**District Assessment Practices**

**Date:** August 2015

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**Links:** • <http://www.doe.mass.edu/research/reports/2014/10SuptAssessmentSurvey.pdf>

• <http://www.doe.mass.edu/research/reports/2015/03MADistAssessStudy-Phase1.pdf>

• <http://www.doe.mass.edu/research/reports/2015/08AssessmentPractices.pdf>

# Key Findings

This set of studies examined assessment practices in Massachusetts public school districts through a statewide superintendent survey, interviews of district and school staff, and four targeted case studies.

* A substantial proportion of the testing that occurs in districts is for district-required, not state-mandated, assessments. This is particularly true at the elementary level.
* Assessments are most commonly used for addressing student academic needs such as diagnosis, placement, and measuring progress towards goals. They are least commonly used for students to prepare or practice for state assessments or to predict student performance on those assessments.
* In a representative sample of 35 districts, the average district required 6.7 assessments with an associated 19.1 testing sessions.
* Three of the four case study districts spent six to nine days on testing, totaled across all grade spans. At the extreme, one case study district spent 18 days on testing, including three different literacy-related assessments and weekly common formative assessments in elementary grades.
* With regard to preparation for state assessments, the case study district selected on the basis of less effort expended on MCAS test preparation employed a more flexible teacher-determined strategy, while the district selected for expending greater effort on test preparation employed a more intensive district-led approach.
* In the case study districts, tested students returned to their classroom after finishing the state assessment, though teachers were reluctant to introduce new content on testing days. Most non-tested students experienced minimal disruption in their school day, except in two districts where non-tested high school students had only a half-day of school when MCAS testing takes place.

# Research Questions

These analyses sought to better understand district practices related to state-mandated and district-required assessments. In particular, they examined:

* What are the purposes for which assessments are administered?
* How much time is spent on district and state assessments?
* How do districts prepare for and schedule assessments?

The studies focused only on assessments that are given district-wide to most students in a particular grade, not tests administered only by certain teachers or schools or tests given only to some students.

# Data and Methodology

The study involved three components:

* A statewide survey of superintendents with 148 respondents (response rate of 38 percent)
* Interviews with both district and school personnel in a representative sample of 35 districts
* Case studies, including an assessment inventory and interviews, in four districts selected to represent the following district types:
  + Average achievement and growth with relatively less effort expended on MCAS test preparation (District 1)
  + Average achievement and growth with relatively more 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)

Districts 1 and 2 and Districts 3 and 4 were also selected because they are similar to one another in terms of student demographics and performance, so their practices can be fairly compared.

# Detailed Results on District Assessment Practices

* A substantial proportion of the testing that occurs in districts is for district-required, not state-mandated, assessments. This is particularly true at the elementary level.
  + The state requires participation in MCAS in English language arts and mathematics, in grades 3 through 8 and 10, along with science in grades 5 and 8 and in high school. In most grades the state testing requirement results in two tests, with two sessions per test.
  + By comparison, in the representative sample of 35 districts, the average district required 6.7 assessments with an associated 19.1 testing sessions. This broke down to an average of 2.9 assessments and 8.3 sessions in elementary grades, 2.6 assessments and 7.5 sessions in middle grades, and 1.9 assessments and 5.6 sessions in high school grades. Districts with lower proficiency levels on average require more assessments.
* Superintendents reported that the most common ways districts use assessments are to measure whether students have met specific learning goals (84 percent reported “often” or “very often”); diagnose student academic needs (82 percent); determine student course grades or marks (82 percent); and provide feedback to teachers on students’ progress (80 percent).
* The four case study districts all used a combination of purchased and locally developed assessments. All required diagnostic screenings in reading for elementary grades, and all incorporated writing prompts in at least one grade span. Three of the four used district-wide benchmark exams to track progress in English language arts and mathematics.
* The case study districts varied from 6 to 18 days spent on district assessments.

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| Grade span | 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 |
| **Total** | **6 days** | **6 ½ days** | **9 days** | **18 days** |

* District 4 stood out as an outlier in terms of time spent on testing. This district administered the Northwest Evaluation Association Assessments, which measure progress and growth in English language arts and mathematics, three times per year in grades K–10; portions of the Developmental Reading Assessment in grades 1 to 5 and Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills in grades K and 1 every six weeks; weekly common formative assessments in English language arts and mathematics in grades K–8; and quarterly assessments in all high school courses. Respondents in this district expressed mixed views on whether this was the appropriate amount of testing. Half of interviewed teachers and the majority of principals said this was the right amount; half of teachers said it was too much; and none said it was too little.

# Detailed Results on State Assessments

* Superintendents reported that the least common ways assessments are used are to help students practice or prepare for summative assessments such as MCAS (43 percent reported “often” or “very often”) and to predict student performance on those assessments (37 percent).
* In the representative sample of 35 districts, 83 percent of districts spent five days or fewer on preparing for state assessments (defined as time spent specifically on test preparation, not general instruction). Forty-three percent spent two days or fewer.
* All case study districts prepared their students for MCAS 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.
* Among two similarly performing case study districts, the one that expended less effort expended on MCAS test preparation employed a more flexible teacher-determined strategy, while the one that expended more effort on test preparation employed a more intensive district-led approach.

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| District 1: Less Effort on MCAS Preparation | District 2: More Effort on MCAS 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 district-wide 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. |

* In the case study districts, district offices did not, in policy or practice, influence MCAS scheduling practices in their individual school buildings. Schools determined the testing schedule after considering the following issues:
  + Whether to administer the test during the beginning, middle, or end of the testing window
  + Whether to test grade levels on different days or simultaneously
  + Whether to administer the sessions on consecutive days or with rest days in between
  + How to meet the state’s required testing conditions and provide appropriate accommodations for students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)
* In all four case study districts, tested students returned to their regular classrooms after testing. MCAS tests are untimed, so students may take as long as they need to finish, and teachers reported that the students are mentally exhausted after testing. For these reasons, teachers are reluctant to introduce new content or concepts on testing days.
* Most non-tested students in the case study districts experienced minimal disruption in their school day, other than adjustment of when their lunch and special subjects such as music and art may occur during the day. In two of the districts, non-tested high school students experience a half-day when MCAS testing takes place. During this down time, non-tested students in these districts are given options to extend learning, such a study period, extra homework, or opportunity to take a practice AP exam.