

Fact Checking the Myths about MCAS Testing

Myth

High-stakes testing boosted Massachusetts from the middle of the pack to the top among all 50 states.

► Fact check

Our scores were near the top before high-stakes testing began. During the first years after the Education Reform Act of 1993, when state aid rose dramatically, test scores rose slightly, then leveled off. But parents have never sent their children to school to prep them for getting the highest possible test scores. Surveys of every social class, ethnic group, and occupation show that parents want their children to learn to work together, communicate effectively, show initiative, learn history, art and music, and develop their physical bodies, in addition to learning English and math. Yet schools have cut back on everything but test prep because test scores dominate the state ratings. In many schools, kindergarteners are doing math worksheets. This is not the way to build an educated society.

Myth

DESE and BESE need the MCAS to identify schools and districts that need assistance or intervention from the state or those that are exemplary.

► Fact check

Standardized tests are a poor indicator of educational quality because they measure just a narrow slice of student learning. Using the results to make high-stakes decisions means you get less reliable information because teachers feel pressure to boost scores by narrowing curriculum to what's on the test. Meanwhile, important learning is left out. Schools identified by low MCAS scores are inevitably low-income, usually have many immigrant youth, and are poorly funded. What the state needs to do is provide real help, not punish schools for educating needy youth.

Myth

Test results offer teachers useful information on what parts of their curriculum are effective and where instruction needs to be strengthened.

► Fact check

Most teachers do not find standardized test results very useful, according to surveys. The tests do not help a teacher understand what to do next when working with a student because the scores do not indicate how the student learns or thinks or why a student may be having difficulty. The results also come back too late to offer any help to students. Good evaluation provides useful and timely information to teachers and students.

Myth

Tests offer parents objective feedback on how their children are doing.

► Fact Check

For reasons similar to why scores are not useful to teachers, they do not provide valuable feedback for parents. Good teacher observation, documentation of student work, and performance-based assessment, which involve evaluation of real learning tasks, are better for parents, teachers and students.

Myth

Before the MCAS graduation requirement, too many students, especially in our larger, poorer cities, received diplomas without having mastered baseline skills and knowledge.

► Fact Check

We have great schools in this state, but there's no question we also have some that must do better. But the results of MCAS are in: Whatever failures our system had before MCAS, they're still with us. Overall scores are up very slightly, and they've recently started to slide. Achievement gaps are mostly the same as before MCAS and are among the widest in the nation. High-stakes testing has only given us the comforting illusion that we've fixed the problem, but we haven't.

Myth

If we didn't use MCAS, we'd have no way of assessing student learning or school quality.

► Fact Check

There are alternatives that promote more engaging, deeper learning, without the negative consequences of high-stakes testing. The MA Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment is exploring alternatives to standardized tests and the test-based accountability system in seven districts.