

# MCAS is the Wrong Answer:

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

**CITIZENS**  
*for* **PUBLIC**  
**SCHOOLS**



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### Overview

Often described as “the grand bargain,” the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 (MERA) committed to substantially increase state financial contributions to public education spending in exchange for increased state control. New state authority included first-time 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 the birth of charter schools. As touted in a Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education (DESE) 2014 report, this legislation “... was the most dramatic change in generations in how the Commonwealth supported and oversaw the delivery of education services by local school districts.”<sup>1</sup>

*In this report, we seek to answer the question: Has MCAS furthered or hindered social and racial justice in our public schools?*

In the years since, state and federal officials have hailed Massachusetts’ system of student testing and district/school accountability a success. They claim the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) moved Massachusetts’ (MA) public education system from what state officials have termed “mediocrity” to the top of the nation in scores on the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) math and reading tests. Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic forced DESE to resort exclusively to online education and cancel the 2020 spring administration of MCAS. It is unclear whether pandemic conditions next year will force cancellation or modification of the 2021 spring MCAS administration.

Against this backdrop, twenty-seven years later, it is time to examine whether the claims of MCAS success are true, with a particular emphasis on how underserved students have fared under MCAS and MERA. After all, a major goal of MERA was to address the major inequities in our state public school system. In this report, we seek to answer the question: *Has MCAS furthered or hindered social and racial justice in our public schools?* To do so, we draw upon a wide array of research studies and data sources.

# 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 nor the full scope of what makes a quality school.

Multiple studies have found that standardized tests, especially those with high stakes for students and schools, narrow the curriculum and increase the amount of classroom time focused on test preparation, memorization, and drills. These changes result in lost instructional time and increased student stress.<sup>2</sup> This is most likely to happen in schools that serve high percentages of low-income, Black, Latinx, and English Learner (EL) students, depriving them of access to a robust curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Instead, too often students in these schools are subject to extra-long English and math classes, focused on teacher-directed drills, to the exclusion of other subjects. They are less likely to experience engaging project-based learning, the arts, and other electives that provide students with a richer, more balanced education.<sup>3</sup>

Beginning with eight-year-olds in the third grade, MCAS measures only a narrow range of knowledge that is best gained through memorization. In today's global, diverse, and technological world, high school graduates need knowledge and skills that cannot be measured by a standardized test. Colleges seek students who have key cognitive strategies (capacity to think, problem solve, and conduct research), learning skills (ownership of learning, collaborative learning, strategic reading), and transition knowledge and skills (self-advocacy, postsecondary aspirations).<sup>4</sup> Likewise, greater than 90% of surveyed employers cite ethical judgment and integrity, intercultural skills, collaboration, communication, and capacity to learn as critical qualities that factor into hiring decisions.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, research has indicated that demand for social skills in the job market is increasing at a faster rate than demand for STEM skills.<sup>6</sup>

Although MCAS scores have been shown to be related to post high school outcomes<sup>7</sup>, these relationships are similar to or smaller than for high school grade point average (GPA). For example, a study found that 10<sup>th</sup> grade English language arts and math MCAS scores explained only 6% and 13%, respectively, of the total variability in first-year college students' grades. The MCAS's ability to predict college grades was no better than SAT scores.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, multiple studies have shown that high school GPA is a stronger predictor of college success than standardized test scores.<sup>9</sup> Although one recent study found that 10<sup>th</sup> grade MCAS scores are related to future earnings<sup>10</sup>, a similar pattern has been shown with high school GPA. A one-point increase in high school GPA has been found to be related to a 12-14% increase in annual earnings for young adults.<sup>11</sup> As noted by the Chicago Consortium on School Research, "*Grades are so important because they capture many of the noncognitive aspects of students' work habits that test scores miss, such as executive functioning, academic perseverance, and growth mindset.*"<sup>12</sup> These "noncognitive aspects

of students’ work habits” are the very qualities that colleges and businesses are seeking in new enrollees and hires.

Finally, standardized tests cannot possibly measure the full range of indicators that make for a quality school – school culture, community wellness, resources and opportunity to learn, teachers and school leaders, family engagement, and academic learning. All these factors contribute to student learning progress.

The public agrees. In a 2017 Phi Delta Kappan poll<sup>13</sup>, the extent to which schools help students acquire interpersonal skills (such as cooperation, respect, problem solving) was a far more important measure of school quality than how students perform on standardized testing, which ranked dead last by a considerable amount:

CATEGORY	EXTREMELY IMPORTANT	IMPORTANT	NOT AT ALL/NOT SO IMPORTANT
Interpersonal skills	82%	12%	4%
Technology/Engineering courses	82%	15%	2%
Advanced academic courses	76%	19%	2%
Art and music courses	71%	23%	5%
Extracurricular activities	70%	25%	4%
Standardized Tests	42%	31%	24%

In the 2019 PDK poll<sup>14</sup>, 94% of teachers and 77% of parents said student progress over time, as measured by report cards, is a better measure of school quality than the percent of students who pass a standardized test. Despite this evidence, Massachusetts continues to judge its schools primarily on MCAS tests, an inadequate measure of both student learning and school quality.

Ultimately, we should take to heart the words of Annelise Schantz, valedictorian of the 2000 graduating class at Hudson High School in Massachusetts, which ring true 20 years later:

*So I’m the valedictorian. Number one. But, what separates me from number two, three, four, five, six, 50, or 120? Nothing but meaningless numbers. All these randomly assigned numbers reflect nothing about the true character of an individual. They say nothing about desire or will. Nothing about values or morals. Nothing about intelligence. Nothing about creativity. Nothing about heart. Numbers cannot and will not ever be able to tell you who a person really is. Yet in today’s society we are sadly becoming more and more number oriented. Schools today are being forced to teach to the numbers. The MCAS serves as just another set of meaningless numbers that add one more reason to focus on scores and forget learning. Judging us by our competency on a biased test is perhaps the biggest injustice that the state could ever inflict upon us.<sup>15</sup>*

# 2

## Standardized tests are inherently biased against the very students they purport to benefit.

*As noted by renowned scholar Ibram X. Kendi, “Standardized tests have become the most effective racist weapon ever devised to objectively degrade Black minds and legally exclude their bodies.”*

In this time of widespread protests focused on eliminating racist policies and institutions in our society, spurred by yet another murder of a Black man by a White police officer, we must examine how institutional racism is embedded within public education. Standardized testing, MCAS included, is first in line. Few people know or acknowledge that standardized testing’s origins lie in the eugenics movement. This movement, begun in the late 1800s through the early 1900s, set the goal of designing so-called intelligence tests to prove the existence of racial hierarchies, that White people were genetically smarter than Black and Latinx people. Lewis Terman, in his 1916 book, *The Measurement of Intelligence*, stated that standardized tests would reveal “enormously significant racial differences in general intelligence, differences which cannot be wiped out by any scheme of mental culture.”<sup>16</sup>

As reported by researcher Claude Steele, cultural bias and stereotype threat further contribute to lowering the test scores of Black and Latinx students on standardized tests.<sup>17</sup> (Stereotype threat occurs when the negative stereotype associated with a group [e.g., lack of intelligence] negatively affects a group member’s performance on a task, such as a test.) Indeed, stereotype threat merely mirrors the reality that standardized tests, including MCAS, reflect and reward the dominant culture. As recently as 2019, in an MCAS essay question based on a passage from the Pulitzer-Prize winning novel *The Underground Railroad*, students were required to write an essay from the perspective of a White woman who uses derogatory language towards an escaped slave and is conflicted about helping her.

There is a reason why MCAS has failed to meaningfully close race, language, and income test score gaps over 27 years. As noted by renowned scholar Ibram X. Kendi, “Standardized tests have become the most effective racist weapon ever devised to objectively degrade Black minds and legally exclude their bodies.” He goes on to ask, “What if we realized the best way to standardize a highly effective educational system is not by standardizing our tests but by standardizing our schools to encourage intellectual openness, [diversity], and difference?”<sup>18</sup> In addition, the linguistic aspects of the MCAS exams may unfairly disadvantage ELs. One study found that ELs answered some MCAS science items incorrectly even when the EL students had the relevant knowledge to answer the items correctly.<sup>19</sup>



## Standardized tests are most closely correlated with parental education and income.

Rather than an accurate predictor of student's success in future life, standardized tests are most closely correlated to a student's parental education and income. The U.S. Department of Education found that children with more highly educated parents have higher average reading and math scores on national standardized tests than children with lesser educated parents, leading to racial disparity in test scores, high school diplomas, and undergraduate degrees.<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately, the disparity between low-income and high-income earners has continued to widen in this country. In Massachusetts, the gap is widening at a much faster pace than the national average. In 2015, Massachusetts had the sixth largest gap in the nation between the top 1% percent and bottom 99% family incomes.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that there is a large standardized test score gap between families of different income levels.

Research has found that this widening income gap has little to do with school quality; rather, the primary reason is the lack of opportunity and resources for low-income students. As noted by researchers Knoester and Au, "*Standardized tests are highly correlated with race and class; higher test scores do not necessarily signal high-quality schools so much as they signal schools that are situated in affluent, white communities. The spreading of this misinformation about school quality exacerbates already alarming rates of school and residential segregation.*"<sup>22</sup>

In Massachusetts, contrary to public officials' claim that our public education system was mired in "mediocrity" prior to 2003, the state has always been close to the top of the nation in National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) scores. One reason why Massachusetts has always scored well on NAEP tests is because our parents are among the most educated and highest income of any state in the nation. In 2016, according to Education Week's 2019 Quality Counts report, Massachusetts had the 3rd highest percent of children living in families with incomes at least 200% greater than the poverty level, and the 4th highest percent of children living with at least one parent with a postsecondary degree.<sup>23</sup> On the flip side, according to the U.S. Department of Education, the state has the 9th lowest percentage (13%) of children in families living in poverty.<sup>24</sup> MA students should be near or at the top on standardized tests.

# 4

## Massachusetts has made few academic gains during the last 16 years under MCAS in the aggregate and in particular with historically underserved groups.

Using NAEP scores instead of MCAS scores to evaluate the academic progress of MA students prevents two problems that could bias the evaluation of test results. Specifically, scores on a state's test might increase because instruction is narrowly focused on the content in a state's test or considerable time is devoted to developing test-taking skills relevant to that state's test. These causes of test score inflation are especially likely in a state such as Massachusetts, where high stakes are attached to the results.<sup>25</sup> In addition, MA DESE's evaluation of the technical properties of MCAS suggest the difficulty level of the test might not have held constant over the years.<sup>26</sup>

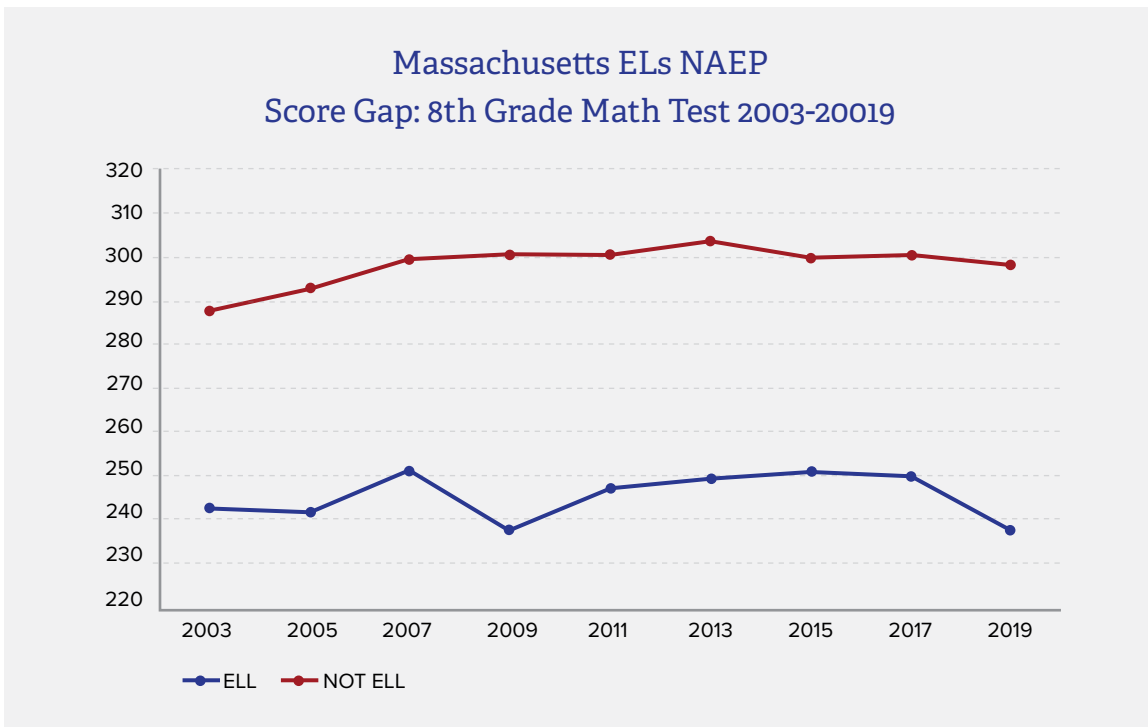
One or more of the above factors might account for why MCAS scores have substantially increased between 2003 and 2019, whereas MA's NAEP scores have shown very little improvement during that time period. A second advantage of using NAEP to evaluate academic progress of Massachusetts' students is that NAEP facilitates a 16-year comparison between the performance of Massachusetts' students and the performance of students in all other states, including underserved student groups.

Since the earliest reporting of state-level NAEP results, even before the passage of MERA in 1993, Massachusetts' students have scored at statistically significant higher levels than the average for participating states on 4th and 8th grade NAEP reading and math tests. In addition, since 2003, MA's NAEP scores have shown little improvement in comparison to the national average. In 2003, the first year in which passing MCAS became a high school graduation requirement, MA students on average scored 10.2 points higher than the national average on the 4th and 8th grade reading and math NAEP tests. In 2019, this advantage increased to only 10.9 points, a gain of less than one point. The only bright spot for MA was 8th grade math, which increased by a modest 3.1 points relative to national average during that 16-year time period.<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, between 2003 and 2019, the large NAEP test score gaps (21 to 61 points) among MA's underserved students have shown little or no improvement. We examined 20 test score gaps: one gap for each of five underserved groups on each of the four NAEP tests (4th grade and 8th grade reading and math). We found that since 2003, there have been no statistically significant changes in the NAEP score gaps for MA Low-Income, Black, or Latinx groups. Even the largest improvements were modest. The largest reduction in the test score gap over 16 years was 5.5 points for Latinx students on the 4th grade reading test. However, at that rate of progress, it would take another 78 years to eliminate the gap.

Also noteworthy are growing gaps in NAEP scores for two underserved groups. MA ELs experienced a statistically significant increase in the gap on the 8th grade math test of 15.6 points. In addition, between 2009 and 2019, score gaps for MA students in special education became statistically significantly larger on all four tests.

We also conducted 20 comparisons between MA and the nation on the 2019 NAEP score gaps of these student groups. *MA had eight test score gaps that were statistically larger than the national average.* These larger score gaps were on all four NAEP tests (4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading and math) for both the Latinx and EL groups. The only MA score gap that was significantly smaller than the national average in 2019 was for special education students on the 4th grade test.



In summary, MA has made little or no progress on aggregate NAEP scores during the last 16 years when compared to national averages. Similarly, MA has not made progress in closing NAEP score gaps among underserved student groups. During the last 16 years, there have been no significant changes in the NAEP score gaps for MA Low-Income, Black, or Latinx groups. However, score gaps have significantly increased for ELs and students in special education. In 2019, MA had eight NAEP score gaps statistically larger than the national average and only one smaller for underserved student groups.

# 5

The demographic make-up of MA public school students is 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.

In the 22 years since 1998, the two fastest growing student groups have been EL and Latinx students, with the percent of students in these two groups more than doubling.<sup>28</sup> According to Education Week’s 2019 Quality Counts report, our state now has the eighth highest percent of parents who are not fluent in English.<sup>29</sup> MA had the largest percent increase of ELs in the nation between 2010 and 2017.<sup>30</sup> The percent of Low-Income, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Multi-Race students has also grown considerably, while the percent of White students has fallen dramatically by 25%. Essentially, the state’s public school student enrollment has become more economically disadvantaged and more racially diverse while increasing its immigrant population. Excepting Asian/Pacific Islander students, these are the very groups that have least benefited from MCAS and the state’s accountability system.

## MA Public School Students Demographic Changes 1998 – 2020

DEMOGRAPHIC GROUP	1998 (%)	2020 (%)	% CHANGE
White	77.5	57.9	(25%)
Black	8.5	9.2	8%
Latinx	9.7	21.6	123%
Asian/Pacific Islander	4.1	7.2	76%
Multi-Race	3.4	4.1	21%
First Language Not English	12.6	23.0	83%
English Learner	4.8	10.8	125%
Low-Income	25.3	32.8	30%

Of the demographic groups listed above, the two fastest growing groups are also the two most likely to fail the MCAS. Despite multiple attempts, 19.9% of EL and 8.6% of Latinx students had not passed all three required MCAS exams by the end of their high school senior year in 2019. Barely failing the high school MCAS by only one or two items can have

long-term serious consequences for historically marginalized students. Papay, Murnane and Willett found that low-income urban students who barely failed the high school MCAS math exam on their first attempt were more likely to drop out and not graduate than those who barely passed.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, in a subsequent study, these researchers found that students who barely failed either the math or ELA high school MCAS exam on their initial attempt were less likely to attend college than those who barely passed the exam.<sup>32</sup> These findings are consistent with studies of high-stakes tests in other states.

High-stakes tests also can have other unintended negative consequences for underserved students.<sup>33</sup> Kruger and colleagues found that MA ELs who repeatedly failed the high school MCAS reported that failing had adverse effects on their motivation, emotions, career goals, and self-perceptions.<sup>34</sup> Other research has found that high-stakes testing led to African American students reporting increased apathy, more punitive discipline policies, and lack of meaningful education.<sup>35</sup>

Although the high school graduation rates of MA students, including underserved students, have improved during the last two decades<sup>36</sup>, MA's graduation gaps in the 2017-18 school year were larger than the national average for both Latinx (18% gap in MA) and African-American students (12% gap in MA).<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, the MA high school graduation rate for Latinx students is seven percent lower than the national average; for MA African-Americans it is only one percent higher than the national average. Only nine states had a lower high school graduation rate for Latinx students than MA.

Papay and colleagues also found large gaps in the college completion rate among MA EL, African-American, Latinx, and low-income students when compared to other students in MA. These college completion gaps existed even for students with identical MCAS scores. Both the high school and college graduation gaps have widened between ELs and non-ELs in MA over time.<sup>38</sup>

*MA's graduation gaps in the 2017-18 school year were larger than the national average for both Latinx (18% gap in MA) and African-American students (12% gap in MA).*

# 6

## Money matters, not high-stakes standardized testing, particularly for students who are low-income, of color, and ELs. Yet, MA has among the widest gaps between lowest and highest spending districts in the nation.

Money in public education does indeed matter, particularly for districts with high percentages of low-income, Black, Latinx, and EL students. A Texas study found that schools with the highest achievement for ELs spent considerably more per pupil than schools with the lowest EL achievement.<sup>39</sup> A second Texas study found that academic performance in low-income districts that received more funds through the Texas Wealth Equalization Program made modest improvements.<sup>40</sup> Yet another study found that increased per pupil spending is positively associated with improved student outcomes, particularly for low-income students.<sup>41</sup> All of these studies found that how money is spent matters too. Money has the greatest positive impact when spent on instructional services for all students as well as on teacher compensation.

As noted above, Massachusetts was close to the top of the NAEP standings before MERA passed, most likely because of its relatively high levels of parent income and education compared with other states. The state's NAEP scores rose further during the first years of MERA implementation than in later years, with the exception of eighth grade math. Those increases coincided with the massive infusion of funding, especially to low-income communities. The high-stakes MCAS graduation requirement took effect after those score increases. Except for increases in 8<sup>th</sup> grade math, there has been little or no improvement in scores since then.

Yet, over the years, Massachusetts has fallen woefully short in holding up its end of the “*grand bargain*,” while school districts have done their best to embrace standards-based curriculum and instruction. According to the U.S. Digest of Education Statistics, in 1993, the year MERA was passed by the legislature, the state ranked 45<sup>th</sup> out of 49 states in the percent of state contribution to local public education spending (contributing 32.7% of the state's total public education spending as opposed to the national average of 45.6%). Essentially, the state contributed among the smallest percent of any states of the total amount needed to support the state's public education system. While the state, due to MERA, slowly increased its contributions to reach the middle of the pack of states by 2006 (25<sup>th</sup>), the lack of adjustment to the state's Foundation Budget led to backtracking. By 2014, MA was once again near the bottom of the rankings in its spending on public education. It ranked 43<sup>rd</sup> (contributing 37.8% of the state's total public education spending as opposed to the national average of 47%).<sup>42</sup>

This failure of the state to adequately fund public education resulted in overreliance on local property taxes to fund public education, the primary source of local community contributions to public education. Given the wealth disparity by community in the state, since 2004 (earliest

data available) Massachusetts has ranked from 4<sup>th</sup>- 8<sup>th</sup> of states with the largest spending gaps between the districts at the 5<sup>th</sup> percentile of spending and those at the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile.<sup>43</sup>

Consider the following district per pupil expenditures in FY 2019 as compared to the district's enrollment of EL, low-income, Black, and Latinx students:

DISTRICT	% LATINX	% BLACK	% LOW-INCOME	% ENGLISH LEARNER	PER PUPIL EXPENDITURE
Chelsea	88	4	64	24	\$16,162
Lowell	34	8	24	58	\$14,862
Weston	6	7	5	3	\$25,846
Wellesley	5	4	5	2	\$21,016

Essentially, we still have a state education funding system in which more White, affluent districts which serve students who need fewer resources spend substantially more per pupil than districts with the highest percent of historically underserved students. Imagine the impact on student learning progress and school quality if Lowell and Chelsea had approximately \$11,000 and \$9,700 more per pupil, respectively, to equal Weston's per pupil expenditures.

**Massachusetts doesn't have a so-called achievement gap; it has a very wide opportunity to learn gap.** The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the racial, economic, and language opportunity to learn inequities that already exist in our state's public education system, created in large part due to the state's systemic, inequitable funding system.

While some would argue that these data are offset by the fact that Massachusetts has one of the highest per pupil spending averages in the nation (ranking from 5<sup>th</sup>- 9<sup>th</sup> among states over the years), it is important to note that the state also has one of the highest costs of living in the country. When adjusted for relative cost of living, Massachusetts ranks 16<sup>th</sup> in per pupil spending, more towards the middle of the pack than the front.<sup>44</sup>

To summarize, Massachusetts has historically contributed to the inequities in public education through its funding system, and it should be contributing more to public education funding than it currently does. While the passage of the Student Opportunity Act in 2019 brings hope that Massachusetts will at the very least reach the national average of state funding for public education relative to local funding, the recent pandemic raises concerns about whether the legislature and governor will fulfill this commitment.

**These findings call into question the state's reliance upon a single high-stakes standardized test. There are alternatives.**

Massachusetts is one of only eleven states in the nation that doggedly hangs onto passing statewide standardized tests as a requirement for high school graduation. Yet, there is little evidence that this requirement has raised test scores, and research has found that high-stakes exit exams have the largest negative impact on graduation rates of students of color

and ELs, particularly those from low-income homes. Most states have realized the harm caused by high-stakes tests and abandoned them.

We hear from state officials that we need a high-stakes standardized test to hold schools and districts accountable for educating all students. Yet there are viable alternatives to five-year contracts worth \$151 million to test-makers and countless millions more spent by local districts on test preparation and administration. We need to refocus our state back on what matters most – engaging students in meaningful learning that best prepares them for future college, career, and civic life in a multicultural, global, and technological world. **The state’s current accountability system is outdated and needs a wholesale replacement.**

Examples exist of what a different accountability system could look like. New Hampshire has a federal waiver to enable a pilot set of districts to demonstrate student academic proficiency and school progress through a set of common and local performance assessments. A set of California districts, through the California Office to Reform Education (CORE), has developed a School Quality Improvement System, representing “a holistic approach to school improvement and accountability that focuses on academic preparedness, social-emotional skills, the culture and climate of a school, collaborative learning ... and supporting effective instruction.” The New York Performance Standards Consortium, consisting of 38 high schools, has a long-standing waiver from the NY Department of Education to forego all Regents graduation exams except for English language arts. These schools make student competency determinations based on a Consortium-defined set of performance tasks in English, math, science, and social studies.

Here in Massachusetts, another example is the Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment (MCIEA). This consortium of eight school districts, representing about 10% of the students in the state, recognizes that school quality and student learning are too complex to be captured by any single test score. The consortium is pioneering an assessment and accountability model that measures what our communities most value and that prepares students with the skills, knowledge, and mindsets to achieve their varied goals. MCIEA’s accountability system focuses on a School Quality Measures data dashboard for every school. The dashboard includes multiple measures of student engagement, student achievement, and school environment, and emphasizes teacher-generated, vetted performance assessments as the primary means of assessing student learning. The goal is to demonstrate that student learning and school progress can be measured in valid and reliable ways that support meaningful student learning and community-wide school improvement.

With MCAS suspended this spring, teachers in Georgetown, MA, had a taste of the freedom that could come if they were freed from the high-stakes MCAS. *“I used to teach current events every Friday as a science teacher, which I felt was time very well spent, but once the MCAS [Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System] standards landed, it became the overriding factor, and teachers had to make sure students were prepared for that exam,”* says Cerise Cauthron, science department chair of Georgetown Middle/High School in Georgetown Public Schools. *“The lockdown lifted an enormous weight off our shoulders in a strange way by allowing us to go back to what we were doing before these state standards and offer tailor-made activities for our students. It has been phenomenally freeing in many ways.”*



# Conclusion and Recommendations

During the last quarter century, Massachusetts school districts have worked diligently to adapt to and embrace standards-based reform based on Massachusetts curriculum standards. In 1993, the state made good on its initial promise to create a more equitable state education funding formula, pressed by a state judicial system that had found the state's education funding system unconstitutional. However, the state once again slipped in its financial commitment until community pressure forced the passage of the Student Opportunity Act.

In the early years of MERA, increased funding contributed to raising Massachusetts from near the top on NAEP scores to the top, except in eighth grade math. In later years of MCAS, NAEP eighth grade math scores climbed to the top of the nation as well.

Unfortunately, MCAS and the state accountability system have made little if any progress over 25 years in eliminating test score gaps by student groups. In particular, the gaps for EL and Latinx students, the groups with the largest percentage growth in enrollment during this period, have grown even larger, while the gaps for Black, low-income, and disabled students have remained statistically the same. No student group has statistically closed the gap with White students during the last 16 years of MCAS and the current accountability system.

The probable reasons for this failure are twofold: (1) the state's failure to maintain an adequate level of state funding, weighted toward districts serving the highest percentages of low-income, Black, Latinx, and EL students, and (2) an outdated and punitive testing and accountability system that has historical roots in racism and corporatization. The widely accepted narrative about the positive role of a high-stakes standardized test is just plain wrong. High stakes testing discriminates against and disadvantages underserved students. This is both a social and racial justice issue. Our Black, Latinx, low-income, EL, and disabled students suffer from a wide gap in opportunity to learn, exacerbated by a standardized test accountability system.

The COVID pandemic crisis has only underscored and exacerbated inequities in students' opportunity to learn. Research has indicated that online learning does not result in academic outcomes commensurate with in-class instruction.<sup>45</sup> As a result of school closures and reliance on online learning, a recent study projected that most students will enter the fall with only about two-thirds of the learning gains in reading made in the average school year, and only half or less of the learning gains in math.<sup>46</sup> The negative effects will likely be even larger for EL, Black, Latinx, and low-income students because of inequities in access to technology and the Internet.

Under these conditions, the large and longstanding test score and educational attainment gaps for underserved students will likely increase. One mathematical model projects that

the COVID pandemic could result in test score gaps widening in the U.S. by 15-20%.<sup>47</sup> In this environment, it would be both punitive and counterproductive to continue to evaluate the academic progress of underserved students and the schools they attend by means of a high-stakes, standardized test. If appropriate action is not taken, the COVID crisis has the potential to exacerbate the existing unintended negative effects of MCAS on our most underserved students. Administering MCAS when we know that disparities are only going to get worse will lead to renewed calls from the state for receivership and other punitive accountability measures that take away local control, particularly in communities of color.

**For these reasons, Citizens for Public Schools makes the following recommendations for changing our state's education accountability system:**

- Enact state legislation that provides for (a) a four-year moratorium on the high-stakes MCAS graduation requirement and the use of MCAS for any purpose of evaluating districts, schools, and educators, (b) a formal written request to the United States Department of Education for a four-year waiver from state testing while new alternatives are explored and established, (c) a commission, with participation stipulated to ensure broad, diverse racial-ethnic, and community representation, to explore and recommend to the legislature a next-generation state assessment and accountability system, (d) a requirement for local districts to conduct annual diagnostic testing, locally selected or derived, on students and report the results to DESE, and (e) a state grant program for districts and consortia of districts to explore and pilot new assessment and improvement systems.
- Develop a new state education assessment and accountability system that embraces a more complete, holistic set of indicators and weights for assessing school quality and student learning that incorporates school culture, 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 locally through multiple means, including curriculum-embedded, teacher-generated performance assessments and student portfolios.
- Limit state-level student assessment to diagnostic testing, removing any high-stakes nature attached to the assessment. Return high school graduation determinations to the local level where they belong. Doing so would enable matrix sampling student assessment, similar to NAEP testing, in which the testing burden on students is significantly reduced by having to only take a portion of the larger assessment.
- Assess schools and districts on the basis of multiple measures of school quality and student growth rather than absolute level of test scores, which reflect race and class more than anything that happens in a student's current school. Eliminate ranking or leveling of schools and districts, which only serves to undermine schools and districts serving high percentages of English Learner, low-income, Black, Latinx, and disabled students.

- 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 MA Budget and Policy Center to track the impact of SOA education funding to ensure that MA's state percent of contributions to total state education spending attains and maintains at minimum the national average, and the gap between the highest and lowest spending districts lessens over time. Annual reports should be submitted to the state legislature.
- Use the money saved from the moratorium on MCAS testing to fund additional support for underserved students who are at most risk for falling further behind academically because of the COVID crisis.

## Endnotes

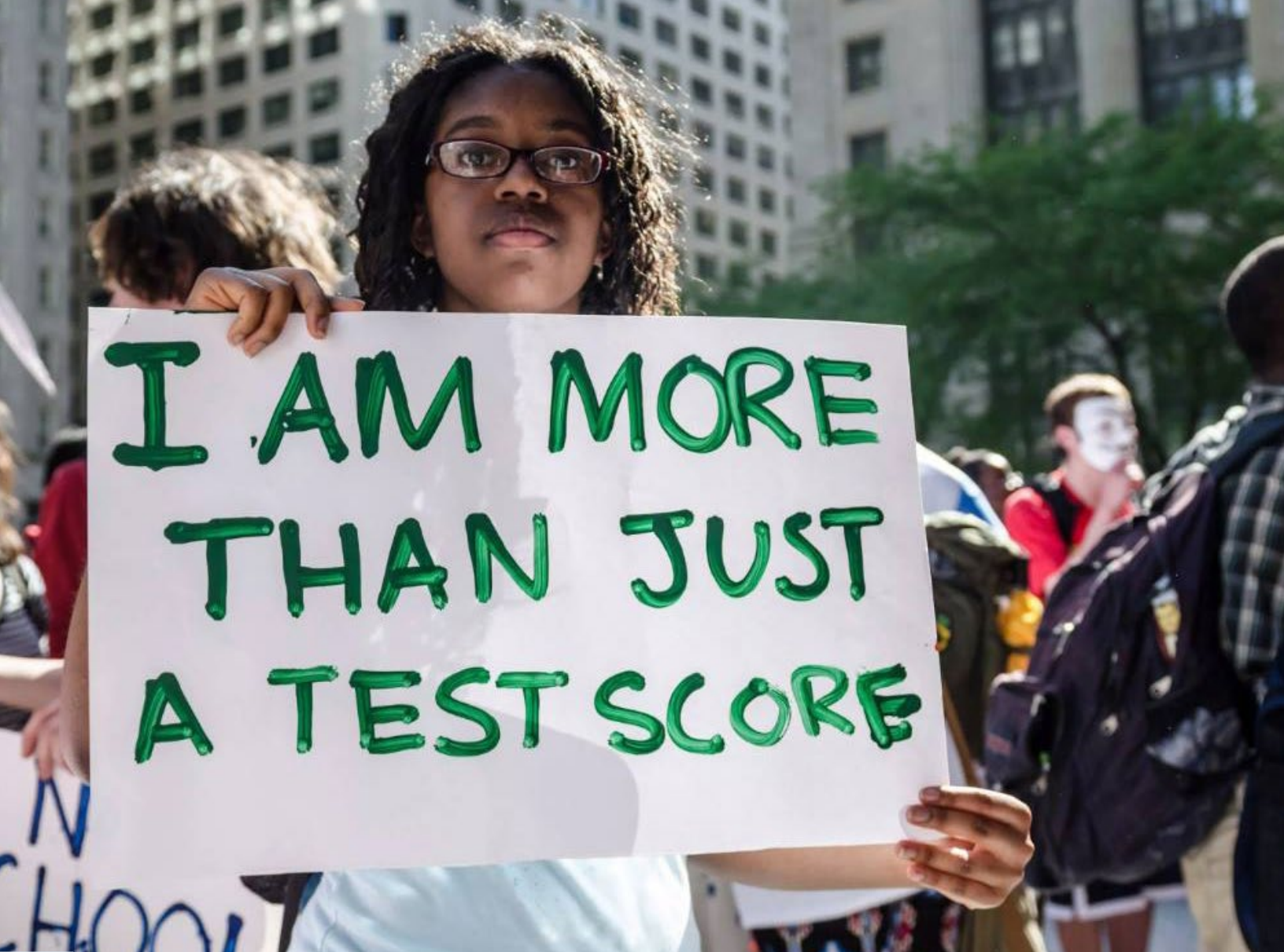
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