

LESSONS LEARNED

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

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.

