

# The Vermont Legislative Research Service



## Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System: An Overview

This report analyzes the way in which the implementation of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) examinations has affected students in the Massachusetts public school system.

### MCAS Summary

The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System was first implemented in 1998 in correlation with the standards put in place by the Massachusetts Educational Reform Act of 1993 and later the guidelines set forth by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2002. Although originally implemented as a 1998 class of 2003, the first class to have their high school degree withheld based on their 10th grade MCAS scores. In accordance with the Educational Reform Law, the MCAS is used to test all public school students in Massachusetts, including students with disabilities and English Language Learners.



Proficiency Plan (EPP) in order to be eligible to graduate.<sup>16</sup>

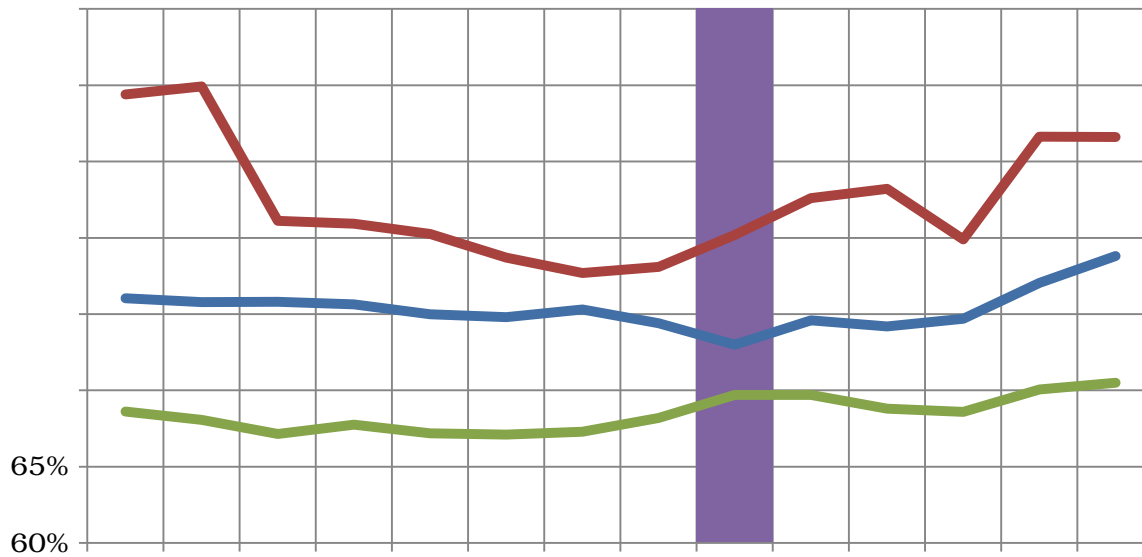


Figure 1. Public High School Graduation Rates.  
 Source: Constructed for this report with data from The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, Preparation for College Public High School Graduation Rates.<sup>23</sup>

As indicated in Figure 2, in 2002 a more difficult version of the GED test was introduced, to a nationwide spike in GED takers in 2001, presumably hoping to take their GED before the test became more difficult. The harder test, which featured less multiple choice questions than previous tests, as well as a calculator section, led to the aforementioned jump in takers for the 2001 GED test, and a 43% decline in the number of 2002 GED takers from the number of takers in 2001.<sup>24</sup> Up until this point, in Massachusetts, there was a general downward trend in GED takers beginning in the early 1990s.

<sup>23</sup>The data set did not include figures for the 2007 graduation rate for any state.

<sup>24</sup>GED Testing Service, Who Passed the GED? Statistical Report, July 2004, accessed April 11, 2013, <http://www.gedtestingservice.com/uploads/files/9132bf361efcae8bdfae809eee5cfdcf33MB>

Figure 2. GED Testakers in Massachusetts.  
Source: GED Testing Service, Annual Statistical Reports

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Figure 3. Percent of GED-Takers in Massachusetts, 1978-2007  
Source: Source: GED Testing Service, Annual Statistical Reports.

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### MCAS Effects on College Preparedness

Although the passing rate of students taking the MCAS has risen tremendously, there is evidence that this has had an effect on college performance. In 1998, when students first started taking the test, fewer than half the students passed both English and math on the try. Now, 95 percent eventually pass, some after retesting. But lack of appreciable improvement in skills among incoming freshman at state colleges raises a deeper question: How well are Massachusetts high school seniors preparing? Multiple studies and surveys have echoed the sentiment that Massachusetts public school graduates (who are MCAS certified by definition) are lacking in basic skills, require placement into remedial classes. Many of the students arrive on campus with little experience writing papers or v



frequently than their peers and are less likely to <sup>33</sup>While these are important factors for a child's success, the greatest predictor of most students' academic achievement is believed to depend on their mother's academic achievement. <sup>34</sup>The United States National Institute of Health found that a mother's reading skill is the greatest determinant of her children's future academic success, outweighing other factors such as neighborhood and family income. <sup>35</sup>

The Governor of Massachusetts, Deval Patrick, has pledged to bridge the achievement gap in the state by investing public funds in programs to improve student performance in disadvantaged schools, such as low-income students. <sup>36</sup>A student in Massachusetts qualifies as low-income if he meets one of the following requirements: [the] student is eligible for free or reduced-price lunch; or [the] student receives Transitional Aid to Families benefits; or [the] student is eligible for food stamps. <sup>37</sup>Low-income students have consistently underperformed on the MCAS exams when compared with the overall state. <sup>38</sup>The consequences of this may be most significant for low-income students who live in areas. A 2008 Harvard study ban

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best way to evaluate student, teacher, and school performance. Supporters also claim these tests will help ensure that disadvantaged students who score poorly will receive more support by having their schools held accountable, and it will ensure that all students have certain proficiencies and are not left behind or are falsely promoted. Grade-level benchmarks for the high-stakes exams argue that the exams will raise the bar for student performance and send a strong message to students' teachers, school leaders, and parents that students must meet proficiency levels. Another response in favor of high-stakes tests espouses the belief that performance results are the best way to measure a student's abilities comparing them to specific criteria. Supporters also argue that schools should be rewarded financially for meeting standards and receiving high scores. This provides the incentives [that] will motivate school leaders and teachers to teach effectively and raise student performance.<sup>52</sup>

While there is support backing the use of high-stakes exams for graduation requirements, teacher and school accountability, and financial rewards, there is also significant opposition to the use of these exams. Some of the strongest oppositions are formed behind Campbell's law, which states: The more any quantitative social indicator is used in social decision making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and distort the social processes it is intended to measure. There are two main ways in which the Campbell law manifests itself in Massachusetts high-stakes examinations: score inflation and narrowing the curriculum.<sup>53</sup>

Score inflation is the alteration or misrepresentation of test scores in order to falsely indicate improvement. Score inflation can occur in many ways, from behalf of students, teachers, and administrators to the exclusion of low-performing students from the final results.<sup>54</sup> In 2009, administration and teacher cheating influenced MCAS results from a public Massachusetts school. These acts included: telling students to check answers, allowing

<sup>47</sup>Public Broadcasting Service, Frontline: Testing Our Schools, A Guide for Parents.

<sup>48</sup>Public Broadcasting Service, Frontline: Testing Our Schools, A Guide for Parents

<sup>49</sup>Public Broadcasting Service, Frontline: Testing Our Schools, A Guide for Parents

<sup>50</sup>Public Broadcasting Service, Frontline: Testing Our Schools, A Guide for Parents.

<sup>51</sup>Public Broadcasting Service, Frontline: Testing Our Schools, A Guide for Parents.

<sup>52</sup>Public Broadcasting Service, Frontline: Testing Our Schools, A Guide for Parents

<sup>53</sup>Public Broadcasting Service, Frontline: Testing Our Schools, A Guide for Parents

<sup>54</sup>Sharon L. Nichols and David C. Berliner, The Inevitable Corruption of Indicators Through High-Stakes Testing, Arizona State University, 200

students to view MCAS material prior to the exam administration, and pressuring teachers to be on board with this scheme.<sup>58</sup>



## Conclusion

While Massachusetts has emerged as an elementary and secondary educational hub in recent times, it is impossible to say whether these gains have been made due to MCAS implementation, or in spite of. This is especially true when taking into account changes in population, and school system, as well as more intangible changes such as the actual knowledge amassed by students within Massachusetts's public schools. Regardless, Massachusetts has become a de facto leader in terms of U.S. education. We believe the effectiveness of the MCAS will better be answered once the Common Core Standards implementation process is complete.

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This report was completed October 21, 2015 by Meagan Borofsky, TJ Bowse, and Stephen-George Davis under the supervision of Acting Director Kate Fournier in response to a request from Representative David Sharpe.

Contact: Kate Fournier, 820 Old Mill, The University of Vermont, Burlington, VT 05405-6305, email [kate.fournier@uvm.edu](mailto:kate.fournier@uvm.edu)

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