



By Louis Kruger

Massachusetts state education officials' decision to resume high stakes MCAS testing last spring has jeopardized the future of many English learners (ELs).

After waiving the MCAS graduation requirement for the previous two cohorts of high school students due to COVID related disruptions in education, state officials reinstated it for the graduating class of 2023. Despite all of the negative effects from the ongoing pandemic, last year's 10th grade students were required to pass tests in English language arts and math.

Although MCAS participation rates during spring 2021 were relatively robust for elementary students, the opposite was true for 10th grade students. Several thousand 10th grade students didn't take the MCAS tests required for a diploma. Furthermore, the groups with the lowest participation rates were also the groups who in the past had the highest rates of failing the high school MCAS tests. These are precisely the groups that state officials say they were trying to help by giving the MCAS during the pandemic.

As can be seen from the table below, groups that have historically scored lower on the math MCAS (English Learners, Economically Disadvantaged, Students with Disabilities, Latinx, African-American) had larger declines in participation on the 2021 10th grade MCAS than the average decline for all students.

ELs had the greatest decrease in participation (22%) from 2019 to 2021 on the 10th grade math test. Indeed, about one-quarter of ELs did not take the 10th grade MCAS in 2021. The low participation of ELs is alarming because perennially they have both the highest MCAS failure and dropout rates of any group, putting them at elevated risk of not getting a high school diploma.

Spring 10th Grade Math MCAS Participation			
Group	2019	2021	% Decline in Participation
All Students	98	89	9
Students with Disabilities	95	85	10
Low Income	96	82	14
English Learner	96	74	22
White	99	94	5
African-American	97	85	12
Latinx	97	80	17

These data prompted my colleagues and me to request the spring 2021 10th grade MCAS passing rates from the Massachusetts' Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). We sought to gain a better understanding of how many ELs did not attain the required MCAS scores for a diploma by the end of their 10th grade. Unfortunately, unlike in prior years, DESE did not make the 10th grade passing rates available to the public during last fall. After multiple requests and the help of a state senator, we were finally able to obtain the data.

The passing rate data heightened our concern about this cohort of ELs. Only about one-third of the 10th grade ELs who took the MCAS last spring passed both tests. This pass rate was a precipitous drop from the nearly one-half of ELs who passed the two tests in 2019 and a far lower pass rate than any other group during the spring of 2021.

When we also take into account the ELs who did not take last spring's 10th MCAS tests, the results are even more discouraging. Only about one-quarter of 10th grade ELs both took and passed the MCAS tests needed for a high school diploma last spring. These data suggest that reinstating the MCAS graduation requirement for the class of 2023 might be having a serious deleterious effect on this cohort of ELs' prospects for earning a high school diploma.

Equally concerning is the decline in fall 2021 enrollment of the class of 2023 (last spring's 10th grade students). The class of 2023 had by far the largest decline in enrollment from 10th to 11th grade of any class in the last decade. Although we do not yet know to what extent this large decline in enrollment was the result of students

dropping out, it is important to investigate given the low MCAS participation rates among underserved 10th grade students during last spring.

Each high school cohort group has multiple opportunities to pass the required MCAS tests. However, failing to pass the 10th grade MCAS can have long-term negative consequences. Based on Papay, Murnane & Willett's 2010 research¹, for example, we know that low-income urban students who do not pass the 10th grade MCAS math test are more likely to drop out.

Young adults who don't obtain a diploma earn far less income during their lifetimes and are more likely to be dependent upon social services. Therefore, it is troubling that state officials have not publicly acknowledged the burgeoning crisis facing the class of 2023 ELs.

In this stressful and educationally compromised environment, it would be unconscionable for DESE to make it even more difficult for ELs to pass the high school MCAS. However, that is exactly what might happen. During DESE's February 2022 board meeting, a DESE appointed advisory committee reported that it was "important" to raise the MCAS scores required for a diploma. Raising 'cutoff' scores for underserved students who are already academically struggling due to circumstances beyond their control would only serve to increase their risk of not obtaining diplomas.

A fixation on high stakes testing should not take precedence over the well-being of underserved students. State officials should waive the MCAS graduation requirement for the class of 2023. Furthermore, it would be foolhardy for DESE to raise the MCAS graduation requirement for current middle school cohorts while we don't yet understand the full scope of how the pandemic has impacted them. DESE ought to promulgate policies that encourage a bright future for underserved students and not dash their hopes against an unyielding test score requirement. ELs and other underserved students deserve a fighting chance to make decent lives for themselves.

1. Papay, J. P., Murnane, R. J., & Willett, J. B. (2010). The consequences of high school exit examinations for low-performing urban students: Evidence from Massachusetts. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 32(1), 5–23.