. Students who need additional time remain in the testing room until they are finished.

Across grade spans, school-level respondents reported that they try to adhere to regular instruction after testing as much as they can. They point out, however, that students are “very worn out” and, especially in elementary and middle schools, “they need to move and stretch and just get their energy out.” Thus, instruction is “much more laid back” and no homework or quizzes are given during the days of testing. As one teacher explained:

We want to do meaningful things with them in the afternoon, but you really have to be careful with the activities that you’re choosing. We try not to introduce new topics that are going to be super important or [have consequences] for them down the road because the kids are exhausted. They’re drained because the majority of our kids are trying to do the very very best that they can on the MCAS and they have nothing left by the end of the day.

High school teachers, however, also face the reality of limited time with their students and the need to “take advantage” of this time. One teacher described the situation and the imperative to do what they can with students:

I think as teachers I think that they do try to get stuff done because, typically speaking, you’re only going to see each class for one period over those two days [of testing], if we’re doing two half days. So it’s kind of like I need to get something done because I won’t see them again for two days and it really cuts your week shorter. And then, who knows, we may have a block day right after that and then we don’t see them again.

Non-Tested Students

In elementary and middle schools, non-tested students proceed with a normal school day. The only difference is that their lunch rotation may be changed or nonacademic classes, such as art, gym, and music, may be cancelled during testing days if additional teachers are needed. Non-tested high school students have a delayed school start time of about three hours, but once in school, they experience a regular school day.

Perceptions of MCAS

Respondents commented on the value of information from various sources to inform instruction, including MCAS. For example, based on MCAS questions and results, teachers can see exactly “how the state is assessing different standards.” This information helps to guide curricular changes as educators “review and look at what standards we missed or didn’t do well on. Did we not teach it correctly or did we not teach it in the same way?”

Respondents, however, also talked about the pressure on teachers and students, particularly at the high school level where performance on MCAS impacts whether individual students graduate. Factoring in intensive preparation for MCAS, such as the boot camps and the number of test-taking days, they wonder if “the cons outweigh the pros of MCAS.” With preparation for and administration of MCAS tests spread over several months beginning in February, the disruption to the “flow” of instruction was especially noted:

I guess I just have the opinion that devoting time from February to June on testing, I just think it really has an influence that isn’t the greatest on the regular flow of teaching and learning. Things are very interrupted for teachers and students alike.

Because of the disruption in the day-to-day work of teaching and learning, one administrator added that MCAS “appears to be very disconnected, as opposed to it being very embedded into what we always do.”

Another reason for the disconnect between MCAS and what takes place in schools is the “lag time between the assessment and the result and the discussion and the action and by that time you have a whole other group of kids sitting in front of you,” which, as previously mentioned, reduces the usefulness of the data. Finally, despite the attention, time, and energy given to MCAS, some teachers reported that data from MCAS, once received, are not used in a sustained and meaningful way to inform instruction. As one teacher said, “I think there’s a part of me that feels, okay, we look at it [MCAS data] during our data dive in the fall and then it’s almost forgotten, it’s almost put on a shelf to some extent.” Lack of time is a factor, but level of comfort and skill in using data to inform instruction also is an issue. This disparity was noted by an ELA teacher: “There are some teachers who are more data savvy, especially I think in the math department. I don’t know that we’re there quite yet in English.”

### District 3: Review of Assessment Practices

August 2015

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The Assessment Program in District 3

According to the interviews conducted, the district’s assessment program has become more structured and rigorous in recent years, particularly with the adoption of new curriculum frameworks for English language arts (ELA) and mathematics aligned with the Common Core State Standards in the 2011–12 school year. District benchmark assessments in ELA and mathematics administered up to six times over the course of the school year and common quarterly and final exams in high schools are the most visible signs of the changes implemented. The district also plans to adopt common unit assessments in elementary and middle school classrooms as well. A respondents described, “The idea is that teachers will do whatever daily, weekly, check-ins in assessments that they do on whatever regular basis they do it, but when a certain collection of standards are completed, they will have access to these common unit assessments.”

School-level administrators and teachers also mentioned that they use assessment data in a more systematic “pre-post way” to track student growth. As one school-level respondent shared, the current approach to assessments is “let’s try to strategize together and come up with more unified assessments that give us a better picture or a leveled playing field to see where the kids are at. So it’s more structured than it used to be.” In terms of continuous improvement at the district and school levels, the sentiment of many interviewed is that “if we don’t know where kids are and where they need to be, then there’s really not a lot we can talk about.”

The following section describes assessments at each grade span and summarizes their usefulness as perceived by those interviewed for this study.

Current Assessments

The student assessment inventory completed by participating districts was adapted from the *Student Assessment Inventory for School Districts* with permission from Achieve, Inc. ([www.achieve.org/assessmentinventory](http://www.achieve.org/assessmentinventory)). According to Achieve, the inventory “supports a process to evaluate the assessment students currently take and then determine the minimum testing necessary to serve essential diagnostic, instructional and accountability purposes.” For this study, AIR and ESE asked districts to list all state- and district-required assessments across subjects for each grade span. Districts completed the inventory prior to interviews with district and school staff. During interviews, respondents were asked to describe how data from each assessment were used in the school or district and rate the usefulness of each assessment.[[11]](#footnote-11) Based on the information provided, Table 1 includes state- and district-required assessments for each grade span per month.

Table 1. Assessments in District 3 by Grade Span and Month

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Sept | Oct | Nov | Dec | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | June |
| K–4 | DIBELS  DRA  TestWiz Math (T1 pre) | TestWiz ELA |  | TestWiz Math (T1 post)  TestWiz Math (T2 pre) | DRA | DIBELS  TestWiz ELA  ACCESS\* | TestWiz Math (T2 post)  TestWiz Math (T3 pre) | MCAS ELA\* | MCAS Math\* | DIBELS  DRA  TestWiz ELA  TestWiz Math (T3 post) |
| 5–8 | TestWiz Math (T1 pre) | TestWiz ELA |  | TestWiz Math (T1 post)  TestWiz Math (T2 pre) |  | TestWiz ELA  ACCESS\* | TestWiz Math (T2 post)  TestWiz Math (T3 pre)  MCAS ELA | MCAS ELA\* | MCAS Math/Sci\* | TestWiz ELA  TestWiz Math (T3 post) |
| 9–12 | TestWiz Math  Common Open Respon-ses | TestWiz ELA  Common Open Respon-ses | Quarterly Exams  Common Open Respon-ses | Common Open Respon-ses | Common Open Respon-ses | Quarterly Exams  Common Open Respon-ses  ACCESS\* | Common Open Respon-ses | Common Open Respon-ses  MCAS ELA\* | Quarterly Exams  Common Open Respon-ses  MCAS Math\* | TestWiz ELA  TestWiz Math  Common Open Respon-ses  Final Exams |

*Notes:* Placement of some assessments is approximate. Not all assessments are required for each grade within a grade span. Common Open Responses in Grades 9–12 vary by content area from once per month to one per unit. The number of quarterly and final exams required of high school students varies depending on the classes taken.

\* Denotes state-required assessments. All others are district-required.

District-Required Assessments

Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS). DIBELS is designed to quickly assess reading and prereading skills in Grades K–6. District 3 assesses all students in Grades K–1 for diagnostic purposes using DIBELS, and assesses second-grade students as needed. Elementary school respondents interviewed also indicated that the assessment was used to help determine classroom assignments, the needs of students to further develop their literacy skills, and reading groups within a class.

Both district and school respondents were positive about the usefulness of DIBELS, stating that it was *very useful*, particularly in the early elementary grades. They clarified that by second grade, teachers typically have a better understanding of each student’s reading level, which may reduce the usefulness of the assessment.

Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA). DRA is an individually administered reading assessment of a student’s reading capabilities at the elementary school level that include accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. District 3 administers DRA two to three times per year depending on the grade, with the data largely used to inform guided and independent reading groups as well as for instructional and intervention planning purposes. One respondent said that the data from DRA are triangulated with other student data to get a “fuller picture of a student’s reading level and comprehension.”

Respondents indicated that DRA data are *somewhat useful* to *useful*, particularly to identify areas of need or improvement for individual students. Comments critical of DRA include the following:

* It is time-consuming to administer, especially with younger students.
* The test can be subjective, relying to some extent on a teacher’s experience.
* Alignment with CCSS [Common Core State Standards] is not clear.

Common Open Responses. This assessment is given at regular intervals (depending on subject area) throughout the school year to all students in Grades 9 and 10 in a number of subjects: ELA, mathematics, history, science, and foreign languages. Administration began in the 2014–15 school year in direct response to a persistent weakness in student writing, which was evident in students’ performance on open-response questions on MCAS tests. The intent is to give students more exposure to and practice with this type of question across subjects and to allow teachers a chance to assess student performance throughout the school year. Several respondents also said this assessment has been adopted as a district-determined measure (DDM).**[[12]](#footnote-12)**

Respondents gave mixed perceptions of the usefulness of this assessment, ranging from *somewhat useful* to *very useful*. This is the district’s first year administering this assessment, and efforts to calibrate scoring to ensure consistency and comparability are ongoing. Teachers note that if scores on open-response items in MCAS increase this year, this assessment will be considered more useful.

Quarterly and Final Exams. Taken by high school students in all academic subjects, these assessments align with state standards and are developed by each department; thus, they are common grade-level assessments within a subject. These exams enable teachers to assess student understanding of subject area content throughout the school year to inform teaching and curricular changes and to assess for summative purposes at the end of the school year to determine the extent of student mastery of course content and skills. One respondent made the point that because these exams are produced and used by all teachers within a grade and subject area, they allow for “collegial” and “common conversations” about student- and grade-level performance as well as vertical alignment of curricula.

Respondents, however, were mixed regarding the usefulness of quarterly and final exams—responses ranged from *not useful* to *useful*. Although respondents considered close alignment with curriculum frameworks and teacher involvement in the development process as advantages, several school-level respondents criticized the usefulness of the data for several reasons:

* Lack of a clear plan about how the data should be used
* Lack of time to reteach based on exam results
* Results are not organized by standards, making it difficult for teachers to address and improve on specific standards.

Some respondents believe that the results are just “stored in the grade books” and not used in any meaningful way to improve instruction or student performance.

TestWiz ELA and Mathematics. The TestWiz online platform has allowed District 3 to create, administer, and score districtwide benchmark assessments that are aligned with state standards. Items for these assessments can be taken from the TestWiz bank of questions as well as locally developed. The districts administers assessments three times per school year for the ELA assessment and up to six times annually for the mathematics assessment to all students in Grades 1–10 for the primary purposes of informing instruction, determining areas of student strength and weakness, and tracking student growth. Other uses of benchmark data mentioned by respondents include predicting student performance on MCAS and developing teacher professional goals.

When asked the degree to which they find the assessments to be useful, respondents indicated they were *somewhat useful* to *very useful*. Positive comments included the following:

* The assessments are aligned with state standards and are locally developed.
* Results are available immediately to inform instruction and student grouping.
* The data is concrete and objective.

Teachers particularly appreciated the ease of extracting and disaggregating data for immediate use, including disaggregating by standards.

Comments critical of TestWiz assessments include:

* Teachers are not clear about which standards are covered on the tests and to what extent.
* The test site and format are not ‘user-friendly.”
* High school teachers in particular are concerned that the test items are either “canned” or not well aligned with their curricula.
* Specific to TestWiz ELA, development was difficult as was determining what they want to learn from the data.
* Specific to TestWiz Math, administering it six times in a school year was considered excessive and the tests were described as “monotonous.”

In addition, one school administrator, although acknowledging that the idea behind district benchmark assessments is sound, made the point that the usefulness of the data is highly dependent on the opportunities to examine and discuss the data in a deliberate way for the sake of improvement.

State-Required Assessments

Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State to State for English Language Learners (ACCESS for ELLs). This federal- and state-required assessment of English language learners (ELLs) replaced the Massachusetts English Proficiency Assessment (MEPA) tests in the 2012–13 school year. It is based on World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) English Language Development Standards and is a comprehensive test measuring proficiency in reading, writing, listening, and spoken English. ELLs in Grades K–12 take the test once per year in the winter. ACCESS is administered to meet federal and state accountability requirements. The test also provides a systematic way for the district and schools to analyze performance on grade-level standards on a yearly basis to measure improvement. Also, teachers use ACCESS results to modify instructional strategies for their ELL students, determine if some students can be transitioned to mainstream classes in the next school year, and develop teacher SMART goals.

Respondents indicated that ACCESS for ELLs is *useful* to *very useful*. Several pointed out that the test is the most comprehensive for this population of students, giving teachers a “true picture” of each student’s ability on specific literacy skills. The only downside mentioned by school respondents is that ACCESS is only given once per year, which limits its usefulness in tracking student progress within a school year. Also, one teacher noted that the data are used to place students in appropriate classrooms for the next school year, but because the test is administered in the winter (January and February), the data may be somewhat outdated by the fall.

MCAS.MCAS is administered annually to students in Grades 3–8 and Grade 10 to assess standards achievement for students, schools, and districts. At the high school level, passing MCAS tests in ELA, mathematics, and science and technology/engineering is a state graduation requirement. Schools also examined the data to inform changes in instruction for the following school year, determine student placement in intervention or enrichment programs, and develop teacher SMART goals. On a broader level, MCAS results are one of the drivers of district and school improvement planning.

Respondents’ views of the usefulness of MCAS ran the gamut from *not useful* to *very useful*. Several respondents said that a statewide assessment system such as MCAS is necessary and test results can be useful to compare within and across districts. They question, however, whether the benefits outweigh the costs in time and effort to administer the tests. Comments critical of MCAS include:

* The tests are administered in the spring, yet they are based on a year’s worth of academic content.
* Results are not shared until the next school year, which is too late to inform instruction for current students.
* The tests are too long and difficult for ELLs.
* Students may not take the tests seriously, because there are no real consequences until high school. Based on the results, however, there are serious consequences for schools and the district.
* There is too much emphasis on MCAS, such that “it governs everything,” and the results come to “define” the district and school.

Perceptions of the District’s Assessment Program

Despite the criticisms of some required tests and acknowledgement that students are asked to take many during the school year, perhaps “borderline too much,” most respondents indicated that the district’s assessment program is generally useful and cohesive. District testing was described as “flexible” and “responsive.” From the point of view of one school administrator, “Teachers are very comfortable using it [district assessments] and know how to use it, which is half the battle. They’re able to understand why they’re doing what they’re doing and they’re able to get some good feedback from it.”

Benchmark assessments can play a critical role in bridging the gap between daily formative assessments and annual statewide assessments.A district administrator explained that in the past, only MCAS data were used to track progress on goals, which are not released until the following school year. With the current battery of district-required assessments throughout the school year, administrators can track progress more often and make adjustments as needed based on the immediately available data. This sentiment is echoed by a school administrator who said, “It [district benchmark tests] is more immediate, it’s more of a formative assessment, a snapshot within the school year as opposed to having to wait until the fall of the next year to get information to use in the building.” Another respondent shared:

That data is so much more valuable to my teachers because it’s immediate and it can be done quickly. And it’s the kids just using the computer for one class period during math and then it’s done. I just feel like they’re more logical. I feel like they just make more sense for the development of [students] to be having assessments that’s a class period, that’s done quickly and then the teacher can confer with the kids right after and discuss how they did or questions they might have.

In addition to more frequent and timely feedback on student performance, the current assessment program, with its reliance on rigorous and standards-based assessments, emphasizes data use as an important part of effective teaching and learning. As one school administrator explained, although the number of assessments is considerable, data from multiple sources give teachers a more complete picture of their students’ performance and help them make informed instructional decisions:

As much as you’re giving them these assessments, you’re really embedding professional development in assessments by giving them these assessments, if that makes any sense. You’re teaching teachers how to look at data and how to make determinations from data. I think some of them are still learning that.

One teacher voiced a pragmatic view about assessments in general as a way to demonstrate the importance of learning to students:

If we didn’t have assessments then I think perhaps students might not take school as, I don’t know if serious is the word, but they might not necessarily see the importance of it if teachers aren’t giving them enough assessments in their classroom. Whether they’re teacher-based or not, they might not think it’s important for them to actually study or remember the stuff that they’ve been taught in the curriculum.

Several teachers cautioned, however, that with the coming adoption of more DDMs, “it [the number of assessments] is trending in the direction of too many,” which is causing some anxiety among their peers.

Regarding their overall opinion of the district’s assessment program, one teacher expressed a view shared by others: “Do I think it takes away time on learning? Yes. Do I need the data I get from that? Yes. Is there a better way to do it? I don’t know. Kind of a Catch-22, I guess.”

Ways to Improve

A common sentiment among respondents is that as long as teachers understand the purpose of the assessment and how the data will be used, there will be less opposition. Thus, several teachers across grade spans recommended **more sustained discussion about data use**. As shared by one teacher:

Unless we’re doing something continually it’s gone. So I think you do the one shot when it first comes out, and then it’s kind of forgotten. Whereas if you met more consistently on okay, this is the data, what have you done, and everybody shares kind of constantly about the data. I don’t think we do enough about that. If you’re going to have those assessments, you might as well make them the most worthwhile.

Another suggestion that school administrators made is to reduce test-taking time as well as the time allotted for assessments in general. Given that the hours in a school day and the days in a school year are unlikely to change, **shorter assessments or more streamlined processes** may be in order. Currently, as one respondent said, “The time periods just overlap so much that it seems like you barely get out of one before it’s time to start another, so something seems like it needs to give there.”

Focus on MCAS

This section focuses on MCAS, particularly how students are prepared for the tests, scheduling and administration of the assessments, and the use of student time during and after testing as shared by the respondents interviewed.

Student Preparation for MCAS

Preparation for MCAS takes on multiple forms in District 3 and includes districtwide efforts as well as practices at the school and classroom levels.

District Efforts

In the 2014–15 school year, the district mandated that half days of school, which are approximately once per month, would be entirely devoted to practicing MCAS open-response questions as performance on these types of questions was identified as a weakness throughout the district. At each grade level, the district disseminates writing prompts and scoring rubrics, ensuring that every student at a grade is exposed to the same questions. Practice in classrooms includes “working on the steps to do an open-response question, looking at the rubrics that are provided by the state, and looking at exemplars as well.” The intent is to “get the kids really acclimated to the type of writing they’re looking for on those tests.” One school administrator noted that using half days in this way was a good use of time as it gives teachers and students concrete activities to focus on in the short time available during these early release days. The district also supports schools individually, depending on their areas of strength and weakness based on MCAS data.

School and Teacher Efforts

Outside of the districtwide emphasis on open-response questions and writing, what MCAS preparation entails is largely a decision at the classroom level. Teachers may be provided with preparation materials from instructional coaches or consult with grade- or department-level teams, but individual teachers decide how they prepare their students for MCAS and how much time to spend doing so. Most respondents indicated that the primary method of preparation is “good quality instruction” with curricula that are aligned with state standards. As shared by one teacher, “I try to weave those [preparation activities] right in so it’s almost seamless, it’s just become habit almost.” Specific preparation practices described include the following:

* Teachers may assign previous MCAS questions or create MCAS-type questions that align with their current unit of study.
* Teachers may review general test-taking strategies with students, such as not leaving any question unanswered and “breaking down” open-response questions. They also might “remind students to actively read through each question to highlight or underline important words as you’re reading through your test booklet and to double check your answers at the end.”
* In some schools, a daily enrichment and intervention period, in which all students are grouped based on academic need, may be devoted to MCAS preparation in the weeks leading up to the tests. This 30-minute block is designed for students to get targeted support or engage in appropriate enrichment activities and does not interfere with regular classroom instruction.
* If funding is available, afterschool MCAS preparation sessions may be provided for struggling or ELL students.

When commenting on how students are prepared for MCAS, one teacher noted the disconnect between Common Core-aligned instruction that emphasizes “active and group-oriented” activities and the format of MCAS, which requires students to work quietly and independently over a sustained period of time.

Impact on Instruction

In general, interviewed teachers said they try not to devote an inordinate amount of time to MCAS preparation as students are prone to “shut down a little bit.” And, according to one administrator, “Teachers do a decent job of not going into panic mode because they’ve done things throughout the year.” How to provide adequate preparation without compromising regular instructional time may come with practice and experience. As one teacher shared, “I’ve learned how to work it into my lessons, and I’ve learned how to analyze the data to be able to figure out what these kids need.”

Still, according to some respondents, the impact on regular instruction can be felt, particularly in the weeks leading up to MCAS when there is a “certain amount of ramping up” and “we do sort of focus less on the normal curriculum.” One teacher explained this cycle:

As much as we try to stick to a normal schedule and routine and we have our curriculum map and we know what we’re supposed to do, that overwhelming feeling that we want our students to do well kind of takes over at that point. So it is difficult to make sure that we’re giving them what they need, but also making sure that we’re preparing them for this test.

Other teachers agreed that because “so much emphasis is placed on it [MCAS], we want to make sure they [students] have the best chance of doing well.” The bottom line is that schools and districts must show progress; thus, respondents believe that “we’re all held to those standards, so you’re constantly thinking how can I improve?”

Challenges

According to respondents, the greatest challenges in adequately preparing students for MCAS are the variety of academic and personal issues that students come to school with that may impede their learning. One administrator said, “Kids are coming to school with a lot of different things on their minds. We’re seeing a lot of that in schools with heightened mental health issues, heightened social emotional issues that sometimes the academic is not the most important thing in that child’s life, so it’s hard for us to deal with that.” Another administrator suggested that an assessment of social-emotional needs is necessary to identify the underlying issues that may impact a student’s readiness to learn. As this individual observes, “So many of these kids that are taking all of these assessments, they’re taking these assessments and they’re just going through the motions because they’re here physically, but they’re not here in an emotional way.”

In addition to social-emotional challenges, other respondents pointed out that some students have not mastered grade-level academic standards, “so the teachers try to do the right thing and review or fill in those foundational holes. Then they find themselves playing catch up.” And, for ELL and other students at lower reading levels, the language of MCAS is a major challenge: “They might know how to make predictions but not [be able to] read the story that they’re making predictions on. Or they may know how to multiply numbers, but they can’t read the word problem to know that that’s what they’re supposed to do. “

Finally, particularly in the lower grades, several respondents noted that “it’s hard to get kids to understand that it’s important showing what they know, important for the school.” Respondents speculate that this may because MCAS has become so routine for many students that they do not take it seriously or because, before high school, there are no real consequences for students based on their MCAS results.

Scheduling and Administration of MCAS

According to respondents, although the district may be consulted, the principal and the school’s leadership team make scheduling decisions. Teachers also may be asked for input, but it is ultimately an administrative decision. Considerations include:

* The number of students to be tested
* The availability of staff to proctor tests and support students in need of accommodations
* The availability of rooms for testing large groups, small groups, and individual students
* The amount of time needed for logistical activities associated with test administration, such as unpacking, sorting, and preparing materials for each class
* Additional time needed for classroom instruction in tested subjects
* Including enough days for make-up sessions

Schools in District 3 have the flexibility from year to year to try different approaches in scheduling tests. For example, looking for better results, one school decided to give students a respite of one or two days between MCAS sessions for a particular subject:

I changed it this year because again you keep doing things the same way and expect different results, it’s not going to happen. It was easier for us as a school to get it done and I thought that’s what teachers liked and that’s what kids liked, but because we’re trying to get some better results from our kids, I changed that this year. I’ll find out if I like it or not.

Also, due to staffing and space considerations, this school tested only one or two grades at a time (rather than all grades simultaneously). All of this means that testing was spread out over a longer time frame, but respondents said it was beneficial for students to have a break and “be a kid again,” and teachers appreciated less chaos during testing days. As one respondent described:

It wasn’t crazy because there weren’t so many grades testing. To go pick up your materials in the morning, it was just one grade in the office, whereas before it was multiple grades, so there were twelve to twenty of us in the office trying to get materials, whereas now it was seven.

With a fewer grades testing at once, teachers spoke positively about the fact that the “school doesn’t stand still when testing is going on.” That is, although tested grades are occupied with MCAS, “the rest of the school runs. There might be changes to the schedule for lunches or specials or whatever, but I think everyone tries to support the testing environment and life goes on.”

Challenges

Respondents agreed that ensuring adequate staffing is the greatest issue when it comes to scheduling and administering MCAS, which is even more complicated in larger schools. One administrator said about staffing:

The principals really know their buildings the best, so they determine when that best testing schedule is going to be for their own schools… it’s a game of making sure you know how many people you have available for the accommodations, the small groups, the pull outs, those things really determine the schedule.

Another respondent talked about the scheduling balance of wanting to provide more time for instruction or a calmer atmosphere for testing and leaving enough time for make-up days. This individual said, “You always roll the dice with stretching it out too far because then you might not allow yourself enough time for make-up days [or] kids who miss sessions because they’re sick.”

Student Time During MCAS

Student time during MCAS testing is the final focus of the study, particularly the extent to which instructional time is maintained for tested and non-tested students.

Tested Students

MCAS testing starts first thing in the morning in rooms reserved for testing (i.e., away from non-tested classrooms if possible). Students who finish early are typically allowed to read a book or engage in quiet activities until the majority of students are finished. As MCAS is an untimed assessment, students who have not finished within the typically allotted time (which varies by grade span from one to three hours) are escorted by a proctor to another room to complete the test, which theoretically could take up the rest of the school day. Although classes resume in the afternoon, respondents said that instruction is “not strenuous” and often involves “some type of review or something we’ve already done or just something fun but still content based.” One school recommends collaborative activities as “the kids have been working in isolation for often two hours or so.” A teacher commented, “When you look at a schedule from an administrative point of view, you say they’re still going to see their teachers in the afternoon and in that case then it would look like it’s minimally impacted. But what’s happening in the classroom in the afternoon tells a different story. We all definitely have light material in the afternoon; I have even my best most engaged students often falling asleep.”

Also, because teachers are uncertain about how many students they will have in the afternoon, they must prepare for multiple scenarios, which can be a challenge. An administrator said:

The teacher really has to have three different plans ready to go on those testing days, depending on if all the kids do finish, then the teacher can do some normal things with the kids in the afternoon. But if the kids don’t finish you’re back to plan B, actually C, depending on how many. The teachers have done this for so long so I think they are used to it, but there’s rarely new teaching that’s happening on MCAS days.

Non-Tested Students

All respondents agreed that non-tested students are not disrupted or only minimally disrupted and proceed with a normal school day. The only change is that they may be in a different location as rooms are reserved for testing. Also, their “specials,” such as music, art, and physical education, may be moved up to the morning so that testing students can have their specials in the afternoon.

Perceptions of MCAS

District and school respondents suggested that there is too much of a focus on MCAS, which prompts many educators to spend valuable time and energy preparing for the tests. This emphasis, in turn, can disrupt the “flow and continuity of lessons” and influence how and what teachers teach.

Respondents acknowledged, however, that MCAS data can be useful. They talked about using MCAS data to inform instructional changes, determine student learning goals and groups, develop teacher performance goals, and drive district and school improvement planning. A few teachers noted that MCAS, in conjunction with the Common Core, has imposed more rigor in classrooms, particularly with the focus on “concise open responses.” Some respondents also suggested that assessment data in general compel teachers to reflect on their practice.

Recognizing that statewide summative assessments are a fact of life in today’s education environment, one teacher summarized MCAS in this way, which reflects the general view of others interviewed:

I know the students will be taking the test. I know the results of those tests. I’ll use them for my own instruction. I know the district uses them for their goals and school improvement plan. All the impact on where those scores go and how they’re looked at, I feel as though that’s something I can’t change, so I just have to ride with it.

### District 4: Review of Assessment Practices

August 2015

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The Assessment Program in District 4

District 4’s assessment program is in transition. In the 2014–15 academic year, the district introduced the central components of its current assessment program, including a monthly writing prompt in Grades K–8, a weekly common formative assessment in Grades K–5, and a K–10 benchmark assessment. District 4 has experienced turnover in district leadership, with four superintendents over the past seven years and consequent changes in curriculum and assessment. A school administrator said, “We just want a good system, and then we want to stick with it.” Respondents noted that stronger data use practices are incorporated in the changes brought by the current district administration. The elementary and middle schools have established data walls to provide a visual reminder of where students fall across zones of performance. An administrator commented that a data inquiry cycle is now in place, and conversations about data are more common.

Current Assessments

The student assessment inventory completed by participating districts was adapted from the *Student Assessment Inventory for School Districts* with permission from Achieve, Inc. ([www.achieve.org/assessmentinventory](http://www.achieve.org/assessmentinventory)). According to Achieve, the inventory “supports a process to evaluate the assessment students currently take and then determine the minimum testing necessary to serve essential diagnostic, instructional, and accountability purposes.” For this study, AIR and ESE asked districts to list all state- and district-required assessments across subjects for each grade span. Districts completed the inventory prior to interviews with district and school staff. During interviews, respondents were asked to comment on how data from each assessment were used in the school or district and the usefulness of each assessment.[[13]](#footnote-13) Based on the information provided, Table 2 includes state- and district-required assessments for each grade span per month.

Table 2. Assessments in District 4 by Grade Span and Month

|  | Sept | Oct | Nov | Dec | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | June |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| K–5 | Weekly Common  Monthly Writing  DIBELS  DRA  NWEA | Weekly Common  Monthly Writing | Weekly Common  Monthly Writing  DIBELS  DRA | Weekly Common  Monthly Writing | Weekly Common  Monthly Writing  DIBELS  DRA  NWEA | Weekly Common  Monthly Writing  ACCESS\* | Weekly Common  Monthly Writing  DIBELS  DRA | Weekly Common  Monthly Writing  MCAS ELA\* | Weekly Common  Monthly Writing  DIBELS  DRA  MCAS Math\* | Weekly Common  Monthly Writing  NWEA |
| 6–8 | Weekly Common  NWEA | Weekly Common | Weekly Common | Weekly Common | Weekly Common  NWEA | Weekly Common  ACCESS\* | Weekly Common | Weekly Common  MCAS ELA\* | Weekly Common  MCAS Math/Sci\* | Weekly Common  NWEA |
| 9–12 | NWEA |  | Quarterly Exams |  | Quarterly Exams  NWEA | MCAS Biology  ACCESS\* | MCAS ELA\* | Quarterly Exams | MCAS Math\* | Quarterly Exams  MCAS STE\*  NWEA |

Note: Placement of some assessments is approximate.

\*Denotes state-required assessments. All others are district-required.

District-Required Assessments

Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) Assessments. Assessments created by NWEA measure progress and growth for students in ELA and mathematics with a computerized interim assessment designed to adapt to student performance; as a student progresses, items will increase or decrease in difficulty until the student’s ability level is identified. District 4 administers NWEA exams in September/October, December/January, and May/June each year in Grades K–10. The 2014–15 academic year is the first in which NWEA has been used in District 4, replacing an assessment called Achievement Network (ANet).

Nearly all respondents said NWEA assessment results are used as intended. One school administrator advised caution in using results for predictive purposes, and one teacher said they are not yet properly used.

Administrators use NWEA assessment data to:

* Focus attention on specific concerns in classrooms during site visits
* Plan uses of intervention blocks
* Chart progress toward MCAS
* Focus on performance of identified student groups

Teachers use NWEA assessment data to:

* Ensure that instructional practices are rigorous
* Analyze as a pretest and posttest
* Develop action plans and goal setting for individual students
* Chart student progress as a benchmark
* Form instructional groups
* Refer students to extended learning programs after school
* Adjust curriculum
* Maintain pace toward MCAS

Respondents gave mixed feedback regarding the usefulness of NWEA assessments. Most district and primary-level administrators said the assessments are useful or very useful, but high school administrators and most teachers at all levels said the assessments are somewhat useful. As previously mentioned, the district is using NWEA assessments for the first time this year, and many educators commented that they are still learning about the information the assessments can provide. Several teachers stated that more training is needed on what the assessments measure and how best to use the results. Administrators and teachers prefer the schedule of three administrations per year over the six administrations of the previous benchmark assessment, ANet. A teacher said the high school has access to a different benchmark system called TestWiz. The teacher feels TestWiz may be a better fit for assessing courses at the high school level because it includes a bank of Common-Core aligned assessment items that the teacher may select to target topics that are relevant to a specific course.

Comments critical of NWEA assessments include the following:

* Using ANet as the districtwide benchmark assessment provided teachers with access to ANet’s online guides to the Common Core that district teachers found helpful. Additional resources such as these are not included in NWEA’s package.
* Results are not accurate for all students.
* NWEA assessments and MCAS differ in that NWEA assessments are administered by computer, whereas MCAS is on paper. Some teachers said the difference may reduce the applicability of gaining test experience with NWEA assessments when students take MCAS.
* The broad design of the assessment may not be well suited for assessing specialized topics in high school mathematics courses. Teachers said they “just get a number.”

Weekly Common Formative Assessments. The district has developed weekly common formative assessments to track student learning. Students in Grades K–8 take the assessments in ELA and mathematics each week.

Nearly all respondents said the weekly common formative assessments are used as intended, although a teacher in the middle school said that not all teachers use results to inform their instruction.

Administrators use the weekly common formative assessments to:

* Track trends in each building
* Track performance of identified student groups

Teachers use the weekly common formative assessments to:

* Analyze as pretests and posttests
* Plan instruction, create action plans, and form small groups
* Develop review or reteaching plans for the beginning of the next week
* Plan intervention block instruction

A district representative noted that the assessments must be used with fidelity, and stated that the strongest growth is seen in the schools using the weekly common formative assessments correctly. The representative also noted that the district is still ensuring alignment between these assessments and the Common Core State Standards.

At the elementary level, all respondents stated the weekly common formative assessments are very useful. A teacher commented that the questions “spiral” back to previous topics to bolster earlier instruction. Responses from the middle school were more mixed, ranging from not useful to very useful. Administrators and teachers said this district-provided assessment helps to guide instructional practice and encourages teachers to discuss scores across subject areas. However, administrators and teachers said that not all teachers use it consistently. One teacher specified that the results from the assessment are not on the agenda for common planning time, reducing accountability for teachers to use the results effectively. In addition, several teachers said that the content of the weekly tests have not kept pace with frequent curriculum changes.

Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) and Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS). District 4 uses portions of DRA in Grades 1–5 and DIBELS in Grades K–1. Both are short, individual assessments used to monitor progress in literacy skill development, and are each used approximately every six weeks. Both have been in use for about five years, but several respondents said that the assessments are overlapping, and that DIBELS will probably be eliminated.

All respondents said that the results from DRA are used as intended. Respondents’ descriptions of the uses for DRA include the following:

* Monitoring progress for reading comprehension
* Targeting support for individual students
* Forming small groups for instruction
* Guiding students to correct book levels

Participants’ views of DRA range between useful and somewhat useful. Teachers said they are looking at its results less closely as the assessment program changes in the district. One school administrator said NWEA assessments would replace DRA this year. Another suggested it would be preferable to administer DRA three times per year for the general student body, and as many as five times per year for struggling students. An administrator said that teachers would prefer to use the whole test instead of the portion in use currently. A teacher said that it is useful for determining students’ reading levels, but not on its own for any decisions more consequential than that. Few comments were made about DIBELS because it may be “on the way out.” A district respondent said that teachers have preferences between DIBELS and DRA, but DRA is more comprehensive. Several teachers commented that the district should choose one and eliminate the other.

Quarterly Assessments. In place of the weekly common formative assessments required in earlier grades, quarterly assessments are required in all high school courses. All respondents said that the quarterly assessments are used as intended, which is primarily to measure instruction. Participants said the assessments are somewhat useful. Teachers said they prefer the quarterly assessments to NWEA assessments because the quarterlies are targeted to the specific course material but NWEA assessments measure a wider range of mathematics skills. An administrator commented that teachers are getting better about using results to adjust instruction and plan intervention blocks, instead of simply putting numbers in their grade books.

State-Required Assessments

Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State to State for English Language Learners (ACCESS for ELLs). This federal- and state-required assessment of ELLs replaced the Massachusetts English Proficiency Assessment (MEPA) tests in the 2012–13 school year. It is based on World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) English Language Development standards and is a comprehensive test measuring proficiency in reading, writing, listening, and spoken English. ELLs in Grades K–12 take the test once per year in January or February. All respondents said ACCESS is used as intended.

Administrators use ACCESS data to:

* Determine program placement and needed supports for students
* Plan placements for the next year and develop schedules
* Discuss ELL program needs with specialist teachers
* Gauge how the ELL team is doing

Teachers use ACCESS data to:

* Understand gaps in content area skills versus language abilities
* Plan vocabulary support in content

Administrators find ACCESS data to be useful or very useful, but teachers were consistent in describing it as only somewhat useful. Administrators and teachers alike indicated that classroom teachers make little use of ACCESS data because each school’s ELL team takes responsibility for the students and the assessment. One administrator noted that the district is moving toward including ELL teachers in department meetings to increase the overall discussion about ELL students’ needs. Several teachers commented that they see the data once each year and generally do not use it in any depth. One teacher said that making the information more available to teachers in the district’s data management system would improve teachers’ access to and use of the data. A school administrator said the three-month turnaround period is too long, and the results would be more useful if they were returned sooner.

MCAS. MCAS is administered annually to students in Grades 3–8 and Grade 10 to assess standards achievement for students, schools, and districts. At the high school level, passing MCAS tests in ELA, mathematics, and science and technology/engineering is a state graduation requirement. All respondents said the MCAS is used as intended.

Administrators use MCAS data to:

* Determine overall strengths and weaknesses in schools
* Track school progress on standards
* Track teacher contributions to student growth
* Evaluate curriculum and instruction in each building
* Track individual student growth over time
* Determine student placement in course sequences

Teachers use MCAS data to:

* Guide common planning by grade level
* Evaluate curriculum and instruction for the current year based on previous years’ results
* Determine “power standards” for the current year based on previous years’ results
* Plan interventions or enrichment for incoming students
* Identify a baseline for individual students at the beginning of each year
* Form student groups

Nearly all respondents said the MCAS is useful for these purposes. One district administrator described it as very useful, but another administrator commented that other data are needed to interpret the “story” told by low MCAS results, such as whether they can be explained by curriculum issues or test fatigue. Most teachers described MCAS data as somewhat useful or useful.

Comments critical of the MCAS include the following:

* Teachers in earlier grades said they find that MCAS results don’t always match their understanding of individual students’ abilities.
* The amount of curriculum to cover in mathematics is difficult to achieve before the exam is administered.

Perceptions of the District’s Assessment Program

Quantity of Assessments

School-level respondents were asked to describe their perception of the quantity of required assessments in their district. School administrators’ responses were mixed regarding the amount of required assessments. Three principals said the amount is about right, but two qualified their responses by describing teachers’ responses to the program. That is, they said teachers think there is too much testing; one said teachers find the weekly ELA, mathematics, and voluntary writing assessments to be “a little bit over what is useful.” Another said that Fridays are becoming “testing days,” with little time for instruction: “I definitely see that there’s a frustration around the volume of testing that occurs.” Several principals noted that the three annual administrations of the new benchmark exam, the NWEA assessments, is an improvement over the previous exam, which was given six times per year. One administrator suggested moving the second administration of NWEA assessments from December to late January. Another questioned the utility of the third administration, which is given close to the end of the year. Finally, the fourth principal stated that there are too many assessments, which was exacerbated this year by days lost to snow days.

Teachers’ views were evenly divided regarding the amount of required testing. Half said it is the right amount, and half said it is too much. Teachers who viewed the testing program more positively noted that the NWEA assessments help to build students’ testing stamina, and the formative tests keep instructional pacing on track. Teachers with a negative view said fitting assessments into the calendar is sometimes difficult, and instruction is frequently interrupted for assessments. One noted that administering each subject-area NWEA exam interferes with two course periods, so students miss a total of 12 periods across the year for NWEA testing.

Gaps and Overlaps

Respondents pointed to several gaps in the overall assessment program. Administrators and teachers noted the lack of common assessments for science. Elementary teachers are concerned about tracking student progress toward the fifth-grade science MCAS. Middle school teachers noted the lack of a science assessment in the NWEA assessments, mentioning the teacher teams try to address this gap through the weekly common assessments. A district administrator commented that although the science curriculum has been updated, assessments have not caught up.

Middle school and high school educators are concerned that relying on NWEA assessments may create gaps. One teacher reasoned that teachers were aware of specific standards that were not covered effectively by ANet, the benchmark assessment replaced by the NWEA assessments, so teachers need time to identify any similar gaps in the new program. Other teachers observed limits to NWEA’s computer-based administration; MCAS requires annotation of text, which is not supported by NWEA. A teacher said that the format used by ANet resembles the MCAS, and the format used by NWEA may be different enough from them both to create a gap in students’ experience with similar assessments. High school administrators and teachers are dissatisfied by NWEA’s broad approach to assessing mathematics; they feel the courses in specific topics, such as algebra and geometry, are not tested accurately. A teacher explained: “[W]e do a statistics unit, so I want to see that they grow in statistics. I don’t expect them to grow in geometry, but at the end of the day what gets reported to the district is just this score, one score that includes everything. So I would absolutely abandon NWEA.”

Finally, a district administrator commented that the weekly common assessments are not completely aligned to the Common Core standards, and that the district’s elementary schools use different reading programs. The administrator acknowledged that these situations may be creating gaps between the district assessment program and the Common Core, and, by extension, MCAS.

School administrators noted several areas of overlap in the district assessment program. One said the weekly reading and writing assessments need to be integrated because there is open-response testing in both. Several administrators and teachers said the fluency portion of DRA and DIBELS are the same thing. Teachers would like the district to choose one and eliminate the other.

Ways to Improve

A respondent from the district office emphasized that using current assessment tools as effectively as possible is the goal; the district is “not just looking for output.” The respondent commented that the current assessment program may take up too much instructional time, and a solution under consideration is to eliminate some summative assessments. At the elementary level, educators see potential for improvement in evaluating the purpose of DRA and DIBELS. Teachers suggested choosing one or the other, or using the full DRA in the fall to provide stronger baseline data. At the high school, a teacher suggested replacing NWEA assessments with TestWiz, which was described as a tool that can track growth in specific content areas more effectively than the NWEA assessments can.

Focus on MCAS

This section focuses on MCAS, particularly how students are prepared for the tests, scheduling and administration of the assessments, and the use of student time during and after testing as shared by the respondents interviewed.

Student Preparation for MCAS

Preparation for MCAS takes on multiple forms in District 4 and includes districtwide efforts as well as practices at the school and classroom levels.

Preparation Activities

All respondents in this district emphasized that MCAS preparation is provided through aligned curriculum and instruction. The district administrator pointed to the data analysis process that guides attention for improving instruction in the next year in broad skill areas, such as reading comprehension or writing skills. In response to identified weaknesses such as these, the district has supported schools by incorporating reading comprehension strategies across the curriculum and creating a writing block. Most school administrators added that they help students prepare by giving pep talks that note the importance of nutrition and adequate rest in the days before the exam. The district administrator and one school administrator said that students are given mock MCAS exams, mainly for the purpose of building stamina to sit for the untimed exam. One school administrator said that three mock exams each in ELA and mathematics are held, starting in December.

School schedules include a daily 40-minute intervention block, and school administrators and teachers noted that interventions planned for individual students are guided by progress toward the standards as informed by benchmark assessments and daily instruction. Intervention blocks might be used to bolster instruction in skills relevant to success on the MCAS, such as close reading strategies, as well as administering the mock exams in ELA and mathematics. School administrators and teachers also described using published MCAS questions in class, typically as “activators” to start the class session, in homework, and on weekly common exams. Teachers described different strategies to ensure that students are ready for the MCAS, including alternating between new material and review, and teaching through the standards with time reserved for review in the weeks before the exam. One teacher said that on the day before the test, “I do a fun review, like a jeopardy game.” As noted by one school administrator, afterschool extended learning time is available for students to focus on problem areas.

Impact on Instruction

All respondents addressing the question, “How is instruction impacted by these preparation activities?” said that there is no impact because preparation is regular instruction. A principal said, “I communicate that I don’t want teachers to sacrifice instruction for test prep.” Teachers agreed that “it’s not an impact because MCAS is what we should be teaching.” The only caveat is that one teacher commented that the pacing is affected by MCAS; the mathematics department’s pacing guide places non-tested topics on the calendar after MCAS. A positive impact was voiced by one teacher, who commented that the reading strategies emphasized by the Common Core standards and enforced by the MCAS have improved literacy instruction: “We used to teach the elements of literature, and students would just identify them. Now students have to know why they are there—what effect they have over the text.”

According to a district administrator, the central office communicates the expectation that student success on MCAS is achieved through aligned instruction and the use of formative data to address weaknesses, as opposed to through explicit test preparation. School-level respondents supported this assertion: Most said they do not receive specific guidance from the district or school on preparation activities they are expected to incorporate. School administrators noted that the district supports schools with data analysis services and instructional practice guides. Teachers described other forms of district support, including communicating ideas and strategies for improving instruction in problem areas, communicating expectations through the teacher evaluation system, and ensuring that strong, experienced teachers are staffing 10th grade.

Challenges

Educators noted a range of challenges they face in preparing students to succeed on MCAS. The district administrator said that in higher grade levels, teachers resist using varied teaching methods that could support a wider range of students, and that class size is a problem. A school administrator said that the mathematics curriculum has been neglected in favor of ELA, and it is not aligned to the Common Core State Standards. This means that curricular-based preparation for MCAS less effective in mathematics. Teachers added that insufficient time is a challenge; several stated that the ELA MCAS comes too early in the year and there is not enough time to cover the material, let alone for review.

Scheduling and Administration of MCAS

In this district, schools determine their own schedules. District support is available, but all school administrators interviewed said they are comfortable with handling scheduling responsibilities. The most common constraint on scheduling is ensuring that sufficient personnel and space is available to meet all small-group accommodation needs at the same time. School administrators first identify locations and staffing to support small groups of students requiring accommodations before planning other changes in staff or schedules. Staffing considerations also impact the afternoon of testing days because some number of students will require extra time. Principals describe this as an annual project that is challenging but usually manageable. Teachers confirmed this view, saying that schedule changes and plans are communicated effectively and the test administration runs smoothly.

In the elementary schools, MCAS is administered to one grade level per day, with each part administered on consecutive days. Fourth graders have an additional testing day in ELA for the long composition exam. In the middle school, all grades take the same parts of MCAS at the same time. With all grades testing simultaneously, a middle school respondent said the school “is on lockdown.” In the high school, individual parts of MCAS are administered on consecutive days.

Although the four elementary schools schedule MCAS independently from the district, they coordinate their schedules so each grade level is tested concurrently. This will ensure that, as one principal said, “You don’t have fifth graders testing on Monday in one school and on Friday in another school.” Because of this, particular limits at one elementary school impact the others. For example, one school does not have the space needed to meet all the testing accommodations required throughout the school at one time. For this reason, all the elementary schools administer the MCAS to only one grade level per day, despite preferences mentioned by several teachers at other schools for testing more grades at once. Similarly, the elementary schools administer Sections 1 and 2 of MCAS on consecutive days for each grade level, although teachers in one school think alternating in non-testing days would be more supportive of students. However, a rest day is scheduled for fourth graders during the ELA exam, before their third test day for long composition.

Student Time During MCAS

Student time during MCAS testing is the final focus of the study, particularly the extent to which instructional time is maintained for tested and non-tested students.

Tested Students

Respondents made consistent comments regarding what students do before and after testing. The district administrator, school administrators, and teachers said that testing begins early in the day, after taking attendance and providing a district-supplied breakfast. As students finish testing, they read a book in the testing room until the end of the testing period. Students needing extra time will continue, either in the original room or after moving to another room.

District respondents said that the expectation is that academic instruction continues after MCAS testing is finished. In the elementary and middle schools, students who are finished will attend the special class that is scheduled for that day, and classroom instruction will generally be review or hands-on activities. These teachers said they do not introduce new material because some students may still be testing, and students may be fatigued. One described that third graders are usually done by lunch, but they’re exhausted, and most fourth graders continue on the long composition exam into the afternoon: “The impact is that typical instruction is not happening on those days the kids are being tested.” An additional challenge to instruction on MCAS days is reported to be the availability of staff in the afternoon. Teachers described occasions when more students are still testing, and fewer teachers are free to return to their rooms. Classes need to be combined, and “behavior becomes an issue when there are 40 students in one room.” High school respondents indicated that students resume their usual schedules after testing. One teacher described afternoons of testing days as “academic light.” At all levels, teachers reported that they and their colleagues avoid assigning homework during MCAS testing.

Non-Tested Students

Respondents consistently indicated that students who are not being tested will have a normal school day. The expectations for maintaining quiet halls are increased, and schedules may change as “specials,” such as music, art, and physical education, are moved to the afternoon for students who are testing. Also, students supported by paraprofessionals or aides may not have small-group support if these staff members are reassigned to proctor accommodated groups.

Perceptions of MCAS

Respondents made a few critical comments about the overall impact of MCAS on instructional time. One administrator noted that when the ELA exam is done, some kids think they can “shut down” in that subject. Another administrator expressed doubts about the developmental appropriateness of the expectations for the long composition exam in fourth grade. Finally, a teacher said:

It makes us focus on the standards, but that does result in less fun in school. It takes a lot of creativity to bring laughter to a class when everyone is so focused on improvement. Lessons are so finely tuned that there is little room for invention on the spot. When there is so much focus on the outcome, there is no room for divergent thinking. We become like medical practitioners, treating a diagnosis. It is not a holistic approach.

However, more respondents said that MCAS has a positive effect on instruction. Several administrators and teachers talked about how their school’s instructional program has improved through the rigor imposed by MCAS. Several noted how it focuses attention on maintaining the instructional pace, keeping the level of rigor high, and guiding improvements in instruction. An administrator noted that after students learn reading strategies, they work longer at reading comprehension exercises as they focus on the text. Another administrator said: “[MCAS] data is rich and it helps to drive instruction in a valuable way. I think people take instruction more seriously because of MCAS.”

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1. All districts and charter schools had the opportunity to participate in the survey administered in October 2014. ESE received complete, nonduplicate responses from 148 respondents, for a response rate of 36 percent. ESE contracted with AIR to build on the preliminary findings from this survey with a more representative sample of districts. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See *Phase 1 Summary* for a description of this phase and the initial findings: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/research/reports/2015/03MADistAssessStudy-Phase1.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Districts in Massachusetts were given the option of administering MCAS or Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers(PARCC) assessments in the 2014–15 school year.Because preparation for and administration of PARCC is new, and the study sought to understand how districts customarily prepare their students for and administer statewide assessments, only districts that selected to remain with MCAS were considered for this study. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Data collected during the first phase of the study also reflected scheduling practices found in the four case-study districts, as respondents in two thirds of the participating districts in Phase 1 stated that scheduling decisions are made entirely at the school level. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Respondents were asked to rate the usefulness of each assessment on a scale of 1 (*not useful*) to 4 (*very useful*). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. According to the ESE, MCAS results are gradually released to superintendents and principals starting in late June. Dissemination of the data to teachers is the responsibility of districts and schools. Full release of MCAS results to the public is in mid-September (for more information, see <http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/2015ReleaseSchedule.pdf>). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. ESE provides access to about half of MCAS test questions from 2010 through 2015. Currently, a total of 3,060 MCAS test items are available to the public (see <http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/testitems.html>). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. All Massachusetts districts and schools with sufficient data are classified as one of five accountability and assistance levels, with the highest performing in Level 1 and the lowest performing in Level 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Respondents were asked to rate the usefulness of each assessment on a scale of 1 (*not useful*) to 4 (*very useful*). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. According to the ESE, MCAS results are gradually released to superintendents and principals starting in late June. Dissemination of the data to teachers is the responsibility of districts and schools. Full release of MCAS results to the public is in mid-September (for more information, see <http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/2015ReleaseSchedule.pdf>). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Respondents were asked to rate the usefulness of each assessment on a scale of 1 (*not useful*) to 4 (*very useful*). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. District-determined measures are measures of student learning, growth, or achievement. According to ESE, they play a key role in the Commonwealth’s new educator evaluation system by providing feedback to educators about their impact on student learning across the full range of content and educator roles. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Respondents were asked to rate the usefulness of each assessment on a scale of 1 (*not useful*) to 4 (*very useful*). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)