TOWARD A BETTER MCAS:

Consensus Recommendations from Organizations Serving the Commonwealth's Students

VOICES FOR ACADEMIC EQUITY | 2023

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Education Reform Now Massachusetts served as the convener of the Voices for Academic Equity Coalition, the members of which are listed below. This report would not have been possible without the commitment of coalition members, who generously volunteered their time. In addition, the coalition wishes to thank Laura Cinelli of the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy, Jessica Huizenga of Latinos for Education, and Jennifer Davis Carey and Emily Dodge of the Worcester Education Collaborative, who attended coalition meetings and provided valuable input and advice. We are grateful to Rob Curtin, Chief Officer for Data, Assessment, and Accountability at the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Facilitator & author: Jill Norton is an independent policy adviser and researcher. Jill has served as the Director of Education Policy at Abt Associates, Senior Policy Adviser at the Massachusetts Executive Office of Education, and the Executive Director of the Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy. She can be reached at clarkstconsulting@gmail.com.

VOICES FOR ACADEMIC EQUITY COALITION MEMBERS:

BOSTON SCHOOLS FUND

ERN MASSACHUSETTS

EDUCATORS FOR EXCELLENCE MASSACHUSETTS

The Education Trust MASSACHUSETTS

Kevin Andrews, K&J Educational Advisors

mbae MASSACHUSETTS Business Alliance for Education

MASSACHUSETTS CHARTER PUBLIC SCHOOL ASSOCIATION

Mass insight education & research

NATIONAL PARENTS UNION Sindicato Nacional de Padres

Paul Toner, Cambridge City Council, MA Board of Higher Education

TEACHFORAMERICA MASSACHUSETTS

TEACH PLUS MASSACHUSETTS

the TEACHERS' lounge MASSACHUSETTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We are nonprofit and community leaders representing classroom educators, school leaders, parents, advocates and employers committed to the promise of equitable and high quality public education. In response to recent calls for the elimination of our state assessment, we came together with a focus on preserving and improving one of our most critical tools for ensuring educational equity: the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). We maintain that MCAS, while in need of targeted revisions, is the primary means for providing students, families, educators and policymakers with the objective, valid, reliable, comparable information essential to determining gaps in outcomes, preparedness for college and career success, and where additional resources are most needed — especially for those who have been and continue to be systemically marginalized: students of color, those with disabilities, English Learners, and students from low income families.

As we emerge from a pandemic that was particularly detrimental for communities of color, some groups disparage MCAS for being "destructive and punitive" and dismiss the role MCAS plays in bringing inequities into the bright light of day. We disagree. Without the safeguards of standards and assessments, students who have been and continue to be marginalized do not receive equitable access to high quality educational opportunities. We know this to be true because we have seen it. Prior to the adoption of state standards and assessments, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court described our public school system as a "loosely connected melange of statutes, local regulations, and informal policies in which elected school boards . . . had broad, individual discretion to set educational policy and practice." Going back to a loosely connected system rife with disparities would be profoundly unjust. **Spending energy, time and resources fighting the assessment does nothing to close the gaps in opportunity or achievement the tests reveal.**

MCAS results shine a spotlight on student outcome disparities, which allows Massachusetts to face the difficult reality of persistent achievement and opportunity gaps. We know the test exposes our society's inequities. We also know what happens when we stop holding up those inequities. Without data to reveal wide disparities in opportunities, we weaken our ability to demand better opportunities for the students who are entitled to a high quality education and have not historically received it. We hold up a mirror to see reality so we can work to improve it. We don't break the mirror because we don't like what we see reflected back to us.

> ***As we emerge from a pandemic that was particularly detrimental for communities of color, some groups disparage MCAS for being "destructive and punitive" and dismiss the role MCAS plays in bringing inequities into the bright light of day.***
>
> **We disagree.**

Over the past four months, our group reviewed data, conducted research and discussed the implementation and use of MCAS over the past 25 years. This document represents our collective analysis of: **its challenges, shortcomings, and misperceptions, the value MCAS has added to our public education system, as well as proposed changes.**

Without MCAS, families, students, educators and policymakers must rely on subjective measures like grades as proxies for students' levels of knowledge and skills across classrooms, schools, and districts. Yet, sometimes in schools serving low-income students an "A" can mean something different than an "A" at a school serving high income students. Our review of MCAS data over the past 25 years makes its value evident as an objective means for reflecting students' progress in meeting grade and subject matter expectations and exposing inequities, as a reliable indicator of students' readiness for future success in college and the workplace, and as a statewide tool to measure trends in students' outcomes over time and determine where additional state resources are most needed and for whom.

Notwithstanding these important benefits, there are critical ways MCAS could and should continue to improve. Equally important, there is a need for the wide dissemination of more, and more accurate, information about the value of MCAS — particularly for students who have been systemically marginalized. Most Massachusetts families support the use of statewide assessments to indicate student achievement levels, but the advocacy efforts of groups opposed to MCAS have increased public awareness about what these groups perceive to be the assessment system's challenges, and have undermined public support. In this document, we describe five of the well-founded reasons MCAS is criticized, four of its unintended consequences, and four commonly held misperceptions.

Recognizing the essential role MCAS plays, our group came to consensus about the need to keep it in place to ensure equity across our public schools and to improve upon it in ways that will mitigate its challenges and make it a more helpful and efficient tool for students, families and educators. Below our coalition makes eight impactful and feasible recommendations for the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). However, it is important to note that community partners, advocacy groups, legislators, families, educators, and the business community also have roles to play in supporting these changes. Our coalition commits to providing DESE with the support needed to enact these changes quickly, and we hope others will join us.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Lead a campaign to educate legislators, families, and the general public on the valuable information MCAS provides and what actions can and should be taken in response to students' scores.**
2. **Help families understand results and provide clear guidance and support to help them advocate for their child(ren).**
3. **Get results to educators and families faster in a way they can easily understand.**
4. **Support better data use to improve instruction.**
5. **Include educators of color in creating the test to prevent the cultural bias that has historically plagued standardized tests.**
6. **Measure the life and career readiness skills not currently measured by MCAS.**
7. **Provide tests in more languages.**
8. **Employ technology to improve common assessments.**

As a state that has prioritized and made significant investments in public education, it is critical that we continue to have a reliable, objective way to understand how our investments are impacting all of the Commonwealth's children — the children who are thriving and those who are struggling. We strongly believe that state leaders and the Healey administration must keep assessments in place as our primary tool for objectively understanding how our students are progressing — especially in the coming years as we seek to quickly mitigate the pandemic's impact. We urge state leaders to make the changes we propose so the test is more useful and accessible. These changes are well within reach to accomplish in the coming months.

INTRODUCTION

Thirty years ago Massachusetts enacted an education reform bill designed to ensure that all public school students in grades K-12 have access to a high quality education. **The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) is an essential component of the 1993 law and remains vital to ensuring educational equity for all students.** Since 1993, state leaders have led a process through which educators established grade-level standards for each content area (the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks) that articulate what students across the state should know and be able to do. State leaders then worked with educators and assessment experts to create an objective way to gauge the progress of students in achieving proficiency on those standards, resulting in the assessments we have today for grades 3-8 and 10 in math, English language arts, and science[1]. The Curriculum Frameworks paired with standardized assessments have been key elements in raising expectations for all students and have helped ensure that more students achieve the levels of knowledge and skills that will prepare them for future success.

Yet, some have questioned MCAS's value as a tool for equity, instead viewing the tests as a tool that perpetuates the oppression of systemically marginalized groups, including students of color, students from low income families, English Learners, and students with disabilities. These critics have questioned the usefulness of MCAS, which, in their view, highlights the connections of family wealth with higher test scores and systemically marginalized populations with lower test scores. In recent years, the perspectives of these critics have been regularly featured in the media and, consequently, become infused in policy conversations.

As Governor Maura Healey and Secretary Patrick Tutwiler begin setting their education agenda, we have come together as a working group of nonprofit and community leaders representing classroom educators, school leaders, parents, advocates and employers who are committed to the promise of equitable and high quality public education. Immediate action to close persistent achievement and opportunity gaps and raise levels of proficiency for students of color, English Learners, students from low income families or those with disabilities is urgently needed, especially as we emerge from a pandemic that was particularly detrimental for systemically communities. At the same time, we also acknowledge the role MCAS has played in bringing attention to those inequities. As one of our marginalized members put it, "you cannot close gaps if you don't measure them." As we seek to mitigate — as quickly as possible — the deeply unequal impact of the pandemic and inequitable learning opportunities for students of color, those with disabilities, English Learners, and students from low income families, it is even more critical that we have valid and reliable ways to know where our students are in relation to grade-level standards.

> ***As we seek to mitigate — as quickly as possible — the deeply unequal impact of the pandemic and inequitable learning opportunities for students of color, those with disabilities, English Learners, and students from low income families, it is even more critical that we have valid and reliable ways to know where our students are in relation to grade-level standards.***

Our working group came together with a focus on preserving and improving a critical tool for ensuring equity. We agreed on two main tasks:

1) to identify and make the case for the ways MCAS provides objective, valid, reliable, comparable data to determine gaps in outcomes for different groups of students; to ascertain achievement levels of individual students; to ensure all students are prepared for college and career success; and to assess district and school performance[2], and

2) to propose changes to MCAS that would: make results more useful for educators, students and families; make it more equitable; improve its efficiency; and provide opportunities for students to show their proficiency in life and career readiness
skills as well as content knowledge.

Together we have examined the current implementation of MCAS, identified its shortcomings as well as the value it has added to our public education system, conducted research on changes to assessments in other states, and consulted with nationally recognized experts in innovative assessments. In this document, we share our collective findings and proposed changes that, if adopted, will provide teachers, students, and families with more robust, timely, transparent, and useful information to improve teaching and learning, continue to highlight persistent gaps across student groups, and help to ensure all students have access to a high quality educational experience.

CHALLENGES OF MCAS

Statewide testing has become a controversial topic among some teachers and families. Gaps between the levels of achievement for different groups of students persist and in some cases widened after the school closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In this section, we describe MCAS's key areas of critique, an array of unintended consequences, and several commonly held misperceptions.

There are five areas of well-founded **critiques:**

1. **Families are typically not included in conversations** about MCAS results, their impact, and what steps families are entitled to take when their students aren't meeting or exceeding expectations[3].

2. To date, MCAS is almost exclusively offered in English[4] – a fact that **puts students who are learning English at a disadvantage**. Multilingual learners who know the content being tested are not able to show what they know because the tests' instructions and questions are in English.

3. **MCAS does not include items that are culturally relevant for systematically marginalized students.** These students may find their cultures misrepresented or not represented at all in test items, a fact that impacts their ability to accurately show what they know and are able to do.

4. MCAS is designed to assess students' progress in achieving academic skills and **does not focus on the harder-to-measure life and career readiness skills that are also needed for students' future success** in college and the workforce. While some of these skills are included in the Massachusetts Frameworks — like "speaking and listening"[5] and oral presentation skills as well as teamwork and collaboration — they are not currently included in MCAS.

5. Smaller and/or under-resourced districts **lack the capacity to effectively analyze data in a timely and efficient way** and then to share it with educators so that the data can be used to inform instruction.

MCAS's assessment of each students' attainment of knowledge and skills has resulted in four **unintended consequences.**

1. Some schools and districts have **dedicated a significant portion of time to "test prep" in the form of "drill and kill" sessions, frequent practice test taking, etc.** Rather than getting the high quality instruction they deserve, students receive only cursory, surface-level opportunities to build a lasting body of knowledge and skills.

2. A common criticism is that MCAS testing disrupts and reduces learning time for students. Indeed, especially in schools where testing times are extended, and extra time is allocated for some students, **the administration of MCAS can result in a significant investment of time for students and educators.[6]**

3. Especially in schools and districts with a high percentage of students not meeting expectations on MCAS, some schools have **increased time spent on tested subjects while decreasing time spent on the arts and physical education.** While research indicates the importance and long-term benefits of obtaining proficiency in the academic areas of math and literacy, students enrolled in districts who subscribe to this model lose an opportunity to receive a well-rounded education. This response to MCAS can negatively impact students' engagement in and attitudes toward school.

4. The public aspect of the scores, without proper context, especially for educators and community members in districts serving students whose achievement is far below expectations has meant that **MCAS scores often have a demoralizing effect on these educators and communities.** Without context, the general public can misinterpret MCAS scores, assuming educators teaching in districts with high percentages of students consistently meeting or exceeding expectations are "doing better" at educating their students.

There are four **misperceptions** about MCAS that are unfounded. Because they have become widely held, these misperceptions undermine support for MCAS:

1. Some people argue that one test should not be used to represent the entirety of what students know and are able to do. But this obscures the fact that **MCAS is a series of tests (ELA, math, science) taken over time and used in combination with locally determined requirements.** These assessments provide an objective measure of students' progression in meeting expectations at or near the end of each tested grade. They complement local measures like students' completion of and grades in their courses, along with other locally determined requirements, such as Vision of the Graduate[7], service learning, community service, and civics[8] requirements.

2. MCAS is commonly conveyed as a tool that names persistent gaps but doesn't trigger support to close them. **In fact, state spending on education has continued to increase since the advent of standards based reform, and — especially with the passage of the Student Opportunity Act of 2019 (SOA) — to be directed to the districts that need it most.** While the SOA is still being implemented, it is designed to provide – and is providing – significant additional resources to districts with large percentages of students who have been historically marginalized and to close achievement gaps among these students and their peers. MCAS is an objective way of gauging whether these additional resources are having their intended effect.

3. **Because MCAS tests are summative rather than formative, it is — by design — not feasible to use test results to inform instruction in the school year in which the test is administered.** As a summative assessment, MCAS must be administered as late in the school year as possible to permit students the maximum amount of time to learn the standards and teachers the maximum amount of time to teach them. As a result, teachers receive data on their students' performance just as those students are completing the school year and don't have sufficient time to adjust their instruction for that group of students. Teachers can and often do, however, make requisite changes to their instruction with the next school year's students, and use incoming students' prior year's scores to ascertain incoming students' strengths and areas in need of improvement.

4. MCAS is perceived as limiting educators' ability to prioritize opportunities for students to understand the context of what they are learning or how it might be applicable in the real world. **MCAS is designed to assess the curriculum frameworks created by educators that Massachusetts has designated for each grade level and subject.**[9] If there is truly not enough time to meaningfully cover the agreed-upon standards in-depth, then the number of standards could be reduced and MCAS would then be altered to assess fewer standards.

Finally, while most Massachusetts families support the use of statewide assessments to indicate student achievement levels,[10] public sentiment supporting MCAS has diminished.[11] After 25 years of MCAS consistently naming the gaps between student groups, some have come to view MCAS itself negatively. Relatedly, some statewide organizations have kept up a constant drumbeat of resistance to the tests and made substantial investments of time and money to raise public awareness about what they perceive to be MCAS's challenges. And, with the disproportionate hardships of the pandemic still reverberating across classrooms and schools, the August 2022 vote of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education to raise the 10th grade scores required to earn a high school diploma fueled anti-MCAS sentiment.

THE VALUE OF CURRICULUM FRAMEWORKS AND MCAS IN ACADEMIC IMPROVEMENT

Notwithstanding these challenges, 25 years of MCAS has unquestionably yielded value for the Commonwealth's students. Before the Curriculum Frameworks and MCAS assessments, there existed an alarming lack of information about the quality of education individual students and groups of students received across Massachusetts. In the days before learning standards and MCAS existed, it was impossible for families to know how their students were faring academically in relation to grade-level standards, to other schools within their districts, or to peers in other districts. Families largely relied on grades and report cards, both of which are subjective, with large disparities in the meaningfulness and accuracy of grades as proxies for students' levels of knowledge and skills across classrooms, schools, and districts.[12] Frequently, these disparities in expectations and opportunities, rooted in bias, further disadvantaged students from communities of color and advantaged their moreaffluent, white peers.

With MCAS, students and their families, as well as educators, have objective, reliable, valid information to see how well students are meeting the academic standards for their grade, to be able to compare students and schools with others across the Commonwealth, and to get an indication of how ready each student is for success beyond high school.

A review of MCAS data makes its value evident in three key areas:

1) As a means for exposing inequities;

2) As a tool to measure trends in students' outcomes over time; and

3) As an objective indicator of students' readiness for future success in college and the workplace, independent from their socio-economic status.

- Scores **provide an objective, common measure** that enables direct comparison between the outcomes of student groups across classrooms, schools, and districts in order to determine where students might benefit from additional support to achieve grade-level standards.

- MCAS scores **expose inequities between groups of students so additional resources and support can be allocated** for those who need them most. Disparities in scores were a critical piece of evidence supporting the need for changes to the foundation budget. Based on that evidence, the Student Opportunity Act directs additional state funding toward support for students with disabilities, multilingual learners, students of color, and students from economically disadvantaged communities.

- MCAS has **driven additional support to schools and districts with large percentages of students not meeting expectations and funds are having an impact**.[13] A 2020 report from the American Institutes of Research found that students in schools that received this support experienced greater gains on both the ELA and mathematics MCAS, compared with students in matched-comparison schools and gains were particularly strong for Hispanic and Black students, especially in ELA.[14]

- An analysis of longitudinal data conducted by Brown University and Harvard University in 2020 found that among students with very similar observable characteristics, such as demographics and high school grades, but different MCAS scores, **scores are predictive of students' academic outcomes — not simply their socio-economic status or their school characteristics.** MCAS scores for 10th graders were shown to predict:

    - **High school outcomes.** In 2011, 89% of students at the 25th percentile of the test distribution graduated from high school, compared to 97% at the 75th percentile.
    - **College outcomes.** Only 19% of students at the 25th percentile graduated from a four-year college, compared to 68% at the 75th percentile.
    - **Labor market earnings.** Students scoring at the 75th percentile on the 10th grade math exam earned $22,342 more than students scoring at the 25th percentile, on average. The pattern in ELA is nearly identical: Students scoring at the 75th percentile on the 10th grade ELA exam earned $22,106 more than students scoring at the 25th percentile, on average.[15]

- **MCAS scores have revealed that overall student performance has improved over time.** MCAS 10th grade scores for all students increased from 2003-2018,[16] along with students' levels of educational attainment as measured by high school course completion and graduation rates. Between 1998 and 2018, the percentage of Massachusetts 10th graders proficient in mathematics rose from 24% to 78%. The percentage proficient in English language arts rose from 38% to 91%. As students recover from the interrupted schooling of the pandemic, MCAS scores are one important way to track students' progress in meeting grade level expectations.

MCAS: *NOW WHAT?*

MCAS results shine a spotlight on student outcome disparities, which allows Massachusetts to face the difficult reality of persistent opportunity gaps. The test exposes our profound societal inequities. But without it, we lose our ability to hold up those inequities and demand better opportunities for the students who are entitled to a high quality education and have not historically received it. Given our nation's history of systemic racism, MCAS serves as a mirror to see reality so we can make it better. We do not break a mirror because we don't like its reflection.

> ***The test exposes our profound societal inequities. But without it, we lose our ability to hold up those inequities and demand better opportunities for the students who are entitled to a high quality education and have not historically received it.***

Because MCAS is a tool for equity, we must continue to improve upon it in ways that mitigate its challenges and make updates that take full advantage of available and emerging technology. While some continue to call for the elimination of MCAS, the prospect of providing students, families, and schools with NO reliable and comparable data about students' academic progress, is unreasonable — and harmful. In addition, eliminating standardized testing would put Massachusetts out of compliance with the state and federal statutes that compel the Commonwealth to conduct these assessments, jeopardizing these sources of funding. With the understanding that MCAS is an effective tool to enhance educational equity and provide students, families and educators with objective, reliable information, our working group explored a range of meaningful and practical improvements to MCAS that are feasible to make in the next 12-18 months. While most of our recommendations identify actions for the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) to take, it is important to note that many other stakeholders — community partners, advocacy groups, legislators, families, educators, and the business community — have roles to play in supporting these changes. Our coalition commits to providing DESE with the support needed to enact these changes quickly, and we hope others will join us.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING OF MCAS

1 As referenced above under "misperceptions," there are a number of commonly held, but inaccurate, beliefs about MCAS. To confront and dismantle those, we recommend that, beginning immediately, and with support from partners and community-based organizations, **DESE leads a campaign to educate legislators, families, and the general public on three key topics:**

1) Messaging: better communication about what information MCAS provides, what actions can and should be taken in response to students' scores, and how to appropriately explain the importance of MCAS without producing anxiety for students,
2) Quality instruction: what great teaching and instruction tied to state standards looks like (as opposed to "drill and kill" practices), and
3) Efficient administration: how MCAS can be administered to minimize time spent on testing.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE THE USE OF ASSESSMENT DATA FOR FAMILIES AND EDUCATORS

2 **Help families understand results and provide clear guidance and support to help them advocate for their child(ren)**. MCAS, as a summative assessment, provides an end-of-year snapshot of how students are performing against grade-level standards, providing data that is comparable across student groups, schools, and districts within the state to help families and educators see where support may be needed. A recent EdTrust/MassINC poll of Massachusetts families found that the majority of families believe their students are performing at grade level, despite 2022 MCAS results showing a large increase in students who are not meeting expectations.[17] If families have appropriate access to and are well-informed about their students' results, they can advocate for more support for their students and even their particular schools. As we reviewed the implementation of assessments in other states, we found that Tennessee provides families with on-demand access to students' state assessment scores and free resources to support learning through a Family Portal that is translated into five languages.

We recommend that DESE:

- Allocate additional resources to develop more effective communications and outreach to families to ensure results are more accessible — especially for non-English speakers.
- Based on a student's scores or score range, provide a list of action steps that families can take when reviewing their student's results and a targeted list of questions to ask their child's teacher.
- Support training for educators in how to review results with families to help families interpret what the results mean and steps they can take to best support their students (e.g., if a child gets a particular question wrong, has low growth, is not meeting grade-level expectations, would benefit from targeted summer support, etc.) and to provide suggestions for what students can do to improve.
- Consider adding "MCAS score review with families" to Standard 1 and/or Standard 3 of the Rubrics for Educator Evaluation.

3 **Get results to educators and families faster in a way they can understand**. DESE currently shares multiple choice results with school districts in May/June, with families receiving their child's scores in late September or October of the following school year. For educators, June is too late in the school year to effectively use the data to tailor their instruction in real time, and the following fall is too late for families to understand and advocate for support their student might need in the school year when the tests are given. In our scan of other states, we found that Tennessee releases scores in July and Washington state provides schools with access to student scores for their online Smarter Balanced ELA and math assessments electronically just a few weeks after their students take the tests, and for science in mid-July. If schools and districts received results before the summer, they could use the data to inform decisions about hiring, scheduling and curriculum for the following school year. We propose exploring the use of technology to:

a. Share data for each component of the assessment as soon as it becomes available rather than delaying the release of all scores until the hand-scored tests are completed.[18]
b. Convene a focus group of educators to solicit input and make requisite changes to Edwin analytics to make it a more useful analysis tool, and get data into Edwin sooner.
c. Link the raw MCAS data file to student information systems and populate results into customizable templates so teachers and school leaders can quickly and easily review data from individual and specified groups of students.
d. Encourage districts to utilize the information from new dashboards that can be filtered and sorted based on the data an individual school or teacher is seeking.
e. Provide families with suggested content for students to engage with over the summer, targeted to their needs and translated into their languages.
f. Provide instructional tools for teachers in the next grade to use with individual students to support that student's continued progress toward meeting expectations during the next school year.
g. Email MCAS reports to families with a log-in to a secure family portal with students' scores and a customized list of resources to support them over the summer - with an option to translate it into their languages.

4 **Support better data use to improve instruction.** The expedited return of results recommended above would have many benefits, including the facilitation of educators' use of data. Educators and district staff with large percentages of students who are not meeting expectations would benefit from in-person, customized, technical assistance (not just guidance) from DESE focused on helping them:

a. Work as teacher teams to identify content areas where all students (or groups of students) struggled, examine what instructional strategies worked/did not work, and make adjustments as needed.
b. Unpack students' prior year results with families/caregivers and ensure this happens as part of all fall parent-teacher conferences.
c. Identify students for summer academies (in combination with district/local data).
d. Prior to the start of the school year, current teachers could prepare next year's teachers for areas in which students may need remediation or increased instructional time (in combination with district/local data).

RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE UPON CURRENT ASSESSMENTS

5 **Include educators of color in the creation and development of the test to prevent the cultural bias that has historically plagued standardized tests.** Because of the history of standardized tests as a mechanism for sorting students of color and reducing their access to rigorous, high quality educational opportunities, there is an urgent need to include more educators of color in the development of Massachusetts standards and assessments. In addition to DESE's current Bias and Sensitivity Committee,[19] we recommend that, for some number of years, the Department overrepresent educators of color in its selection of members of the test development committees that create test items to correct for inequities, and add new items that reflect and honor the perspectives, experiences and cultures of communities of color.

6 **Measure skills in the curriculum frameworks that are not currently measured by MCAS using performance-based assessments.** MCAS has proven to be an accurate and trustworthy measure of how students are attaining content-specific knowledge. However, these assessments are not currently gauging students' attainment of other skills included in Curriculum Frameworks such as oral presentation, speaking, and listening skills. In addition, families and employers have long advocated for students to build the life and career readiness skills that are important for their future success in the workforce, skills like collaboration and teamwork. Several states are piloting performance-based assessments[22] that permit students to showcase these skills, but because of the extensive investments in professional development required to ensure performance-based assessments achieve inter-rater reliability and do not perpetuate biases, none have yet been scaled statewide.

DESE is currently piloting performance based assessments in science[20] in which students work on a meaningful science or engineering performance task in the context of a real-world simulation. The computer scored assessment includes opportunities for students to engage in performance tasks, providing students an element of choice.[21]

We recommend that DESE thoughtfully expand its pilot of performance-based assessments, and develop new ways to:

- Enable students to show proficiency in skills that are difficult to measure on standardized tests, e.g. team projects, oral presentations, solving real-world problems, and hands-on projects,
- Provide additional means for students to show what they know and can do, and
- Foster engagement with community members and families as co-creators and evaluators of performance assessments that reflect community values and prepare students to engage in their communities.

The pilot could also help address the following questions:

1) To what extent would the use of performance assessments impact educators' ability to teach all the grade-level standards currently included in state frameworks?

2) How much would such assessments cost if implemented statewide? and

3) What are the implications of using the same type of computer-scored performance-based assessment DESE is piloting for science in other subjects?

7 **Require and advocate for funding for more translated tests in more languages.** The federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) stipulates that reading/language arts assessments must be given in English to students who have attended U.S. schools for more than two years, although a school district may allow students to continue taking language arts assessments in their native language for an additional two years as long as they are still classified as English Learners. Under state law a student could not take such tests for more than three consecutive years. Currently, Massachusetts provides the grade 10 math test in Spanish and as of June 2022, Biology and Introductory Physics MCAS tests are offered in American Sign Language (ASL) and Spanish. Thirty-one states and the District of Columbia offer native language (usually Spanish) assessments, most commonly in math or science, but sometimes in reading/language arts and social studies as well. Hawaii offers tests in Hawaiian, and three states (Michigan, New York, and Washington) offer tests in multiple non-English languages.[23]

8 **Employ technology to improve common assessments through computer adaptive testing, continuous measurement, and artificial intelligence.** Massachusetts should be a leader in adopting technological advances that fundamentally improve common assessments and make them less intrusive than current assessments. In the near term, DESE could use technology to improve the design of MCAS and make it more visually appealing for today's digitally savvy students. This would especially benefit students in grades 3-8 and students with special needs. In the longer term, DESE should explore and work to employ the following technology tools to improve assessments as soon as possible:

- **Artificial intelligence**, using computers and machines to mimic human perception, decision-making, and other processes that could speed up scoring.
- **Continuous measurement**, assessing students' progress toward mastery of standards in less intrusive ways than current assessments by embedding tests in the curriculum.
- **Computer adaptive,** tailoring the difficulty or content of the assessment items presented or an aspect of the timing of the items on the basis of each test taker's responses to better enable educators to target students' levels of knowledge and skills.

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

Because of data from our state assessments, we know there are significant, and inexcusable, inequities in academic outcomes across student groups. With that knowledge, Massachusetts has directed additional resources to students for whom this inequity has lifetime consequences. Our work is far from finished.

We implore state leaders to leave assessments in place as they are our primary tool for objectively understanding how our students are progressing — especially as we seek to quickly mitigate pandemic l earning loss. At the same time, we urge state leaders to make the changes we propose, many of which are well within reach to accomplish in the next year or two. Our proposals are reasonable, affordable, and urgently needed.

> ***We implore state leaders to leave MCAS in place AND to make the reasonable, affordable and urgently needed changes we propose.***

ENDNOTES

[1] Currently science is only assessed in grades 5 and 8 and once in high school. Civics assessments for grade 8 are in development.
[2] We focused only on MCAS, not the state's accountability system.
[3] Regulations passed in August 2022 require parental notification of MCAS performance for grade 10 students who are on an Educational Proficiency Plan (EPP).
[4] Currently, Massachusetts provides the grade 10 math test in Spanish. Biology and Introductory Physics MCAS tests are offered in both American Sign Language (ASL) and in Spanish as of June 2022.
[5] Speaking and listening are included in the Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State for English Language Learners (ACCESS), which is the annual assessment administered to students identified as English Learners.
[6] The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education estimates a range of 1.0-2.5 hours for the "typical" completion of each of the two sessions of testing required for each grade level and subject area in grades 3-8 and in grade 10. Using these estimates, MCAS accounts for an average of 1% of students' learning time (for most students). However, many schools and districts have chosen to adopt formative assessments and other tools intended to provide data on students' progress, which can result in significant additional time spent on assessments.
[7] The New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) includes a Vision of the Graduate in its Standards for Accreditation.
[8] MA state law requires: "Each public school serving students in the eighth grade and each public high school shall provide not less than 1 student-led, non-partisan civics project for each student."
[9] Since MCAS tests do not dictate how teachers teach the curricula tied to the Curriculum Frameworks, district leaders have the flexibility to select curricula and implement instructional practices that will help students understand the context of what they are learning or how it might be applicable in the real world.
[10] A National Parents Union poll found that "62% of families agree that schools should continue to assess how well students are learning using statewide tests so that we can compare results to previous years and schools can identify areas students may be falling behind or need support."
[11] A 2021 MassINC poll of Massachusetts families revealed that the information provided in MCAS reporting was the least helpful in tracking their students' academic progress as compared with report cards or progress reports, general feedback from teachers and staff, or grades and scores on assignments and tests.
[12] Prior to the adoption of state standards and MCAS, families from Brockton, Lowell, Springfield, and Winchendon filed a lawsuit and successfully made the case that their students were being denied the adequate education to which they were entitled due to a lack of equitable funding and what the court called a "loosely connected melange of statutes, local regulations, and informal policies in which elected school boards in hundreds of communities across the Commonwealth had broad, individual discretion to set educational policy and practice." After the Curriculum Frameworks and MCAS were in place, the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled that, while progress was still needed, "across the board, objective, data-driven assessments of student performance and specific performance goals now inform a standardized education policy and direct the Commonwealth's public education resources."
[13] According to the state budget, since FY09, Massachusetts has spent over $126M (through its Targeted Intervention in Underperforming Schools line item) in schools where students aren't meeting expectations, providing direct assistance from DESE staff and approved partners, funding and research-based resources, and preferred access to professional development. Since FY09, Massachusetts has spent over $126M in schools where students aren't meeting expectations, providing direct assistance from DESE staff and approved partners, funding and research-based resources, and preferred access to professional development. In combination with federal School Improvement Grant funds, schools and districts identified as in need of improvement based on their MCAS results have received $208M in targeted support since FY09. In SY19-20, DESE supported 227 schools in 53 districts with a combined total of 128,251 students, or 13.5 percent of the state's total student enrollment. Approximately 62 percent of these students were economically disadvantaged, 24 percent were English Learners, and 20 percent were students with disabilities.
[14] LiCalsi, C., García Píriz, D., Kistner, A. (2020) *Impact Analysis of Massachusetts Schools Engaged in Sustainable Improvement*. Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research.
[15] Papay, J.P., Mantil, A., Murnane, R.J., An, L., Donohue, K., & McDonough, A. (2020). *Lifting all boats? Accomplishments and challenges from 20 years of education reform in Massachusetts*. Providence, RI: Brown University.
[16] Because the revised MCAS 2.0 made comparisons between the prior test difficult, and because there was no MCAS in 2020 and only partial administration in 2021, we have opted to focus on results through 2018.
[17] The Education Trust Massachusetts and MassINC Polling Group, Statewide Poll of families, January 2023.
[18] In its next Request for Proposals for the state assessment vendor, DESE should include a request to speed up the release of scores.
[19] DESE currently has a Bias and Sensitivity Committee made of Massachusetts educators (some of whom are educators of color) that assist with the review of all MCAS questions and ELA passages, but not the creation of them. BSC members review questions and passages for bias and sensitivity concerns based on considerations including ability, age, culture, ethnicity, gender, geography, languages spoken, race, religion, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status then make recommendations to DESE regarding questions and passages with potential bias or sensitivity issues.
[20] For more information and sample questions, see the Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority approved science pilot.
[21] Spring 2021 was the first year of the science assessment pilot, with nearly 1,000 students in 5th and 8th grades, from 17 districts. In Spring 2022, DESE added new districts, reaching roughly 6,000 5th and 8th grade students from 25 districts and over 100 schools.
[22] Performance-based assessments measure how well students apply knowledge, skills, and abilities to authentic problems and typically require students to show what they know and can do through a product or presentation such as a report, experiment, or performance, which is scored against specific criteria on a common rubric. Creating and using these common rubrics requires intensive teacher training.
[23] In its next Request for Proposals for the state assessment vendor, DESE should include a request for more translated tests in more languages.