

LESSONS LEARNED

After 25 years of test-and-punish accountability,
it's time to end the misuse of tests and help
all our students to **THRIVE**.



**CITIZENS
for PUBLIC
SCHOOLS**

FairTest

The National Center for Fair & Open Testing

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary.....	1
Introduction.....	5
Section 1: Has the MCAS graduation requirement helped or hurt students?.....	7
Section 2: Did high-stakes testing make Massachusetts students the best educated in the country?.....	13
Section 3: Are there better ways to measure?.....	15
Section 4: Receivership in Massachusetts.....	21
Section 5: Does federal law require states to take over underperforming districts?.....	25
Appendix: A State Survey of Assessment and Graduation Practices.....	Appendix 1

This report was written by Citizens for Public Schools and The National Center for Fair and Open Testing (FairTest) and made possible with the generous support of the Massachusetts Teachers Association. We want to thank Dan Murphy for sharing his invaluable knowledge on receivership in Massachusetts.

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After 25 years of test-and-punish accountability,
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What kind of public education do we want to provide to all of our students?

All students, not only the most privileged, deserve an education that provides the knowledge and skills most needed in today's global, diverse, and technological world. We should be providing a balanced curriculum that includes project-based learning, the arts, world languages, history and social studies, internships, and other electives that help prepare students for college, career, and life.

Have Massachusetts students benefited from the MCAS graduation test policy?

Twenty years into the implementation of MCAS as a high school graduation requirement, the policy has harmed students who have been denied diplomas and has failed to address inequities in academic outcomes by race, income, language, and disability. As funding increased, scores on national tests went up for all subgroups between 1993 and 2003. Fewer students scored below the "Basic" level on national tests. That was especially true for Black and Latinx students. When the graduation requirement took effect in 2003, there was no appreciable impact on these trends, but educators report a range of negative consequences, including narrowed curriculum, increased stress and anxiety among students.

The policy's failure is rooted in its inability to address the factors that cause those opportunity gaps: the underinvestment in the schools and other essential services that could effectively level the playing field, and the use of a standardized test that does not accurately assess or prepare our increasingly diverse student body with the knowledge and skills needed for participation in future college, career, and civic life. There is no educational justification to maintain a graduation requirement that inflicts significant harm on our students.

Would the Thrive Act eliminate MCAS testing?

No. MCAS testing would continue, as required by federal law. And there would still be statewide graduation standards that students would be required to meet, as described below.

What would the Thrive Act do?

The Thrive Act has three parts:

- 1. Replace the failed MCAS graduation requirement.** Students will still take the MCAS, but they won't need a passing grade to graduate. Instead, schools will certify a student for graduation if they demonstrate a mastery of the skills and knowledge required by state standards.
- 2. The state will no longer take over schools in the lowest performing schools/districts.** Instead, the school district will create a group, including local school officials, educators, and parents, which will develop an improvement plan.
- 3. Establish a commission to study the effects of the current school and district accountability system** and make recommendations to the legislature for a better approach. (This could include recommended changes to the federal law.)

Has the MCAS high school graduation requirement improved graduation rates?

The evidence suggests the opposite. When the requirement to pass MCAS was temporarily suspended, graduation rates went up for all student groups, especially for students who are not fluent in English, students with disabilities, and students from low-income families.

Did MCAS lift Massachusetts from the “middle of the pack” to the top among states on national test scores?

No. Massachusetts always did well because of our high household income and education levels. During the big increases in state funding for schools in the early years of the Education Reform Act of 1993, our scores rose. After the funding leveled off, so did the scores. Recently, there has been some backsliding.

Most important, the number of students scoring at the lowest levels shrank dramatically as the funding grew. But now, we see rising numbers of students at those lowest levels. The widest NAEP gaps are between English Learners and non-ELs and between students with disabilities and non-disabled students. Gaps between white students and Black and Latinx students, and between affluent and low-income students, remain alarmingly high. The test-and-punish strategy has failed.

Do MCAS scores show a student's readiness to handle college or career?

No. They measure a narrow range of academic skills, but tell very little about a student's ability to apply knowledge to real-world situations. They also ignore the important personal and interpersonal skills that adults need for success in college, career, and living in a democratic society. Parents, educators, and business leaders agree that standardized tests get far too much attention in our schools. But schools focus on these scores because the state gives them so much importance.

How many other states require students to pass exit exams in order to graduate high school?

For the class of 2023, only seven other states require students to pass exit exams to graduate. They are Florida, Virginia, New York, Texas, Illinois, Louisiana and Wyoming. In the early 2000s, as many as 27 states required exit exams. As recently as 2017, fourteen states required exit exams.

Why did so many states drop the exit exam requirement?

Exit exams have disproportionately harmed Black, Latinx, and low-income students, as well as English Language learners and those with learning disabilities, blocking their ability to graduate from high school — a key credential in American life. At the same time, policymakers have come to realize that exit exams do not create better educational outcomes. Standardized tests of academic performance are a poor measure of the skills and knowledge graduates need to function in the modern workforce and citizenry.

What do other states require students to do to earn a high school diploma?

Nearly all states rely on state-mandated course completion as the central, and sometimes sole, requirement for graduation. Some states have created additional pathways for graduation, requiring students to demonstrate skills towards a chosen post-secondary outcome – college and/or career. Other states have included local and state-developed performance assessments as options to demonstrate graduation-ready skills and knowledge.

Are there better ways of assessing students' knowledge and skills than standardized tests?

Yes. Performance - based assessments tell us what students have learned by having them actively demonstrate their knowledge and skills by doing instead of filling in bubble sheets. Students complete a task or project requiring them to apply knowledge and explain their process and methodology in solving a problem. They explain a phenomenon, answer a question or hypothesis, conduct an inquiry, or create an original work. In this way, along with the traditional ways teachers assess students' learning every day, we get a real picture of what students know and can do.

Are there examples of performance assessments being used successfully?

Yes. Several states have scaled the use of performance assessments. Eight districts in Massachusetts have formed the Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment (MCIEA) to develop and implement performance assessments. The New York Performance Standards Consortium is a group of 38 middle and high schools that use performance assessments for graduation. They have been extremely successful with low-income and students of color. New Mexico, Colorado and New Hampshire have all implemented performance assessments as part of their graduation systems at district and state levels.

Would eliminating the high-stakes consequences from MCAS violate federal law?

No. Federal education law – the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) – requires that states administer assessments during high school in English Language Arts, mathematics, and science for use in guiding state and local policy. But federal law does not require any consequences for students from these exams. **Exit exams are not mandated or encouraged by federal law.**

Would getting rid of state takeovers for struggling schools and districts violate federal law?

No. ESSA does not require or encourage state takeovers of struggling schools. It requires comprehensive support and improvement for low performing schools and requires nothing for districts. Federal law says that local districts must come up with plans for the bottom 5% of schools based on four accountability measures. The Thrive Act's methodology for determining and improving struggling schools fully complies with ESSA.

Does receivership help improve quality and equity for students and schools in low-income communities?

No. The hope was that those interventions would lead to dramatic improvements for students in those districts. In fact, the opposite has happened. Districts that the state is operating are now ranked as the lowest performing districts in the state – by the state's own measures.

What are the negative consequences of state receivership?

The strategies that the state has used have led to low morale, high educator turnover, and a failure to give students the opportunities to thrive that they deserve. Receivership also undermines local democratic control of schools and deprives students of a broad, engaging curriculum.

What are better means of school improvement?

Better ways to improve schools and student learning are grounded in community-based efforts – not state takeovers or private partnerships – using holistic, wraparound services to support schools that face multiple challenges. California, for example, rejected the test-and-punish approach embodied in the No Child Left Behind law and focused on collaborating with local community members to identify local priorities and needs. A similar approach, known as the Community Schools model, tackles school improvement by empowering students and educators and partnering with local community organizations to address students' academic, mental health and other needs.



LESSONS LEARNED

After 25 years of test-and-punish accountability,
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What kind of public education do we want to provide for all of our students? All students, not only the most privileged, deserve an education that provides the knowledge and skills most needed in today's global, diverse, and technological world. We should be providing a balanced curriculum that, in addition to the state-tested subjects of English language arts, math and science, includes the arts, world languages, history and social studies, and other electives that help prepare students for college, career and life. Instruction should be organized around project-based learning, internships, field work, research, inquiry, and authentic performance assessments.

In fact, the state Supreme Judicial Court decision in the McDuffy case, which prompted passage of the 1993 Education Reform Act (MERA), said the state had a "duty" to educate Massachusetts students "sufficiently" in at least these seven capabilities:

1. Oral and written communication skills to enable students to function in a complex and rapidly changing civilization.
2. Knowledge of economic, social, and political systems to enable students to make informed choices.
3. Understanding of governmental processes to enable students to understand the issues that affect their community, state, and nation.
4. Self-knowledge and knowledge of their mental and physical wellness.
5. Grounding in the arts to enable each student to appreciate their cultural and historical heritage.
6. Training or preparation for advanced training in either academic or vocational fields so as to enable each child to choose and pursue life work intelligently.
7. Academic or vocational skills to enable public school students to compete favorably with their counterparts in surrounding states, in academics or in the job market.

In this report, we examine the evidence of benefits and harms to public education in the Commonwealth since the passage of MERA.

1 Has the MCAS graduation requirement helped or hurt students?

Twenty years into the implementation of the MCAS as a high school graduation requirement, the policy has harmed students who have been denied diplomas and has failed to address inequities in academic outcomes by race, income, language and disability. The failure of the policy is rooted in its inability to address the factors that cause opportunity gaps: the underinvestment in schools and other essential services that could effectively level the playing field and the use of a standardized test that does not accurately assess or prepare our increasingly diverse student body with the knowledge and skills needed for participation in future college, career and civic life. There is no educational justification to maintain a graduation requirement that inflicts significant harm on a large segment of the student population.

Although it presents more harm to some communities, it's harmful to all. There is a cost for everyone.

Standardized tests reflect race and income better than knowledge and skills

Multiple factors contribute to disparities by race, income, language, and disability in standardized test outcomes. One is the high-stakes use of standardized tests themselves. Standardized test development focuses on culturally dominant language and ignores how students' race/ethnicities, cultures, and languages shape their understanding and new knowledge. Thus, standardized tests can hinder students of color, low-income students, and emergent multilingual students from demonstrating in full what they know and can do.¹ (Emergent multilinguals – students who are adding English to one or more languages in which they already are fluent – are often called English learners.)

"Stereotype threat," defined by Steele and Aronson as a "socially premised psychological threat that arises when one is in a situation of doing something for which a negative stereotype about one's group applies," is a significant contributor to lower test scores for Black and Latinx students.² Forcing English learners who are not academically proficient in English to take standardized tests in English is another substantial contributor to these students' low scores.

Poverty is a societal contributor to disparate standardized test scores. In one study of New Jersey fifth grade scores, researchers found that by looking at family income in communities, they successfully predicted the percent of students who scored proficient on the state test in 84 percent of the schools over a three-year period. The researchers concluded that "...our results demonstrate that standardized tests don't really measure how much students learn, or how well teachers teach, or how effective school leaders lead their schools. Such tests are blunt instruments that are highly susceptible to measuring out-of-school factors."³ That is one reason why so many U.S. colleges and universities are shifting to test-optional admissions; the College Board's own data shows a near-perfect correlation between average family income and average SAT scores.⁴

¹ Randall, J. (2021). "Color-neutral" is not a thing: Redefining construct definition and representation through a justice-oriented critical antiracist lens." *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice*, 40(4), 82-90.

² Aronson, J., Quinn, D. M., & Spencer, S. J. (1998). Stereotype threat and the academic underperformance of minorities and women. In J. K. Swim & C. Stangor (Eds.), *Prejudice: The target's perspective* (pp. 83-103). Academic Press. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-012679130-3/50039-9>; Jencks, C., & Phillips, M. (Eds.). (1998). *The Black-White test score gap*. Brookings Institution Press; Steele, C. M., & Aronson, J. (1995). Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African Americans. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69(5), 797-811. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.69.5.797>; Couch, Michael II; Frost, Marquisha; Santiago, J.; and Hilton, Adriel (2021) "Rethinking Standardized Testing From An Access, Equity And Achievement Perspective: Has Anything Changed For African American Students?," *Journal of Research Initiatives*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 3 , Article 6. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.uncfsu.edu/jri/vol5/iss3/6>

³ Tienken, C.; Colella, A.; Angelillo, C.; Fox, M.; McCahill, K.; & Wolfe, A. (2017). Predicting Middle Level State Standardized Test Results Using Family and Community Demographic Data. *RMLE Online*, 40:1, 113: DOI 40:1, 113 DOI: 10.1080/19404476.2016.1252304.

⁴ Kantrowitz, M. (2021). How admissions tests discriminate against low-income and minority student admissions at selective colleges. *Forbes Magazine*.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/markkantrowitz/2021/05/21/how-admissions-tests-discriminate-against-low-income-and-minority-student-admissions-at-selective-colleges/?sh=72a84ff43cc1>.

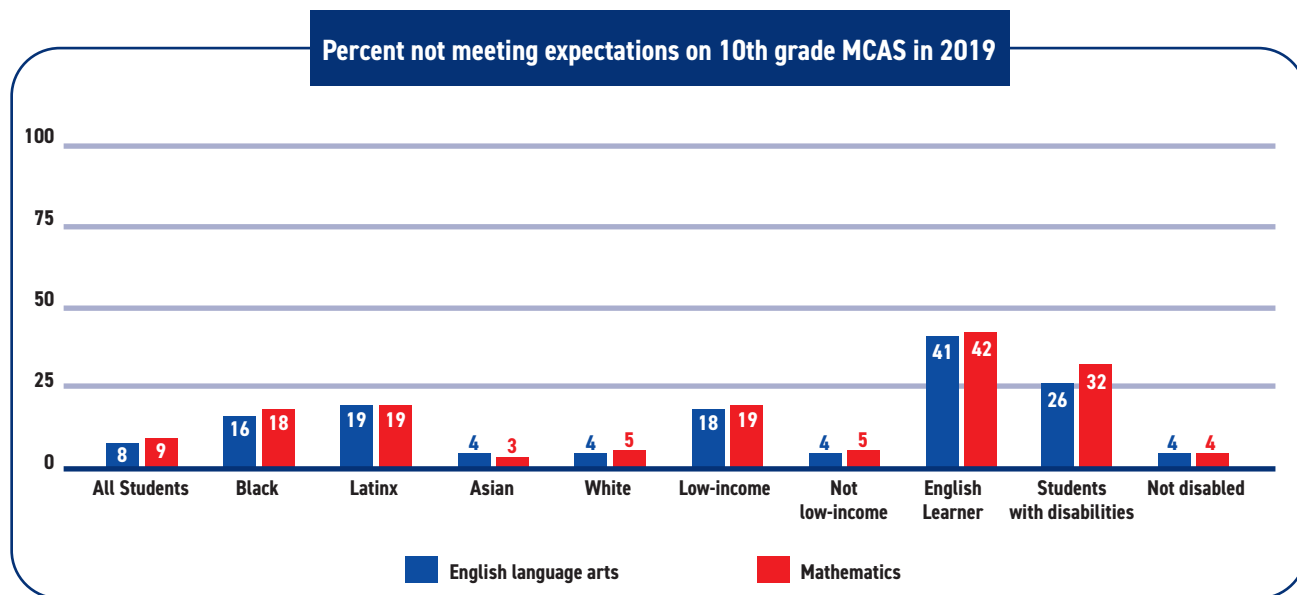
While these societal and testing inequities have influenced disparities in test scores, a different conception of education and assessment can improve educational quality and bring about more equitable results across race, income, language and disability. Schools could focus on developing culturally responsive school cultures and curriculum, project-based learning, ample student and family support services, a welcoming environment for families and diverse staff. An assessment system primarily focused on students demonstrating what they know and can do in real-world ways, without the threat of failure and punishment based on a test score, can help more of our increasingly diverse students be successful.

It is critically important to make the investments in (and out of) schools that will give all students a real opportunity to succeed and to make sure we are measuring success in ways that don't discriminate against students of color or drive instruction in ways that are harmful to all students.

Glaring gaps remain in MCAS passing/failure rates among key student subgroups

We examined 2019 10th grade MCAS scores to determine which student subgroups are most at risk of failing MCAS and not graduating. Due to the pandemic, the MCAS was canceled altogether in 2020, and the classes of 2020, 2021, and 2022 did not have to pass MCAS to graduate. So 2019 provides a good snapshot of the impact of MCAS before the pandemic interrupted long-standing state policies.

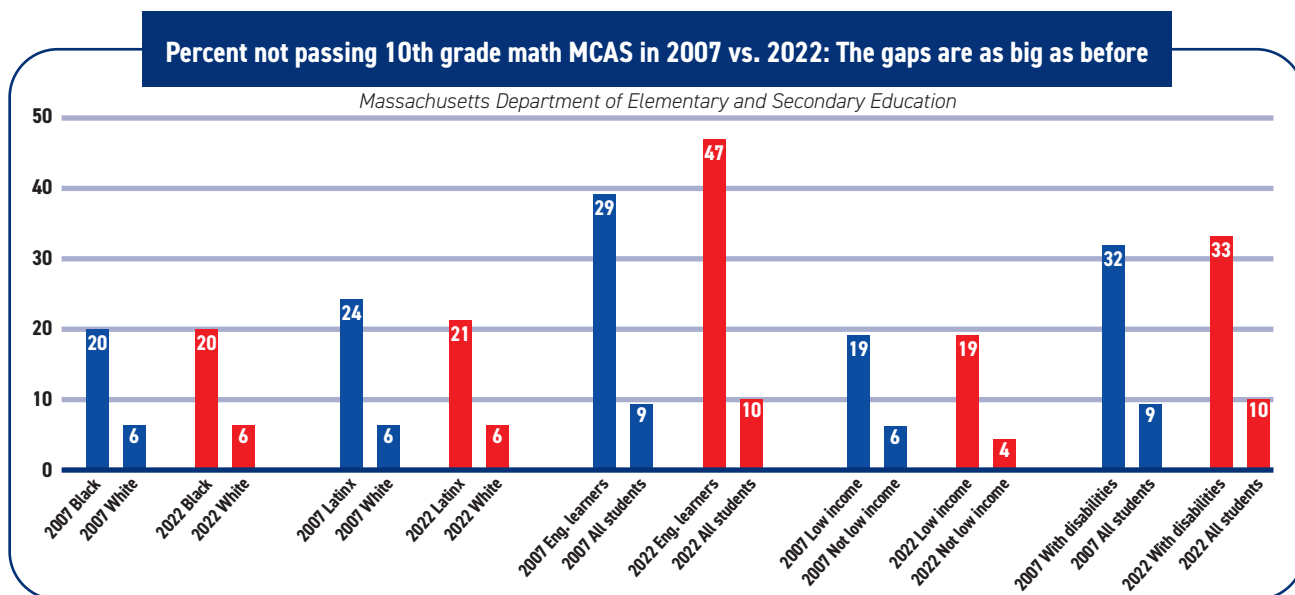
Consistent with previous years, the 2019 MCAS showed disproportionate rates of Black students, Latinx students, low-income students, English learners, and students with disabilities not passing the MCAS (or, more specifically, scoring in the "not meeting expectations" category on the exam⁵). The charts below illustrate the magnitude of these disparities.



To get a sense of trends over time, we also looked at differences in pass/fail (or not meeting expectations) rates among different student subgroups, comparing 2007 – the second year in which the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) lists subgroup data – and 2022, the most recent year for which there are published MCAS results.

⁵ Starting with the Class of 2026, students who score in the "not meeting expectations" category will not be able to earn the Competency Determination and graduate.

Over this period of 15 years, the gaps between different student groups remain large. It is especially concerning that the gaps between English Learners and all students grew in both English language arts and math. While the data sets for 2007 and 2022 may not be directly comparable because the test and scoring have changed, the data suggest little progress has been made over the years to close these gaps.⁶



The disparity in MCAS passing rates is contributing to a disparity in graduation rates

Several studies show the harmful impact of tying standardized tests to high school graduation:

- A 2007 study found that tying high school graduation to passing a state standardized test "...significantly reduced the probability of completing high school, particularly for black students."⁷
- Brown University Professor John Papay and colleagues compared low-income, urban students who barely passed the math MCAS the first time they took it in 10th grade with low-income, urban students who barely failed it. The groups had nearly the same academic achievement levels, but those who failed the test were eight percent less likely to graduate.⁸
- Reardon and Kurlaender reached the same conclusion about California's state exit exam: "...the CAHSEE requirement has had no positive effects on students' academic skills....[On the other hand, they found] the CAHSEE requirement had a large negative impact on graduation rates for students in the bottom quartile of achievement, and that this impact was especially large for minority students."⁹
- Multiple studies have found that not receiving a high school diploma results in higher unemployment and incarceration rates, lower lifetime earnings, and less participation in civic life.¹⁰

In Massachusetts public schools, due in part to the MCAS graduation requirement, substantial disparities exist in graduation rates by race, income, language and disability. See chart with 2019 graduation rates on the following page.

⁶ Note that, in 2007, DESE reported the percent not passing as the percent "failing." In 2022, DESE reported the percent not passing as the percent "not meeting expectations." While the two metrics may not be directly comparable, they are closely related and tell the same story of sizable gaps across time.

⁷ Dee, T., & Jacob, B.A. (2007). Do High School Exit Exams Influence Educational Attainment or Labor Market Performance?. In A. Gamoran (Ed), Standards-Based Reform and Children in Poverty: Lessons for "No Child Left Behind". Brookings Institution Press.

⁸ Papay, J.P., Murnane, R., Willett, B. (2008). The consequences of MCAS exit examinations for struggling low-income urban students. Cambridge, MA, Harvard Graduate School of Education. https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w14186/w14186.pdf.

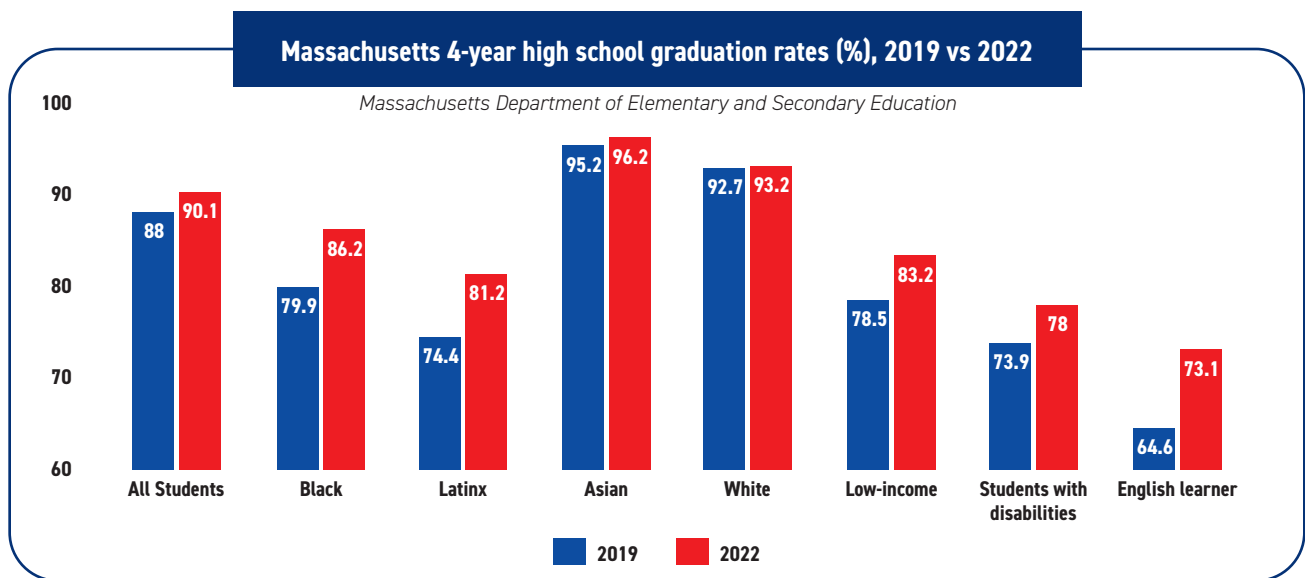
⁹ Reardon, S. & Kurlaender, M. (2009). Effects of the California High School Exit Exam on Student Persistence, Achievement, and Graduation. PACE Policy Brief 09-3.

¹⁰ Sum, A.; Khatiwada, I.; McLaughlin, J.; Palma, S. (2009). The consequences of dropping out of high school: Joblessness and jailing for high school dropouts and the high cost for taxpayers. Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University, Boston, MA.

Atwell and colleagues found that Massachusetts had the fifth-largest high school graduation gap of all states between Latinx and white students and the sixth-largest gap between English learners and non-ELs. The gaps between low-income and more affluent students and between Black and white students were also larger than the national average.¹¹

Graduation rates increased during the pandemic when the MCAS requirement was waived

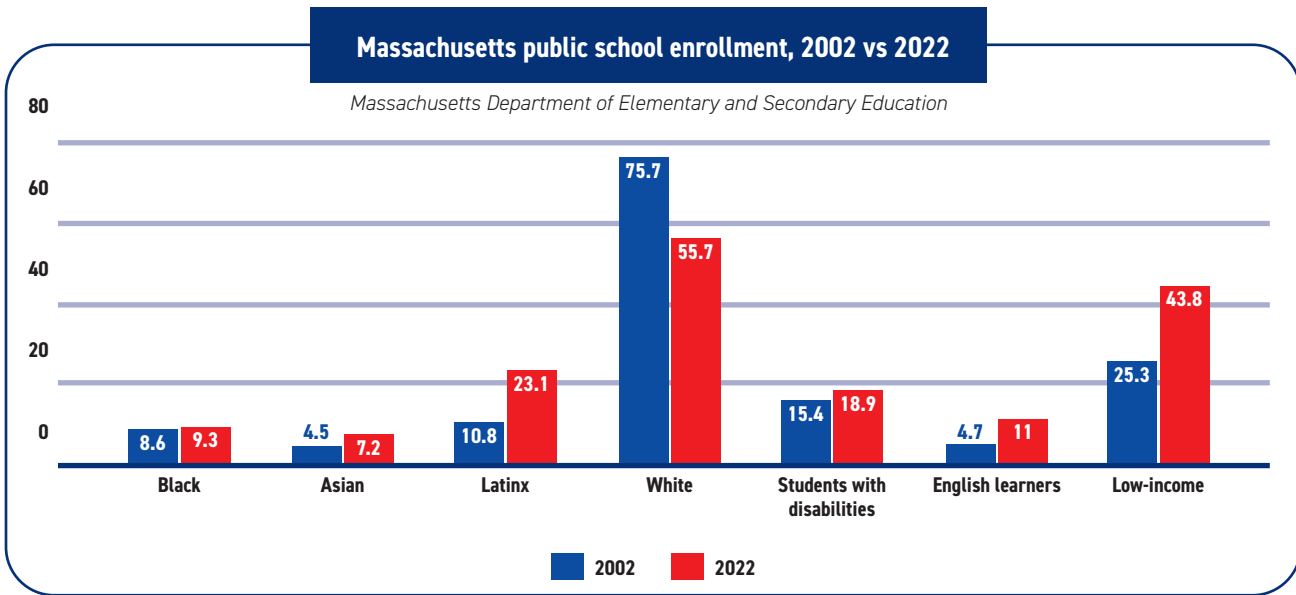
Significantly, when the MCAS requirement was waived during the pandemic, graduation rates rose, especially among students from historically marginalized groups. This suggests that having an MCAS-based requirement contributes to historical and inequitable gaps in high school graduation rates. For example, the class of 2022 was the third consecutive and final class that did not have to pass the MCAS tests to receive a diploma. We compared 2022 graduation rates to rates in 2019, the last year prior to the pandemic when the graduation requirement was in effect. The chart below illustrates the findings and suggests that the MCAS-based graduation requirement suppresses the graduation rate for key subgroups. While inequities remained in 2022, disparities were reduced for every historically marginalized group. Most notable is that the gains for English learners were four times greater than that of the total population, as they were relieved from having to take a high-stakes test in English when they were not yet academically English-proficient.



Unfortunately, this welcome bump in graduation rates is likely to be short-lived as the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) recently raised the MCAS cut scores required for the Competency Determination (CD), starting with the Class of 2026.¹² This will likely result in even more students not passing MCAS tests, and even more students not graduating. And it is the student groups with the fastest growing enrollment in Massachusetts public schools (see chart below) who are being most harmed by the MCAS graduation requirement, including Latinx, English learners, and low-income students.

¹¹ Atwell, M., Balfanz, R., Manspile, E., Byrnes, V., Bridgeland, J. (2021). Building a grad nation: Progress and challenges in raising high school graduation rates. Civic and Everyone Graduates Center at the School of Education at Johns Hopkins University. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED617355.pdf>.

¹² See <https://www.doe.mass.edu/bese/docs/ty2023/2022-08/>



MCAS doesn't assess important knowledge and skills for college, career, and life

Standardized tests, especially those with high stakes for students and schools, narrow the curriculum and increase test preparation, memorization and drills, which result in lost instructional time.¹³ MCAS simply does not measure the knowledge and skills most needed in today's global, diverse and technological world. Schools serving high percentages of low-income, Black, Latinx and English learner students are negatively impacted the most due to the threat of being identified by the state as an underperforming school, or as a district or school to be placed in receivership. Students are thus deprived of access to a richer, more balanced curriculum that helps prepare students for college, career and life.

Rather than the lower-order cognitive knowledge tested by MCAS, colleges seek students with 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).¹⁴ Likewise, more than 90 percent of surveyed employers cite ethical judgment and integrity, intercultural skills, collaboration, communication and capacity to learn as qualities that factor into hiring decisions.¹⁵

In 2016, the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education, whose leaders are among the most enthusiastic cheerleaders for high-stakes testing, commissioned MassINC to survey business executives.¹⁶ MassINC reported:

¹³ Amrein, A. L. & Berliner, D. C. (2002). High-stakes testing, uncertainty, and student learning. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 10 (18). Retrieved on March 27, 2002 from <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v10n18>; Papay, J.P., Mantil, A., Murnane, R.J., An, L., Donohue, K., & McDonough, A. (2020). *Lifting all boats? Accomplishments and challenges from 20 years of education reform in Massachusetts*. Providence, RI: Educational Opportunity in MA, Brown University. https://education.brown.edu/sites/default/files/2020-06/LiftingAllBoats_FINAL.pdf.

¹⁴ Conley, D. (2012). A complete definition of college and career readiness. *Educational Policy Improvement Center*. Downloaded at http://www.avid.org/dl/eve_natcon/nc12_four_keys_handout2.pdf.

¹⁵ Hart Research Associates (2013). *It takes more than a major: employer priorities for college learning and student success*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities. Downloaded at https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/LEAP/2013_EmployerSurvey.pdf.

¹⁶ See <https://www.mbae.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/FINAL-Report-2016-MBAE-Employer-Poll-for-web.pdf>



Has MCAS grad requirement helped or hurt?

Naghely Guilamo

former student at Salem High School, now a hair stylist and makeup artist:

My graduation year was 2011 but I couldn't pass the math MCAS. I received a certificate of completion. That wasn't enough for most jobs. I worked for a call center with a certificate of completion. I tried to become a preschool teacher but I needed financial aid for the courses and I couldn't get aid without a diploma.

I went back and took the math MCAS twice more and finally passed by two points. Then I was able to get financial aid for beauty school. My goal in life was to be a hair stylist and makeup artist. Now, I'm doing pretty good. But I was held back for almost six years by a piece of paper.

"Employers continue to think there is too much emphasis on standardized tests.

"Business leaders want more accountability for teachers, but they are deeply concerned about one of the main tools used to evaluate teachers and students: standardized tests. More than three-fifths (62 percent) think there is too much emphasis put on preparing students for standardized tests.

"This is virtually identical to the 2013 survey, and it is consistent with other surveys of voters and parents [MassINC] has conducted since."

Parents agree. A 2017 Phi Delta Kappan (PDK) poll found that parents believe students acquiring interpersonal skills, and participating in tech/engineering, advanced, art and music courses were far more important measures than how students perform on standardized tests.¹⁷ A 2022 Populace, Inc. national survey of parents and other adults found that "respondents believe students should advance once they have demonstrated mastery of a subject [ranked no. 7 out of 57 questions] rather than when they pass an arbitrary test. In fact, evaluating student success based on standardized tests was ranked as a bottom 10 priority (no. 49).¹⁸ And in PDK's 2019 poll, 94 percent of teachers and 77 percent 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.¹⁹ Studies have come to the same conclusion; high school GPA is a stronger predictor of college success than standardized test scores.²⁰

In sum, after more than 20 years, the high-stakes MCAS has failed on multiple fronts. MCAS pass/failure rate gaps among racial, income, disability, and language groups remain alarmingly large. In addition, there continue to be stubbornly large disparities in graduation rates among subgroups. The MCAS has degraded the quality of instruction students receive in districts with high percentages of students from historically marginalized groups. And it does not assess the knowledge and skills that students most need to succeed in higher education, career and civic life.

¹⁷ PDK International. (2017) The 49th annual PDK poll of the public's attitudes toward the public schools. Retrieved from https://pdkpoll.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/pdkpoll49_2017.pdf

¹⁸ Populace, Inc. (2023). Populace Insights: Purpose of Education Index.

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59153bc0e6f2e109b2a85cbc/t/63e96b44a0e46d79a10ecf26/1676241761790/Purpose+of+Education+Index.pdf>.

¹⁹ PDK International. (2019) PDK poll of the public's attitudes toward the public schools. Retrieved from <https://pdkpoll.org/>.

²⁰ Tienken, C. (2017). Students' test scores tell us more about the community they live in than what they know. The Conversation. Retrieved from

<https://theconversation.com/students-test-scores-tell-us-more-about-the-community-they-live-in-than-what-they-know-77934>; Tienken, C. (2015). Education Policy Perils: Tackling the Tough Issues. Chapter 7. Taylor and Francis: Routledge.

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Did high-stakes testing make Massachusetts students the best educated in the country?

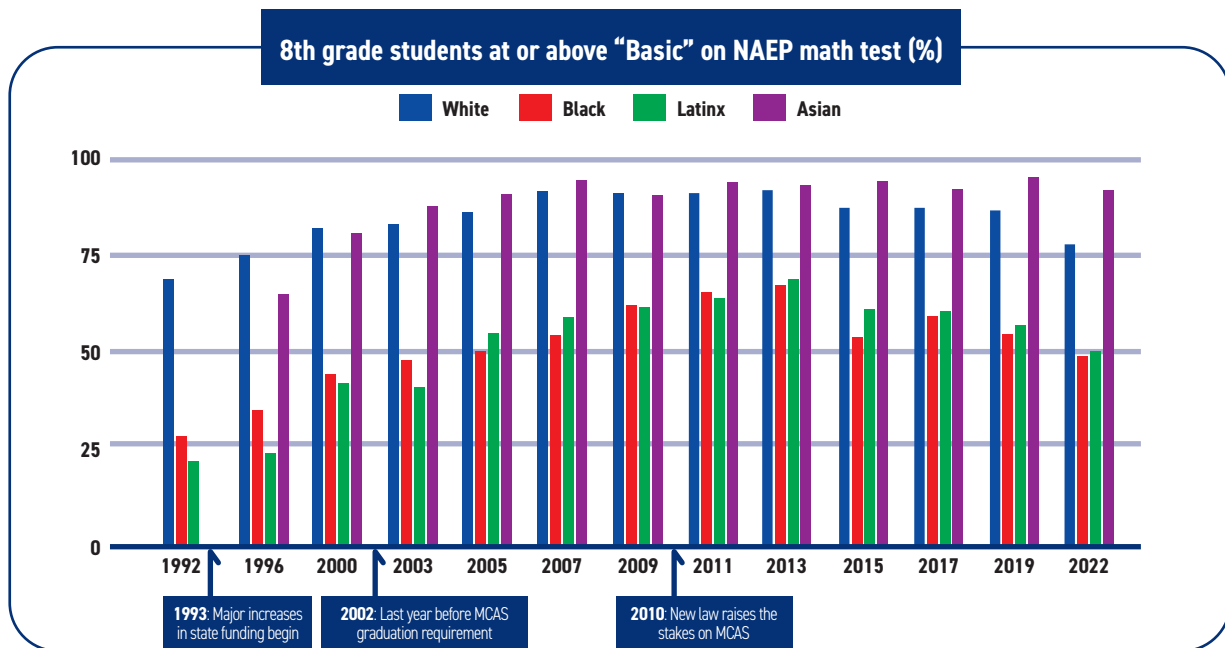
The Education Reform Act of 1993 provided for a major increase in state funding for public schools, especially in low-income communities. At the time, Massachusetts was among the states with the widest gaps between the highest and lowest spending districts because schools were heavily dependent on local property taxes. Massachusetts was close to the bottom among states in the percentage of school funds that came from state budgets.

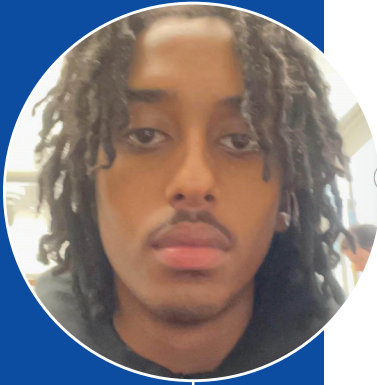
The law also called for a "comprehensive assessment system" to gather information about student achievement across the state, and to determine whether individual students had the academic competence to deserve a high school diploma.

During the first few years after 1993, as school funding went up, Massachusetts scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) rose and our ranking among states improved. In 1992, for example, Massachusetts eighth graders were in 12th place among states on the NAEP math test. By 2005, with better funding, Massachusetts eighth graders were number one.

The extra funding was a major step toward giving every Massachusetts child a solid learning foundation. The percentage of Massachusetts students scoring "basic" or higher showed a major improvement. Black, Latinx and low-income students had the biggest gains.

But when the funding leveled off, so did the NAEP increases. These charts show eighth grade math scores. Eighth grade reading and fourth grade reading and math results show a similar pattern.





Did high-stakes testing make Massachusetts the best?

Nathaniel Asfawosen
senior at Brookline High School

I'm a good student. I'm taking college-level classes and in the National Honor Society. My grades are good. My test grades aren't measuring my capabilities as a student, so why should I take this test and make myself look worse than I am?

In 2010, the legislature passed a new education law, An Act Relevant to the Achievement Gap, which increased the stakes for MCAS scores. It gave state officials the power to take over schools and districts with low test scores. That did not lead to any improvement in NAEP scores. Instead, there are indications of backsliding. (See Section 5, Page 27.)

Standardized tests have increased school and district segregation

Knoester and Au state that, "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."²¹

In Massachusetts, Schneider, Carey, Piazza, and White found similar patterns. In a span of 11 years between the 2008-2009 and 2019-2020 school years, there was a 34 percent increase in intensely segregated, nonwhite Massachusetts public schools. The authors cite the state's accountability system, which relies primarily upon MCAS scores, as one reason for this shift, arguing that the state accountability system identifies as "underperforming" the districts and schools with high levels of poverty, students of color and English learners.²²

These designations are picked up by real estate agents and publicized in sites such as GreatSchools.org and niche.com. Many affluent parents/guardians with school-age children decide where to live based on such data.

Measuring real-world skills

More and more educators are turning to performance assessments to teach and assess real-world skills, like the assessments developed by the Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment, the New York Performance Standards Consortium, and others around the country. But the development and use of these new forms of learning and assessment are held back by the need to put countless hours into helping as many students as possible over the MCAS hump.

Without a diploma, students have tremendous difficulty finding their footing in the job world.

So students must spend many hours learning arcane rules about the MCAS question formats and answer rubrics, and focus intensely on the limited set of standards that are likely to be on the test – instead of getting the best possible educational start in life.

It's time to change that.

Standardized tests can give teachers useful information. But when scores become the goal of learning, children lose out.

²¹ Knoester, R. & Au, W. (2015). Standardized testing and school segregation: like tinder for fire? Race Ethnicity and Education. Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2015.1121474>

²² Schneider, J.; Carey, A.; Piazza, P.; White, R. (2020). School integration in Massachusetts: Racial diversity and state accountability. University of Massachusetts Lowell. https://cecr.ed.psu.edu/sites/default/files/Demography_Report_FINAL_7.24.20.pdf

3

Are there better ways to measure?

Performance-based assessments

Performance-based assessments tell us what students have learned by having them actively demonstrate their knowledge and skills by doing. In the “real world,” we do not judge people’s competency or mastery based on their performance just on a pencil and paper test; we judge them based on what they actually accomplish. We assess the performance of a chef by how the food tastes; an accountant by the accuracy of the prepared tax return; a musician by the sound that comes out of the instrument and their ability to play with other musicians; and a plumber by how well this professional fixed the leak. By removing the high stakes standardized summative assessments that stand as a barrier to this kind of authentic assessment, the Thrive Act would enable educators to include more performance tasks in their suite of measures of student learning.

In school, performance assessments ask students to complete a task or project requiring them to apply knowledge and explain their process and methodology in solving a problem. Students explain a phenomenon, answer a question or hypothesis, conduct an inquiry, or create an original work. Performance-based assessments are designed to be authentic to student learning and experience and connected to the actual curriculum implemented in the school and classroom. They reward critical analysis, varied modes of expression, depth of knowledge and student voice and choice. When done well, assessments are evaluated and graded to give the student meaningful feedback toward continuous skill improvement. Well-designed rubrics can be a way of accomplishing this goal. Ideally, the assessments are developed by teachers, working individually or in grade-level and discipline-specific committees in consultation with school administrators and local community members.

Accountability comes from the school community, with student work available for demonstration and community inspection. Students are also constantly assessed and evaluated in multiple ways throughout a school year. They take tests in the normal course of the curriculum, get grades and receive progress reports and report cards. By developing performance assessments as part of schools’ culture, local districts can improve the regular course of student evaluation in ways that encourage inquiry and deeper learning. This is very much in the Massachusetts tradition of local school committees and districts being responsible for meeting the needs and expectations of their communities.

Under the Thrive Act, such things as course completion in required curricular areas with their existing, attendant assessments, would serve the necessary accountability function. It would also allow room for the development of performance assessments.

Examples of scaled systems of performance-based assessments

Successful performance-based assessment systems contain infrastructure and networks of practice and oversight to support the school-based work. Banks of performance tasks and project possibilities, development of common rubrics (guides used to grade work), professional development to exchange ideas and practices, studies to make sure grading is reliable and valid, and partnership with research academics to study practices and outcomes, are all important elements of improvement in practice and adequate scaling so that a local performance-based assessment system can be incorporated into a mechanism for accountability.

Several states, including Massachusetts, have supported performance-based assessment to varying degrees. Making room for and supporting such assessments, which develop deeper learning and critical thinking skills, is good educational policy.

Performance-based assessment, because it is authentic to student experience, is a culturally responsive framework that respects both students and teachers. Graduation-level exit exams, on the other hand, snuff out the possibilities for that framework as they require preparing students for a pencil-and-paper test that is antithetical to the kind of authentic work undertaken through performance tasks.

Two important examples of systems of performance-based assessment are described below. For a fuller description of examples around the country (including systems and practices in New Mexico, Colorado, Kentucky and New Hampshire) see the **State Assessment and Graduation Practices** document that accompanies this report.

Massachusetts--MCIEA

The Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment (MCIEA) is a partnership of eight public school districts (Attleboro, Boston, Lowell, Milford, Revere, Somerville, Wareham and Winchester) and their local teacher unions, joined together to create a fair and effective accountability system that offers a more dynamic picture of student learning and school quality than a single, standardized test. MCIEA emphasizes performance assessments as the primary means of assessing student learning. MCIEA partners with the University of Massachusetts Lowell for study and evaluation.

If this model were adopted statewide, teachers across schools and districts would meet regularly to engage in blind scoring of student work to ensure scoring reliability. High school graduation decisions would be made at the local level, using, in part, portfolios of student work. The state's role would be to continue to set learning standards, to ensure that districts are developing requisite student skills and knowledge, as well as providing districts with resource support and technical assistance. State assessments would be used for **diagnostic** purposes to provide a consistent data source on student learning for schools and educators, without requiring passing state tests to graduate from high school.

New York - The New York Performance Standards Consortium

The oldest and most demonstrably successful system of performance-based assessment in the country is the New York Performance Standards Consortium (NYPSC). In 1996, the New York State Education Department granted a group of schools a variance from the Regents graduation testing requirements, inviting them to use inquiry-based models of teaching and learning and develop a system of assessments that was performance-based in lieu of standardized tests. Data reports document the impressive graduation and college acceptance rates of NYPSC students.²³ The NYPSC is now in its 25th year, with the Regents exam variance having been renewed every five years since 2001. NYPSC students do take and must pass a basic ELA exam. (Other New York high school students have to take and pass five Regents exams to earn a diploma.)

All Consortium students prepare performance-based, assessment task (PBAT) papers and oral presentations including analytical essays on literature, social studies research papers, lab reports of original science experiments or engineering designs, and narratives of the process and solution of mathematical problems. There are also tasks at the individual school level in the arts, art criticism, world language, internship, or other areas. Graduation-level PBATs are evaluated by external assessors using Consortium rubrics for both writing and oral presentations. In addition, a series of interim assessments, roundtables, classroom argumentation based on content and evidence, creative- and first-person writing, and hands-on projects all prepare students for their final PBATs.

²³ "A Performance Assessment Model: Data Report on the New York Performance Assessment Consortium" (2001) <https://www.performanceassessment.org/howitworks>

The success of the performance-assessment model has been documented through a City University of New York (CUNY) pilot study of NYPSC graduates.²⁴ The evidence shows that Consortium students begin high school more educationally and economically disadvantaged than their peers, yet are more likely to graduate from high school, attend college and persist – or return to college following their first year – than demographically similar peers. Early evidence suggests that Black males, in particular, benefit from a Consortium education when compared to Black males educated in traditional high school settings. They are noticeably more likely to persist in college and to receive higher grades. The results also indicate positive outcomes for students admitted to CUNY through the Consortium-CUNY pilot: on average, they achieve higher first-semester college GPAs, earn more initial credits, and persist in college after the first year at higher rates than peers from other New York City schools, who, on average, have higher SAT scores.²⁵

Are performance-based assessments valid and reliable?

When put into systemwide practice, performance-based assessments have been found to produce superior outcomes, both educationally and in terms of equity, compared to standardized tests. Through communities of practice, well-developed rubrics, inter-rater reliability studies, and independent auditing, performance-based assessments can provide valid and reliable accountability for what occurs in school practice. These assessments do so without the harm of standardized tests. Schools and districts in states as varied as New York, Colorado, New Mexico, New Hampshire and Kentucky have come to this conclusion, verified by independent research.

What do other states require for students to graduate high school?

High-Stakes Tests and Diplomas

Massachusetts is currently one of only eight states to require passing one or more standardized exams to receive a high school diploma (for the class of 2023). That number is down from a high of 27 states following passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001. The current number is at the lowest level since the mid-1990s, prior to implementation of NCLB.²⁶

The other states with exit exam passage requirements for a high school diploma are Florida, Virginia, New York, Texas, Illinois, Louisiana and Wyoming. The number of states requiring passage of exit exams has decreased from 14, as recently as 2017.

Recent abandonment of exit exams

The shift away from exit exams is based on a number of factors. There is an understanding that standardized tests of academic performance are a poor measure of the skills and knowledge graduates need to function in the modern workforce and citizenry. There is a growing movement toward other measures and assessments of student performance that reflect real-world tasks, with states creating multiple pathways toward the demonstration of college and/or work-ready skills and knowledge. States have realized that exit exams have disproportionately harmed Black and Latinx students, as well as English language learners and those with learning disabilities²⁷, blocking their ability to graduate from high school – a key credential in American life. Finally, the shift in federal law from No Child Left Behind to the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2016 removed the high-stakes consequences for schools and districts from required standardized testing, and thus reduced the perceived pressure to use standardized tests for graduation purposes.

²⁴ Fine, M. and Pryomka, K. "Assessing College Readiness Through Authentic Student Work" (2021) <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/assessing-college-readiness-authentic-student-work-report>

²⁵ In an effort to expand the work of the Consortium, New York received a grant in 2022 from the federal Department of Education to help replicate and scale effective performance-based assessments across the state. The Pilot seeks to reimagine New York's assessment strategy so that it fosters high-quality instructional opportunities, provides authentic measures of deeper learning, and better prepares students for college and the workplace.

²⁶ See "Number of States Requiring Tests for High School Graduation Plunges to EIGHT – Lowest Count Since Mid-1990s," <https://fairtest.org/8093-2/>; "Graduation Test Update: States That Recently Eliminated or Scaled Back High School Exit Exams," <https://fairtest.org/graduation-test-update-states-recently-eliminated/>.

²⁷ For a discussion of that disparate impact with respect to MCAS, see p. 7 of this report.

A review of several states that have recently abandoned their exit exams as a diploma requirement is instructive. For a fuller discussion of these state practices see the State Assessment and Graduation Practices document that accompanies this report.

Indiana

Indiana in 2017 passed legislation to allow multiple pathways to graduation. Exit exams are no longer required but end-of-course exams become part of the course grade and credit accrual process. With graduation pathways, students can individualize their graduation requirements to align to their postsecondary goal of higher education enrollment, employment, or enlistment leading to service.²⁸

Washington

Washington eliminated high-stakes exit exams through legislation passed in 2019.²⁹ It created graduation pathways for students to develop their course plans and show their preparation for a meaningful first step after high school. Beginning with the class of 2020, students must fulfill the pathway requirement to graduate, which must align with their “High School and Beyond Plan,” through one of three options: a career and technical education course plan, an armed services plan, or a math/ELA plan.³⁰

Ohio

Ohio passed legislation in 2021 suspending its exit exam requirements.³¹ Instead of exit exams, end-of-course tests count toward a student’s overall grade in the class. Beginning with the graduating class of 2023, high school students in Ohio must: 1) satisfy course completion requirements; 2) demonstrate competency in math and English by either passing a test (for which there is mandated remedial support if necessary) or one of four other avenues of demonstration including career experience and technical skill; and 3) obtain two or more “graduation seals” that reflect a variety of post-graduate necessary skills (citizenship, college readiness, science, arts, industry certification) depending on future pathway.³²

New Mexico

In 2019, New Mexico suspended its high-stakes test for graduation.³³ New Mexico now requires minimum course completion and demonstration of competency through a variety of assessments. Students can use any number of standardized assessments, a statewide innovative assessment option, or a locally developed demonstration of competency, which includes rigorous portfolio projects or competency-based options.³⁴

New York

While New York still requires five exit exams (Regents exams), the state is comprehensively reviewing that system.³⁵ The review has been spurred by the disparate impacts of the requirement on disadvantaged communities and the realization that the Regents exams do not measure or incentivize learning skills and knowledge for college or the workforce. The exams are relics of a prior century.³⁶ The review is coupled with a statewide pilot program funded with a federal Competitive State Assessment Grant to grow schools using performance-based assessments, modeled on the New York Performance Standards Consortium, the International Baccalaureate program, and career and technical education programs. Adding to the impetus to reform the exit exam is the fact that New York’s graduation rate rose significantly with the COVID-induced pause in the Regents requirement.³⁷

²⁸ See <https://www.in.gov/doe/students/graduation-pathways/>.

²⁹ See <https://www.seattletimes.com/education/lab/washington-was-one-of-the-last-states-to-require-high-school-exit-exams-now-seniors-can-apply-for-a-waiver-to-graduate-on-time/>

³⁰ See <https://www.k12.wa.us/student-success/graduation/graduation-requirements/graduation-pathways>

³¹ See <https://www.dispatch.com/story/news/2021/03/17/ohio-waives-state-testing-requirements-high-school-seniors-lets-kids-use-final-grades/4735345001/>

³² See <https://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Ohio-s-Graduation-Requirements/Ohio-s-Graduation-Requirements>

³³ See <https://www.abqjournal.com/2508757/lesc-mulls-graduation-requirement-changes.html>

³⁴ See <https://webnew.ped.state.nm.us/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Cohort-2024-Demonstration-of-Competency-Menu-Options-rev-8.26.2021.pdf>

³⁵ Comprehensive Center Network, “Graduation Requirements and Measures: A Review Conducted for the New York Board of Regents and the New York Department of Education, November 2022, <http://www.nysed.gov/common/nysed/files/programs/grad-measures/graduation-requirements-and-measures-review.pdf>, <http://www.nysed.gov/news/2022/graduation-measures-blue-ribbon-commission-members-announced>

³⁶ See Amin, R. “Goodbye Regents? A New York Commission Mulls High School Graduation Requirements,” NY Chalkbeat, January 4, 2023, <https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2023/1/4/23539626/ny-regents-exams-graduation-requirements-high-school-diploma-state-education-commission>

³⁷ Zimmerman, A. “NYC’s 2022 graduation rate rises as state officials relax graduation requirements,” NY Chalkbeat, February 2, 2023, <https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2023/2/2/23583538/nyc-2022-school-graduation-rate-regents-exam-requirement>

Course credit requirements

Almost all states require students to obtain a minimum number of course credits in order to receive a diploma. According to the Education Commission of the States, 47 of 50 states and the District of Columbia have state-mandated course passage requirements, with Massachusetts, Colorado and Pennsylvania leaving the particulars of those requirements to local school districts.³⁸ Mandated credits for graduation vary from state to state in number and subject matter.

California is an example of a state that eliminated its exit exam requirement and relies on course completion as the requirement for earning a high school diploma. It instituted an exit exam requirement beginning with the class of 2006. The requirement was administratively suspended for the class of 2015 and permanently eliminated through legislation in 2017. From 2014 to 2015, the graduation rate of students in LAUSD climbed from 67 percent to 74 percent.³⁹ In 2014, a HumRRO evaluation noted that “passing rates for economically disadvantaged, Hispanic, and African-American students continue to be significantly lower than passing rates for white and Asian students at all grade levels.” The HumRRO evaluation concluded “that there is some evidence from our prior analyses that the CAHSEE requirement has prevented or delayed between 1 and 4 percent of seniors from graduating.” Based on that estimate, between 37,695 and 150,780 students would have been denied a high school diploma solely because of the exam since it became a graduation requirement in 2006. HumRRO also concluded that the exit exam “has been a significant barrier for students classified as English learners.”⁴⁰ There was recognition among policymakers that the unwanted consequences of the exit exams were not justified by any academic purpose; modern skill and knowledge requirements could not be adequately captured by a single standardized instrument.⁴¹

Requiring passage of a battery of standardized tests to obtain a high school diploma denies opportunity to a significant swath of students while harming the quality of high school education. Most states have recognized that the economic, social and political demands of the modern world require that we think more broadly about the skills and knowledge demanded of high school graduates and, consequently, how those skills and knowledge are assessed. The absence of high-stakes tests does not reduce academic standards or undermine learning; to the contrary, it opens the possibility of developing assessment and accountability systems that reflect the needs and experience of high school students in 2023.



Better Ways to Measure

Morgan Taliaferro

Attleboro HS junior, about organizing a mayoral debate at Attleboro HS, in an MCIEA partner district.

I think this process was different, because even in the questions, you could tell the kids weren't doing it to impress someone; they were doing it because it was what they wanted to be shared. It was really personal. It was something that the students involved were passionate about. They weren't just doing it for a grade. They weren't just doing it because they were told to. They were doing it because they actively wanted to be involved and they cared about the cause.

³⁸ Education Commission of the States, High School Graduation Requirements: 50 State Comparison, February 2019, <https://reports.ecs.org/comparisons/high-school-graduation-requirements-01>

³⁹ Guzman-Lopez, A. "Elimination of high school exit exams leads to rise in LAUSD graduation rate," Los Angeles Times, November 17, 2015, <https://www.kpcc.org/2015-11-17/elimination-of-high-school-exit-exams-leads-to-rise>

⁴⁰ See <https://edsources.org/2017/california-joins-trend-among-states-to-abandon-high-school-exit-exam/588640>

⁴¹ Ibid.



Receivership in Massachusetts

In 2010, Massachusetts passed a law facilitating state takeovers of schools and districts. The hope was that those interventions would lead to dramatic improvements for students in those districts. In fact, the opposite has happened. The districts that the state is operating are now ranked as the lowest performing districts in the state – by the state's own measures. The strategies that the state has used have led to low morale, high educator turnover, and a failure to give students the opportunities to thrive that they deserve. These failures call into question the underlying theory that punishment tied to test performance is a good approach to motivate students and educators.

The receivership, or state takeover, policy was a provision of the **2010 Achievement Gap Act**, which empowered the state to intervene in or take control of districts and schools deemed “chronically underperforming,” based on the state’s primarily MCAS-based rating and ranking system.⁴²

The **Achievement Gap Act** moved quickly through the Legislature and was signed into law by then-Governor Deval Patrick to position the state to qualify for up to \$250 million in federal grant money.

The law authorized the state education commissioner to declare schools with the lowest rankings under the state’s accountability system either “underperforming” or “chronically underperforming,” with a “chronically underperforming” designation triggering state takeover. Entire districts ranked in the bottom 10 percent could also be placed under the control of a state-appointed receiver through a vote of the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. The **Achievement Gap Act** also allowed the state to override collectively bargained educator contracts and made it easier to replace teachers and principals.

Under the law, the state placed three school districts into receivership: Lawrence in 2011, Holyoke in 2015, and Southbridge in 2016. The elected school committees were stripped of their powers, meaning voters and school community members in these cities lost their voice in decisions about their local schools.

Springfield underwent a different type of intervention. In 2014, nine schools were carved out to become an “Empowerment Zone” controlled by DESE in partnership with the district.

What every district and school targeted by these interventions have in common is that they serve primarily low-income students and students of color, including many recent immigrants and English learners. Lawrence is 82 percent Latinx; and the Holyoke and Southbridge student bodies are 81 percent and 65 percent Latinx, respectively.

This is because, as research consistently finds, the state’s measurement and ranking process and similar systems are much better at reflecting a school or district’s socioeconomic composition than the quality of its schools.⁴³ Research also confirms that socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity are closely intertwined.⁴⁴

⁴² The Achievement Gap Act of 2010, Mass Gen Law ch 71 § 89.

⁴³ Sirin, S. R., 2005. Socioeconomic Status and Academic Achievement: A Meta-Analytic Review of Research. *Review of Educational Research*, 75(3), 417–453. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543075003417>. See also Angrist et al., 2022. Race and the Mismeasure of School Quality, Working Paper. Retrieved Feb. 6, 2023 from: <https://blueprintlabs.mit.edu/research/race-and-the-mismeasure-of-school-quality/>

⁴⁴ See also <https://www.apa.org/pi/ses/resources/publications/minorities>

"If you just go by published accountability ratings, you will be guided to the schools that have the most white and Asian students," said Josh Angrist, a professor at MIT who won the Nobel Prize in economics. "You're not actually being guided to the best schools."⁴⁵

Test performance does not equal school quality

MCAS scores are used by DESE as the primary means of identifying schools and districts as underperforming and as candidates for state receivership. Yet a Brookings Institution report found that between 50 percent to 80 percent of the improvement in a school's average test scores from year to year was temporary, caused by fluctuating factors that had nothing to do with changes in learning.⁴⁶ Due to test score volatility, the authors noted that incentives or penalties based on separate thresholds for each racial/ethnic group could put integrated schools at a disadvantage and promote segregated practices.

Test scores also do not consider all the characteristics that reflect a high-quality school, including school culture, parent/guardian engagement, high-quality professional development for teachers and mental health support services.

Does receivership improve educational quality and equity?

Since the Achievement Gap Act's passage in 2010, the track record shows the state's policy has failed to bring sustained improvements for students in the receivership districts, **according to the state's own system of measurement**. Based on the most recent DESE district rankings, in 2020 [pre-pandemic]⁴⁷:

- The state gives Southbridge its lowest ranking.
- Holyoke ranks second from the lowest.
- Springfield ranks third from the lowest.
- The state ranks Lawrence in the bottom 6 percent of districts, after the city showed some initial improvement.

Of course, these rankings do not measure or take into consideration the work of educators and administrators to address the needs of the whole child, which is part of the problem with the system.

According to a Boston Globe analysis conducted in 2022, "state intervention has not led to sustained improvements in Lawrence or other districts. Instead, for the districts it had taken over, the state failed to meet nearly all of its goals or make improvements on the MCAS, college attendance, or absenteeism."⁴⁸

These results call into question the law's premise, that if democratic local control doesn't yield high test scores, state leaders can impose changes that will lead to improvements. "It assumes that the state has more capacity than it really has — that the state can understand what is happening inside districts and inside of schools," said Jack Schneider, associate professor at University of Massachusetts Lowell.⁴⁹

What are the negative consequences of receivership?

Beyond failing to demonstrate improvement by the state's own narrow, test score-based measures, the state takeover policy has a range of other negative consequences:

⁴⁵ See <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2022/1/24/22899133/great-schools-ratings-bias-economists-research>

⁴⁶ Kane, Thomas J. and Douglas O. Staiger (2002) "The Promise and Pitfalls of Using Imprecise School Accountability Measures" *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 16(4): 91-114.

⁴⁷ The list is available at <https://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/enrollment/CapIncrease/>. Click on "2020 district ranking."

⁴⁸ See <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2022/05/15/metro/school-takeovers-by-state-havent-worked-globe-analysis-shows/>

⁴⁹ See <https://www.baystatebanner.com/2022/11/16/changes-possible-in-state-education-policy/>

- Receivership undermines the long and strong tradition of local democratic control of public schools. Elected school committees lose their decision-making power. Teachers and other educators lose basic workplace rights that help them advocate for their students.
- Pressure to demonstrate improvement on MCAS tests means curriculum is narrowed to tested subjects, and students lose access to a broad, engaging curriculum. (This affects not just districts in receivership, but all districts that fear receivership.)
- Students are also subjected to damaging disruptions and churn, with new teachers and administrators replacing the familiar faces of those who have developed knowledge and relationships with students and their families and community over the years.⁵⁰

In 2017, six years after Lawrence entered receivership, Youth Council President Junielly Vargas delivered this message during a U.S. Department of Education event: “Education is supposed to be freedom from oppression, but in reality we come to class and we feel anxiety, we feel as if our [test score] numbers are our identity. We need [adults] to realize that education is more than numbers, more than books, more than letters on the board — it is life, it is family, it is friends, it is experience”.⁵¹

Of particular concern to communities under receivership, there is no clear off-ramp once districts and schools are taken over. If the state receiver fails to improve outcomes, that guarantees the district stays in receivership. The only way out is improvement. So the more completely the receivership fails the more certain it is to continue. Community members in Lawrence demonstrated for a return to local control, and the elected school committee voted in October 2021 for the same, a demand met with silence from Education Commissioner Jeff Riley.⁵²

It’s not just Massachusetts that has failed to improve quality and equity with its receivership policy. The national record for state takeovers is also consistently poor, according to a 2021 national study by Schueler and Bleiberg.⁵³

“These policies are very harmful to communities in terms of their political power,” said Domingo Morel, a Rutgers University political scientist who has studied and criticized state takeovers. “And then what the state says is going to improve — this research shows it’s not doing that either.”⁵⁴



Receivership

Jonathan Guzman

elected Lawrence School Committee member:

A lifelong Lawrence resident told me he was grateful to raise his children in Lawrence. But his daughter wanted to teach in our public schools and lasted only a few months. That’s because our district has become a space that focuses more on passing the MCAS and satisfying DESE than caring for the development of a student and supporting the passion and commitment of a teacher. That makes me angry. The receivership system, which has kept us in the bottom 10% for more than 11 years, has not been able to show our city it can do better. When is enough enough?

⁵⁰ Center for Education Policy and Practice, 2019. Teacher Turnover in DESE-Involved Schools.

⁵¹ USDOE, 2017. <https://www.ed.gov/content/%E2%80%9Cwhat-education%E2%80%9D-elevated-thought-students-respond-arts>

⁵² See <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/10/19/metro/after-10-years-lawrence-wants-take-back-control-its-schools-commissioner-riley-is-showing-no-signs-letting-go-state-receivership/>

⁵³ Schueler, B. and Bleiberg, J. 2021. Evaluating Education Governance: Does State Takeover of School Districts Affect Student Achievement? <https://www.edworkingpapers.com/sites/default/files/ai21-411.pdf>

⁵⁴ See <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2021/6/8/22524765/school-districts-state-takeovers-academic-success-research-studies>

5 Does federal law require states to take over underperforming districts?

Though the federal Every Student Succeeds Act does require states to identify the lowest performing schools, it does not require states to take them over. The 2010 Achievement Gap Act has failed to bring sustained or substantive improvement. Nor has it helped provide equitable access to high-quality education. There is no federal impediment to rescinding the state's authority to take over districts and schools and replacing those tactics with measures that would allow for support and improvement, not labeling, punishment and disempowerment.

Similarly, removing passage of the MCAS exams as a requirement for a Massachusetts diploma, (as proposed in the Thrive Act) **also complies fully with federal law.** Massachusetts must administer a math, ELA and science exam for all high school students for ESSA accountability purposes. But it is not required to base individual graduation decisions on those tests. And the vast majority of states do not.

What are better ways to improve schools?

Another step in the right direction would be better and more accurate ways to assess, or measure, student learning and school quality. Section 3, Page 17, describes some successful approaches and efforts to develop better, more democratic school quality measures, based on what community members value and expect from their schools. And, of course, ensuring that all students have access to essentials like small classes, well-trained educators and support staff and adequate resources is critical.

California, for example, decided to abandon No Child Left Behind's "test-and-punish" philosophy.⁵⁵ It changed the focus to "assessing and improving" by helping schools build capacity and collaborating with local communities to identify their own priorities and needs. The goal was to make progress through a "whole child, whole school" agenda.

With better, more comprehensive measures in place, Massachusetts could shift the emphasis from labeling, punishing and removing local control, to community-driven approaches such as the school-improvement process proposed in the *Thrive Act*.

The *Thrive Act* would replace the state's failed takeover system and the MCAS-based graduation requirement with policies to help all students succeed. Instead of the current harmful and disruptive approach, the new legislation would establish a modified graduation requirement based on successful completion of coursework that demonstrates a student has the skills, competencies and knowledge required by the state standards, rather than high-stakes standardized testing. The act would also implement a new "comprehensive support and improvement" system designed to empower local communities to give students and educators the tools and resources they need to succeed.

⁵⁵ Furger, R. C., Hernández, L. E., & Darling-Hammond, L., 2019. The California Way: The Golden State's quest to build an equitable and excellent education system (research brief). Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute

If not receivership, then what?

A brief from the Intercultural Development Research Association, summarizing research on the failure of state takeovers around the country, offered several policy recommendations, including these:⁵⁶

- Adopt community-based efforts – not state takeovers or private partnerships – using holistic, wrap-around services to support schools that face multiple challenges.
- States should recognize and treat school districts as democratic entities.

One successful approach that embodies these recommendations is the community schools model, a long-standing approach that has seen renewed interest and implementation in recent years, including in Boston. This model tackles school improvement by partnering with local community agencies to address students' academic, mental health and other needs.

A 2017 brief by Maier, Daniel and Oakes synthesized and summarized the evidence from 143 research studies on the impact of community schools on student and school outcomes.⁵⁷ The researchers looked at schools across the country, including Boston.

The brief notes that community schools vary in programming and operations but share four common features:

1. Integrated student supports
2. Expanded learning time and opportunities
3. Family and community engagement
4. Collaborative leadership and practice

An example that illustrates integrated student supports was a national dropout prevention program called Communities in Schools (CIS), which serves 1.5 million students in 25 states. CIS provides health screenings, tutoring, food, clothing and shelter, working with community-based groups to bring these supports into schools. A full-time coordinator is placed in each school, usually paid by the local CIS affiliate.⁵⁸

Overall, the authors conclude that well-implemented community schools improve outcomes for “low-achieving students in high-poverty schools,” while meeting the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requirements for evidence-based interventions.

⁵⁶ Wilson, T. and Sikes, C., 2020. State Takeovers of School Districts Don't Work. <https://www.idra.org/resource-center/state-takeovers-of-school-districts-dont-work/>

⁵⁷ Maier, A, Daniel, J., & Oakes, J., 2017. Community schools as an effective school improvement strategy: A review of the evidence (research brief). Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

APPENDIX

A State Survey of Assessment and Graduation Practices

PERFORMANCE-BASED ASSESSMENTS

Performance-based assessments tell us what students have learned by having them actively demonstrate their knowledge and skills by doing. In the real world – the world of work – we do not judge a person’s competency or mastery based on her performance on a test, we judge them based on what they actually accomplish. The performance assessment of a chef is how her food tastes; of an accountant the accuracy of the prepared tax return; of a musician the sound that comes out of her instrument and her ability to play with other musicians; of a plumber how well she fixed the leak.

In the academic context, performance assessments ask students to complete a task or project requiring them to apply knowledge and explain their process and methodology in solving a problem, explaining a phenomenon, answering a question or hypothesis, conducting an inquiry, or creating an original work. Performance-based assessments are designed to be authentic to student learning and experience and are connected to actual curriculum implemented in the school and classroom. They allow students to demonstrate mastery of learning standards in ways that reward critical analysis, varied modes of expression, depth of knowledge, and student voice and choice. When implemented effectively, assessments are evaluated and graded to give the student meaningful feedback towards continuous skill improvement. Well-designed rubrics can help accomplish this end. Ideally, these assessments are developed by teachers, individually and in grade-level and discipline-specific committees, in consultation with school administrators and local community members. Accountability comes from the school community, as student work should be available for demonstration and community inspection. This is very much in the Massachusetts tradition of local school committees and districts being responsible for meeting the needs and expectations of their communities.

Examples of scaled systems of performance-based assessments

Successful systems of performance-based assessments contain infrastructure and networks of practice and oversight to support the school-based work. Banks of performance tasks and project possibilities, development of common rubrics, professional development to exchange ideas and practices, inter-rater reliability studies, and partnership with research academics to study practices and outcomes, are all important elements of improvement in practice and adequate scaling so that a local performance-based assessment system can be incorporated into a mechanism for accountability.

Several states, including Massachusetts, have allowed for and supported performance-based assessment in varying degrees of scale. Making room for and supporting such assessments that develop deeper learning and critical thinking skills in students is good educational policy. Performance-based assessment, because it is authentic to student experience, is a culturally responsive framework that respects teacher practice, as opposed to off-the-shelf standardized testing. Graduation level exit exams snuff out the possibilities for authentic assessment as they require preparing students for a pencil and paper test that is antithetical to the work undertaken through performance tasks.

Massachusetts--MCIEA

The Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment (MCIEA) is a partnership of eight public school districts (Attleboro, Boston, Lowell, Milford, Revere, Somerville, Wareham and Winchester) and their local teacher unions, joined together to create a fair and effective accountability system that offers a more dynamic picture of student learning and school quality than a single standardized test. MCIEA's accountability system focuses on a School Quality Measures framework that includes multiple measures of student engagement, student achievement, and school environment, and emphasizes Performance Assessments as the primary means of assessing student learning. Approximately one in 10 students in Massachusetts is enrolled in an MCIEA school.

To assess student learning, educators design standards-based, culturally responsive performance assessments, and submit them to a MCIEA Performance Assessment Task Bank for peer review and approval. Teachers administer these tasks for students to demonstrate what they know and can do in ways that are authentic, culturally responsive, and engaging. If this performance assessment model were adopted state-wide, teachers across schools and districts would come together regularly to engage in blind scoring of student work to ensure scoring reliability. High school graduation decisions would be made at the local level, using in part portfolios of student work. The state's role would be to set learning standards and provide districts with resource support, technical assistance, and certain basic criteria and guidance. State assessments would be used for diagnostic purposes to provide a consistent data source on student learning to schools and educators, without the requirement of passing state tests to graduate high school.

New York - The New York Performance Standards Consortium

The oldest and most demonstrably successful system of performance-based assessment in the country is the New York Performance Standards Consortium (NYPSC). In 1996, the New York State Education Department granted a group of schools a variance from the Regents graduation testing requirements, inviting them to use inquiry-based models of teaching and learning and develop a system of performance-based assessments in lieu of standardized tests. A Blue Ribbon Commission was established to evaluate the work. The Commission recognized the NYPSC schools' accomplishments and recommended the variance continue. The work of the NYPSC was also subject to evaluation by an appointed Performance Assessment Review Board composed of university researchers and experts in the field. Data reports document the impressive graduation and college acceptance rates of NYPSC students.¹ The NYPSC is now in its 25th year, with the Regents exam variance having been renewed every five years since 2001. NYPSC students take and must pass a basic ELA exam. (New York high school students have to take and pass five Regents exams to earn a diploma).

There are 38 schools in the NYPSC serving over 12,000 students. The NYPSC's system is based on in-depth literacy, mathematical problem-solving, application of the scientific method, social studies research, a span of mediums for exhibiting learning, and a chance for students to have a voice and proud ownership of their work. The schools' literacy-based culture focuses on extensive reading, writing, and discussion across content areas in every grade, building towards the graduation-level performance-based assessment tasks, known as PBATs. All Consortium students prepare PBAT papers and oral presentations, including analytic essays on literature, social studies research papers, lab reports of original science experiments or engineering designs, narratives of the process and solution of mathematical problem solving. There are also added tasks at the individual school level in the arts, art criticism, World Language, internship, or other areas. Graduation-level PBATs are evaluated by external assessors using Consortium rubrics for both writing and oral presentations. In addition, a series of interim assessments, roundtables, classroom argumentation based on content and evidence, creative and first-person writing, and hands-on projects all prepare students for their final PBATs.

¹ A Performance Assessment Model: Data Report on the New York Performance Assessment Consortium" (2001) <https://www.performanceassessment.org/howitworks>

The success of the performance-assessment model has been documented through the CUNY pilot study of NYPSC graduates.² Quantitative evidence demonstrates that students in Consortium schools begin high school more educationally and economically disadvantaged than their peers and yet are more likely to graduate from high school, attend college, and persist in college than demographically similar peers. Those who go on to attend CUNY are more likely to be Black and Hispanic and are more likely to be from the Bronx (the borough with the lowest per capita income) than their CUNY peers. Early evidence suggests that Black males in particular benefit from a Consortium education when compared to Black males educated in traditional high school settings. They are noticeably more likely to persist in college and to receive higher grades. The results also indicate positive outcomes for students admitted to CUNY through the Consortium–CUNY pilot: on average, they achieve higher first-semester college GPAs, earn more initial credits, and persist in college after the first year at higher rates than peers from other New York City schools, who, on average, have higher SAT scores.

The PLAN Pilot

New York received a grant in 2022 from the federal Department of Education to help replicate and scale effective performance-based assessments across the state. The grant application cited three models: the NYPSC, the International Baccalaureate (which is a project and inquiry-based learning model), and a career and technical workforce readiness demonstration of skills and knowledge. The Pilot seeks to reimagine New York’s assessment strategy so that it purposely fosters high-quality instructional opportunities, provides authentic measures of deeper learning, and better prepares students for college and the workplace.³

New Mexico

In response to graduation and testing data, the needs of its diverse communities, and the call for better methods of ensuring that graduates are prepared for college, the workforce and citizenship, in 2019 New Mexico conducted an overhaul of its graduation requirements and assessment system.⁴ Policymakers recognized that the one-size-fits-all, single-state-test accountability system had not served New Mexico’s diverse population well over the last 20 years, and the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) opened doors for flexibility in assessment that New Mexico had not yet utilized to build a comprehensive system of assessment. New Mexico eliminated its high-stakes graduation exams and replaced them with a flexible system of proof of competencies. New Mexico is encouraging locally developed performance-based assessments through rigorous portfolio projects and is developing a statewide option culminating in student exhibitions to demonstrate learning. The statewide option will be connected to communities of practice throughout the state.⁵ As a result, a variety of successful graduation level performance assessment local practices have sprung up across the state.⁶

Colorado

The Colorado Department of Education offices of Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness and Assessment engaged Colorado practitioners and leaders from K-12 education, industry, and higher education to create a process and supports to the field in the development of performance assessments that students can use to demonstrate their readiness to graduate from high school. The state describes high-quality performance assessments as generally hands-on and/or involving real-world scenarios and having the capacity to measure a student’s ability to apply and transfer to new situations relevant content knowledge and essential

² Michelle Fine and Karyna Pryomka, “Assessing College Readiness Through Authentic Student Work” (2021)

<https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/assessing-college-readiness-authentic-student-work-report>

³ <http://www.nysed.gov/plan-pilot>

⁴ See Future Focus Education, “Remodeling Our Systems of Assessment in New Mexico: Current Conditions and Opportunities,” October 2018

https://futurefocusededucation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/FFE_White-Paper_fulldraft_print.pdf

⁵ <https://webnew.ped.state.nm.us/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Cohort-2024-Demonstration-of-Competency-Menu-Options-rev-8.26.2021.pdf>

⁶ <https://futurefocusededucation.org/policy-assessment-reform/>

skills.⁷ Colorado also developed a local innovative assessment grant program with participation from 32 districts. Several districts have developed or are currently working to develop performance-based assessment graduation requirements. For example, Canon City requires all graduates to complete a Capstone project showcasing math, language arts and essential skills through a portfolio and oral presentation to a panel composed of district/school staff and community members.⁸

Kentucky

Kentucky has undertaken a statewide “United We Learn” initiative that seeks to create a system of local systems transforming assessments into those that foster and support deeper learning.⁹ Kentucky received a federal assessment grant from the Department of Education in 2022 to help undertake this work. Kentucky’s public schools are increasingly shifting their focus to more practical learning experiences, engaging students in deeper lesson plans that build off prior knowledge and help students apply what they learn to real-world challenges.¹⁰ Through this project, Kentucky launched its L3 initiative—Local Laboratories of Learning—to institute assessments and other practices that support deeper learning. There are three cohorts of districts that began operating in 2021 and 2022 to create innovative assessment and accountability systems that seek to develop and measure skills and knowledge beyond standardized testing and are all in some way performance based.¹¹ While because of federal law Kentucky cannot stop all standardized testing for ESSA purposes, it has undertaken a statewide initiative of stakeholder partnerships to shift how students are assessed and thus how they learn to reflect the ideas of deeper learning and continuous improvement rather than test, reward and punish. Kentucky provides an innovative statewide model for a non-standardized test-based system of assessment.

New Hampshire

New Hampshire received an Innovative Assessment grant from the federal Department of Education in 2015 to undertake a statewide system of performance-based assessment. The Performance of Competency Education (PACE) system relied upon locally developed, locally administered performance assessment tasks aligned with local district grade and course competencies. These local competencies and local performance assessments were aligned to the State Model Competencies, which, in turn, were aligned with national standards in each content area. The PACE common tasks and local tasks are intended to be closely linked to classroom instruction. All the tasks, local and common, are teacher-designed to assess the specific competency targeted by lessons within the curriculum or unit of instruction. The tasks are not administered in a specific testing window, but instead come at the time during the year when it is most appropriate in the curriculum. Students write and revise, perform real-world applications of mathematics, or conduct science experiments to demonstrate their competencies. Assessments are so integrated into the curriculum, students often do not realize they are taking a test. Instead, they consider the PACE tasks to be another part of their daily classwork.

Through local development and cross-district cooperation, professional development and task bank creation, the New Hampshire Department of Education was on its way to developing a comprehensive system. Preliminary independent evaluations of the PACE system indicated positive results for students and teachers.¹² A change in political leadership of the state led to New Hampshire abandoning the statewide system, although many local districts continue to implement the innovations and have formed their own consortium – the New Hampshire Performance Learning and Assessment Consortium for Educators – to continue practices and develop assessments.¹³

⁷ <https://www.cde.state.co.us/postsecondary/perfassessment>. A multi-site case study of performance assessment practices was undertaken by professors at the University of Colorado, Boulder School of Education. Elena Diaz-Bilello and Medjy Pierre-Louis, “The Colorado Performance Based Assessment Pilot: Background and Context” (October 2021), <https://www.cde.state.co.us/postsecondary/pacasestudy-paper1>

⁸ <https://sites.google.com/canoncityschools.org/cchscapstonecurriculum/home?pli=1>

⁹ <https://education.ky.gov/UnitedWeLearn/Pages/default.aspx>

¹⁰ <https://www.kentuckyteacher.org/news/2022/11/kentucky-superintendents-hear-update-on-deeper-learning-initiative/>

¹¹ <https://education.ky.gov/school/innov/Pages/Current-Projects-and-Initiatives.aspx>; <https://www.leadingwithlearning.org/kentucky>

¹² HumRRO, Formative Evaluation of New Hampshire’s Performance of Competency Education (PACE), Final Report, March 2017,

<https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/stateletters/nhpaceformativevalrpt2017.pdf>

¹³ <https://nhlearninginitiative.libguides.com/c.php?g=1231117&p=9009437>

Are performance based assessments valid and reliable instruments?

When put into system-wide practice, performance-based assessments have been found to produce superior educational and equitable outcomes to standardized tests. Through communities of practice, development of rubrics, inter-rater reliability studies, and independent auditing, performance-based assessments can provide the validity and reliability as measurements of learning that ensures accountability for what occurs in school practice. They do so without the harm of standardized tests. Schools and districts in states as varied as New York, Colorado, New Mexico, New Hampshire and Kentucky have come to this conclusion, verified by independent research.

STATE GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS

High-Stakes Tests and Diplomas

Massachusetts is currently one of only **eight** states to require passage of one or more standardized exams in order to receive a high school diploma (for the class of 2023). That number is down from a high of 27 states in the wake of the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001. The current number is at the lowest level since the mid-1990s, prior to implementation of NCLB.¹⁴

In addition to Massachusetts, the other states with exit exam passage requirements for a high school diploma are: Florida, Virginia, New York, Texas, Illinois, Louisiana and Wyoming. The number of states requiring passage of exit exams has decreased from fourteen as recently as 2017.

Recent abandonment of exit exams

The shift away from standardized test passage as a requirement for high school graduation is based on a number of factors. There is a realization that standardized tests of academic performance are a poor measure of the skills and knowledge required of graduates in the modern workforce and citizenry. There is a growing movement toward other measures and assessments of student performance that reflect real-world tasks, with states creating multiple pathways towards the demonstration of college and/or work-ready skills and knowledge. It has become clear in many states that the high-stakes consequences of exit exams disproportionately harmed Black and Latinx students, as well as English Language learners and those with learning disabilities, in the ability to graduate from high school—a key credential in American life. Finally, the shift in federal law from No Child Left Behind to the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2016 removed the high-stakes accountability consequences for schools and districts from required standardized testing and thus reduced the perceived pressure to use standardized tests for graduation purposes.

A review of several states that have recently abandoned their high school exit exams as a diploma requirement is instructive:

Indiana

Indiana in 2017 passed legislation to allow multiple pathways to graduation. Exit exams are no longer required, but end of course exams become part of the course grade and credit accrual process. With Graduation Pathways, students can individualize their graduation requirements to align to their postsecondary goal of higher education enrollment, employment, or enlistment leading to service. No longer must all students fit into the same academic mold, but rather, they can choose the high school options that best meet their postsecondary needs and aspirations. Every student must show “employability skills” in one of three ways, and postsecondary-ready competencies by completing one of a menu of credentials, which includes

¹⁴ See “Number of States Requiring Tests for High School Graduation Plunges to EIGHT – Lowest Count Since Mid-1990s,” <https://fairtest.org/8093-2/>; “Graduation Test Update: States That Recently Eliminated or Scaled Back High School Exit Exams,” <https://fairtest.org/graduation-test-update-states-recently-eliminated/>.

state-approved locally created pathways.¹⁵ In other words, Indiana has both broadened the skills it seeks of its high school graduates and the ways in which they can demonstrate those skills.

Washington

Washington eliminated exit exams through legislation passed in 2019.¹⁶ It created Graduation Pathways for students to develop their course plans and show their preparation for a meaningful first step after high school. Beginning with the Class of 2020, students must fulfill the pathway requirement to graduate, which must align with their High School and Beyond Plan, through one of three options: a Career and Technical Education course plan, an armed services plan, or a Math/ELA plan. The Math/ELA plan has multiple avenues of passage, including some standardized tests (AP, IB, SAT, ACT) or specified coursework (dual enrollment and college transition courses).¹⁷ The legislative change secured broad support this year from the state superintendent's office, education-advocacy groups and organizations representing parents, teachers, principals and school boards — many of whom argued no single test should deny students their diplomas.¹⁸

Ohio

Ohio suspended its exit exam requirements through legislation passed in 2021.¹⁹ The former exit exams were transformed into administered end-of-course exams counting towards a student's overall grade in the class. Beginning with the graduating class of 2023, in order to graduate high school students in Ohio must: 1) satisfy course completion requirements; 2) demonstrate competency in math and English by either passing a test (for which there is mandated remedial support if necessary) or one of four other avenues of demonstration including career experience and technical skill; and 3) obtain two or more "graduation seals" that reflect a variety of post-graduate necessary skills (citizenship, college readiness, science, arts, industry certification) depending on future pathway.²⁰ Ohio has traded a single set of standardized exams for a more balanced approach to demonstrate graduation - level skills and knowledge.

New Mexico

In 2019, New Mexico suspended its single instrument high - stakes test for graduation.²¹ New Mexico now requires minimum course completion and demonstration of competency through a variety of possible assessments. Students can use any number of standardized assessments, a statewide innovative assessment option, or a locally developed demonstration of competency, which includes rigorous portfolio projects or competency-based options.²² This flexibility has encouraged assessment innovation in New Mexico resulting in the development of innovative assessments throughout New Mexico.²³

New York

While New York still maintains a series of five exit exams ("Regents exams") that students have to pass in order to earn a high school diploma, the state is undertaking a comprehensive review of that system.²⁴ The review has been spurred by a combination of the recognized disparate impacts of the requirement on disadvantaged communities and the realization that passage of the Regents exams does not measure or incentivize the learning of real world workforce and college-ready skills and knowledge. The exams are relics of a prior century.²⁵ The review is coupled with a statewide pilot program funded with a federal Com-

¹⁵ <https://www.in.gov/doe/students/graduation-pathways/>

¹⁶ <https://www.seattletimes.com/education-lab/washington-was-one-of-the-last-states-to-require-high-school-exit-exams-now-seniors-can-apply-for-a-waiver-to-graduate-on-time/>

¹⁷ <https://www.k12.wa.us/student-success/graduation/graduation-requirements/graduation-pathways>

¹⁸ <https://www.seattletimes.com/education-lab/washington-was-one-of-the-last-states-to-require-high-school-exit-exams-now-seniors-can-apply-for-a-waiver-to-graduate-on-time/>

¹⁹ <https://www.dispatch.com/story/news/2021/03/17/ohio-waives-state-testing-requirements-high-school-seniors-lets-kids-use-final-grades/4735345001/>

²⁰ <https://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Ohio-s-Graduation-Requirements/Ohio's-Graduation-Requirements>

²¹ <https://www.abqjournal.com/2508757/lesc-mulls-graduation-requirement-changes.html>

²² <https://webnew.ped.state.nm.us/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Cohort-2024-Demonstration-of-Competency-Menu-Options-rev-8.26.2021.pdf>

²³ <https://futurefocusededucation.org/innovation-map/>

²⁴ Comprehensive Center Network, "Graduation Requirements and Measures: A Review Conducted for the New York Board of Regents and the New York Department of Education, November 2022,

<http://www.nysed.gov/common/nysed/files/programs/grad-measures/graduation-requirements-and-measures-review.pdf>,

<http://www.nysed.gov/news/2022/graduation-measures-blue-ribbon-commission-members-announced>

²⁵ See Reema Amin, "Goodbye Regents? A New York Commission Mulls High School Graduation Requirements," NY Chalkbeat, January 4, 2023,

<https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2023/1/4/23539626/ny-regents-exams-graduation-requirements-high-school-diploma-state-education-commission>

petitive State Assessment Grant to grow schools that utilize performance-based assessments, modeled on the NY Performance Standards Consortium, the IB program, and career and technical education programs, to help develop more authentic educationally beneficial summative assessments. Adding to the impetus to reform the exit exam is the recent statistic that New York's graduation rate rose significantly with the temporary COVID-induced abandonment of the Regents requirement.²⁶

Course Credit Requirements

Almost all states require students to obtain a minimum number of course credits in order to receive a diploma. According to the Education Commission of the States, 47 out of 50 states and the District of Columbia have state-mandated course passage requirements, with Massachusetts, Colorado and Pennsylvania leaving the particulars of those requirements to local school districts.²⁷ Mandated credits for graduation vary from state to state in number and subject matter.

California is an instructive example of a state that eliminated its exit exam requirement and relies on course completion as the requirement for earning a high school diploma. It instituted an exit exam requirement beginning with the Class of 2006. The requirement was administratively suspended for the class of 2015 and permanently eliminated through legislation in 2017. From 2014 to 2015, the graduation rate of students in LAUSD climbed from 67% to 74%.²⁸ In 2014, a HumRRO evaluation noted that "passing rates for economically disadvantaged, Hispanic, and African-American students continue to be significantly lower than passing rates for white and Asian students at all grade levels." The HumRRO evaluation concluded that "that there is some evidence from our prior analyses that the CAHSEE requirement has prevented or delayed between 1 and 4 percent of seniors from graduating." Based on that estimate, between 37,695 and 150,780 students would have been denied a high school diploma solely because of the exam since it became a graduation requirement in 2006. HumRRO also concluded that the exit exam "has been a significant barrier for students classified as English learners."²⁹ There was recognition among policy makers that the unwanted consequences of the exit exams were not justified by any academic purpose; modern skill and knowledge requirements could not be adequately captured by a single standardized instrument.³⁰

Conclusion

Requiring passage of a battery of standardized tests in order to obtain a high school diploma denies opportunity to a significant swath of students while degrading the quality of high school education. Most states have recognized that the economic, social and political demands of the modern world require that we think more broadly about the skills and knowledge demanded of high school graduates and, consequently, how those skills and knowledge are assessed. The absence of high-stakes tests does not reduce academic standards or undermine learning; to the contrary, it opens the possibility of developing assessment and accountability systems that reflect the needs and experience of high school students in 2023.

²⁶ Alex Zimmerman, "NYC's 2022 graduation rate rises as state officials relax graduation requirements," NY Chalkbeat, February 2, 2023,

<https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2023/2/2/23583538/nyc-2022-school-graduation-rate-regents-exam-requirement>

²⁷ Education Commission of the States, High School Graduation Requirements: 50 State Comparison, February 2019, <https://reports.ecs.org/comparisons/high-school-graduation-requirements-01>

²⁸ Adolfo Guzman-Lopez, "Elimination of high school exit exams leads to rise in LAUSD graduation rate," Los Angeles Times, November 17, 2015,

<https://www.kpcc.org/2015-11-17/elimination-of-high-school-exit-exams-leads-to-ris>

²⁹ <https://edsources.org/2017/california-joins-trend-among-states-to-abandon-high-school-exit-exam/588640>

³⁰ *Ibid.*



MTA commissioned this report, which was written by FairTest and CPS.