

Six Ways High-Stakes Testing Has Failed Students and What to Do Now

The Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 (MERA) substantially increased state financial contributions to public education spending in exchange for increased state control. It brought state curriculum standards, a student assessment system that turned into a single set of standardized tests, an accountability system for rating schools and districts, and charter schools.

In the years since, the Massachusetts' accountability system has been hailed a success. State and federal officials claim the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) moved the state's public schools from "mediocrity" to the top of the nation in scores on the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP).

But are the claims valid? And has MCAS furthered equity and racial justice in our public schools? **On the contrary, the record shows that many students and schools have been deeply harmed by MCAS testing.** This issue has particular urgency because of the potential of the COVID-19 pandemic to further exacerbate inequities in the opportunity to learn that already exist in our state's public education system.

CPS drew on a wide array of research and data to reach these conclusions:

- 1.** *MCAS measures a narrow range of academic achievement, not the full scope of what we want students to know and be able to do.* Studies have found that high-stakes standardized tests narrow the curriculum and increase the focus on test-taking skills. This occurs primarily in schools serving low-income, Black, Latinx, and English learner students. Public polling confirms that most people define school quality based on measures other than test scores.
- 2.** *Standardized tests are racially biased against the very students they purport to benefit.* The MCAS is an outdated and punitive testing and accountability system that has historical roots in racism and corporatization.
- 3.** *Standardized test results are most closely correlated with parental education and income.* As a result, they are more reflective of the wealth of a community than the quality of a school and contribute to re-segregation.
- 4.** *Massachusetts has made few gains on NAEP tests during the last 16 years under MCAS, especially with historically underserved groups.* Since 2003, MA's rate of improvement on the NAEP tests is about the same as the average rate of improvement of the other 49 states. During that time period, the large test score gap between MA's underserved students their peers has shown no significant improvement.

5. *MA public schools are rapidly diversifying.* The fastest growing groups include those students who are most likely to be harmed by the state's high-stakes standardized testing accountability system. MA public school enrollment has grown more economically disadvantaged and racially diverse since 1993, with a larger immigrant population. MCAS has not lessened the wide test score gaps with any of these student groups, with gaps for English Learners having significantly increased.
6. *State expenditures make a difference in educational outcomes, particularly for students who are low-income, of color, and English Learners.* Yet, MA has among the widest gaps between lowest and highest spending districts in the nation. In addition, MA is near the bottom of the rankings in its spending on public education as a percentage of total state budget.

For these reasons, CPS recommends that MA:

- *Enact state legislation that provides for (a) a four-year moratorium on the high-stakes MCAS graduation requirement and the use of MCAS to evaluate districts, schools, and educators, (b) a request to the U.S. Department of Education for a four-year waiver from state testing while new alternatives are explored, (c) a commission, with participation stipulated to ensure broad, diverse representation, to recommend a next-generation state assessment and accountability system, (d) a requirement for local districts to conduct annual diagnostic testing on students and report the results, and (e) a state grant program for districts and consortia of districts to pilot new assessment and improvement systems.*
- *Develop a new, broader state education assessment and accountability system with indicators for social and emotional wellness, family engagement, student support, professional development, opportunity to learn, and academic learning. Expand the definition of academic learning to include habits of learning such as creativity, self-direction, communication, collaboration, problem-solving, and evaluation in addition to content knowledge. Assess student learning through multiple means, including curriculum-embedded, teacher-generated performance assessments and student portfolios.*
- *Ensure full and timely funding of the Student Opportunity Act (SOA).* We can't let the negative financial impact of the COVID pandemic lessen our commitment to a more just and equitable state education finance formula.
- *Fund the Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center to track the impact of SOA education funding* to ensure that MA attains at least the national average of state percent contributions to total education spending, and the gap between the highest and lowest spending districts lessens over time.
- *Use the money saved from the moratorium on MCAS testing to fund additional wrap around supports to address poverty-related barriers to learning for underserved students* who are at most risk for falling behind academically because of the COVID crisis. Extensive research demonstrates that such integrated student supports leads to a wide variety of positive impacts on student, school, and community level outcomes