

# MCAS TESTS ARE NOT STANDARDS

## Let's keep what's working and fix what's not

Massachusetts has had world-class, comprehensive K-12 educational standards since passage of the 1993 Education Reform Act. These standards are deeply embedded throughout our K-12 system. MCAS tests are not state standards. They are limited assessments that address only a small portion of the state standards. Our uniform state standards will continue to shape teaching, learning and assessment, with or without the MCAS graduation requirement.

**B**efore 1993, most decisions about Massachusetts public schools were made at the local level. The state's only high school curriculum requirements were four years of physical education (9-12) and one year of U.S. history/civics. There was no defined curriculum or standards for these two subjects or any other subject. In fact, there was no state requirement that students actually pass these courses or any subjects. All decisions regarding curriculum and graduation requirements were left up to each local school district.

As a result, there truly were about 350 different district curriculum and graduation requirements. In addition, according to the U.S. Digest of Education Statistics, Massachusetts ranked 45th out of 49 states in the percentage of state contribution to local public education spending in 1993 (contributing 33% of the state's total public education spending, as opposed to the national average of 46%). This led to an overreliance on local property taxes and the state having some of the widest gaps in district per-pupil spending in the nation. These two factors – first and foremost the state underfunding of public education, but also the lack of curriculum and graduation requirements – contributed to disparities in outcomes across districts and by race, income, disability and language.

However, in 1993, with a Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court decision pending in the school funding case *McDuffy v. Secretary of the Executive Office of Education*, the Legislature enacted the Massachusetts Education Reform Act (MERA), fundamentally changing public education governance. In addition to creating a new state funding formula, the law required the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) to establish

state standards and curriculum frameworks.

The Massachusetts Teachers Association and Citizens for Public Schools played key roles in the efforts that led to the passage of MERA. The groups were leading members of the Coalition for Fair School Finance, which aggressively pursued the McDuffy lawsuit, first filed in 1978, to establish the state's constitutional obligation to provide adequate funding to public schools in rich and poor communities alike.

Carrying out the mandates of the new law, DESE, in consultation with educators and other experts, developed frameworks, standards and related documents that included guiding principles, standards for practice, anchor standards, content standards by grade level, vertical progression guides, model courses and implementation resources. For the first time, Massachusetts had a consistent, statewide system of curriculum standards. These standards have been widely praised as some of the best and most rigorous in the nation.

For example, Marc Tucker, president emeritus and a distinguished senior fellow of the National Center on Education and the Economy, offered this evaluation of Massachusetts' state standards: "Massachusetts benchmarked the standards used by the world's top-performing countries, set its own standards there, assumed that Massachusetts students could meet them, and then gave their educators the time and support they needed." (How Massachusetts Built a World-Class School System, Dec. 22, 2016.)

### IMPLEMENTATION OF STANDARDS

Over the past 30 years, the frameworks and standards have become the foundation of most state education



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policies in Massachusetts, including teacher preparation, licensing, evaluation and accountability, as well as many local decisions, such as curriculum development, purchase of textbooks and curriculum materials and professional development. In addition, educators use the frameworks and standards to guide the construction of units, lessons and assessments. More specifically:

- All Massachusetts teacher preparation programs are approved by DESE and must include instruction in the curriculum frameworks and standards.
- All teachers in Massachusetts must demonstrate content area knowledge that is aligned to the curriculum frameworks through licensure requirements.
- All educators are evaluated by standards of practice aligned to the frameworks and standards.
- The DESE district review process includes a standard that evaluates whether the district’s curriculum is aligned to “the content and rigor of the appropriate Massachusetts curriculum frameworks and to definitions of high-quality instructional materials, such as those set forth by Curriculum Ratings by Teachers (CURATE).”
- The rules and practices outlined in the preceding bullets lead school districts to align their curriculum to the state curriculum standards. The requirement in the Thrive Act that districts certify that students have met the state standards to graduate will reinforce the need for that alignment. MassCore, a state-recommended high school course sequence, provides districts with a blueprint to ensure that students master the curriculum standards prior to graduation.
- In addition to the state curriculum frameworks and standards, Massachusetts schools, particularly high schools, offer programs that must follow established standards. Advanced Placement courses, International Baccalaureate programs and Perkins vocational programs are all based on articulated curriculum standards at the course level.

State standards did not exist in 1993, but over time, they have become the core of education in Massachusetts. The work of public educators here is dominated by the curriculum frameworks and standards; educators are well-versed in the standards and how they need to be implemented.

## MCAS

In contrast, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) is not a standard. It is merely an instrument developed to assess whether students have demonstrated proficiency in a subset of the state’s curriculum standards.

MCAS is a limited tool that measures only some of the standards established by the curriculum frameworks. For example, the ELA standards define 32 anchor standards (standards that apply to all grades) in four areas: Reading, Writing, Language, and Speaking and Listening.

	Anchor Standards	Addressed in MCAS
Reading	10	7
Writing	10	3
Language	6	4
Speaking + Listening	6	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>14</b>

Yet, the 2023 Grade 10 ELA MCAS does not address any Speaking and Listening Standards. For Writing, only three out of 10 standards are covered. Overall, at grade 10, the MCAS is aligned to less than half (43%) of the ELA anchor standards.

Today, the state’s curriculum frameworks and standards are deeply embedded in the public education system and will continue to be, whether or not MCAS is a graduation requirement. In contrast, the MCAS graduation requirement detracts from the state’s curriculum frameworks and standards by focusing on only a few, to the detriment of others.

Without the MCAS graduation requirement, Massachusetts will still collect MCAS data and the state standards will remain the core of the graduation requirement.

Replacing the MCAS graduation requirement with a requirement that students demonstrate that they have mastered the skills and knowledge required by the standards through successful completion of coursework embodying those standards, as the *Thrive Act* would do, will strengthen the state’s standards-based system by creating a more accurate and complete measure of whether students are meeting the standards.



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