

Fact-Checking MA Education Commissioner Chester on Statewide Assessments

In the face of rising opposition and mounting calls to opt out of Massachusetts high-stakes standardized tests, **Education Commissioner Mitchell Chester issued a memo in defense of his harmful and destructive policies.**¹

Chester claims, *“I know of no high performing system that fails to benchmark its performance and hold itself responsible for results.”*

However, **we know of no high-performing nation that subjects its children to standardized tests in more than three grades, nor do they judge schools or teachers on the basis of student test scores.** Clearly, a nation can do well without high-stakes standardized tests.

Chester then claims, *“MCAS results have supported our education efforts in a number of ways.”*

Here is his case, followed by a **point-by-point fact check** by FairTest and CPS:

- The Commonwealth has a constitutional obligation to ensure that all students have the opportunity to receive an adequate education. MCAS results are one of several sources of information the Department and the Board use to identify schools

and districts that require some additional assistance or intervention from the state.

Fact check: As the recent Foundation Budget Review Commission report confirms, MA has not kept up with the rising education costs, and all students clearly do not have an adequate opportunity to learn, yet the state continues to focus substantial resources on failed and counterproductive high-stakes testing policies that have not improved or closed gaps in achievement between different student groups. Moreover, test results play a predominant role in identifying school “levels” and therefore in state takeovers of schools and districts.

- At the same time, test results allow us to identify higher performing schools and districts and spotlight effective practices.

Fact check: Standardized tests are a poor indicator of educational quality because they measure just a narrow slice of what goes into an excellent education. Adding high-stakes to test results makes the information even less reliable because it pressures schools to narrow teaching and learning to just what's on the test, in order to boost scores. It's like holding a match to a thermometer. The temperature looks like it's rising, but the room is still cold. Worse, the misleading information will cause the room to continue to get colder, not warmer.

- High quality assessments send important signals about the kinds of curriculum, teaching and learning that are reflected in the standards.

Fact check: Standardized tests such as MCAS and PARCC are very poor yardsticks of important student learning. They are weak measures of the ability to comprehend complex material, write, apply math, understand scientific methods or reasoning, grasp social

science concepts, or engage in the kinds of research and evaluation adults often need to do. Nor do they adequately measure thinking skills or assess what people can do on real-world tasks.

- Teachers and administrators are provided with detailed analyses of student test results, offering useful information on what parts of their curriculum are effective and where instruction needs to be strengthened.

Fact check: Classroom surveys show most teachers do not find scores from standardized tests very useful. The tests do not help a teacher understand what to do next in working with a student because they do not indicate how the student learns or thinks or why a student may be having difficulty. They fail to measure very much of what students should learn. The scores also come back too late to offer any help to students. Good evaluation provides useful and timely information to teachers and students.

- Parents deserve objective feedback on their children's progress through elementary and secondary school grades. When students are performing below their grade-level expectations, we hope that their MCAS score reports will prompt constructive conversations among parents, teachers, and guidance counselors.

Fact check: For reasons similar to why scores are not useful to teachers, they do not provide valuable feedback to parents. Better are things like good teacher observation, documentation of student work, and performance-based assessment, all of which involve the direct evaluation of real learning tasks. Many nations that do the best in international comparisons, like Finland, use these techniques instead of large-scale standardized testing.

- Passing the tenth grade MCAS tests is one of the requirements for a student to receive a Massachusetts high school diploma. Before education reform, too many students, especially in our

larger and poorer cities, were receiving diplomas without having mastered even a baseline foundation of skills and knowledge.

Fact check: Exit exams in MA and across the country deny diplomas to tens of thousands of U.S. students each year, regardless of whether they have stayed in school, completed all other high school graduation requirements, and demonstrated competency in other ways. A review by the National Academy of Sciences concluded that high school graduation tests have not improved college or employment results but have raised the dropout rate. In response to the rapidly growing testing resistance and reform movement along with strong evidence of their harm, more than 12 states have eliminate or scaled back high school exit exams just in the past few years.

- Finally, test scores help us to demonstrate our achievements and our progress to the Legislature and to the public at large. We spend more than \$16 billion a year on K-12 public education in the Commonwealth. We have an obligation to demonstrate to the taxpayers that we are spending that money effectively.

Fact check: There are far superior ways to demonstrate our achievements and progress to the legislature and the public. Pilot alternative assessment programs are under way in New Hampshire. A group of Massachusetts's districts has formed a consortium to develop better approaches, such as the performance and portfolio assessments that have been so successful in model systems like the New York Performance Standards Consortium schools.

ⁱ A Message from Commissioner Chester about Statewide Assessments. April 2016.
<http://www.doe.mass.edu/news/news.aspx?id=21574>

For more information on these points, see the fact sheets and materials at <http://www.fairtest.org> and <http://www.citizensforpublicschools.org>