POLICY BRIEF:

IT'S TIME FOR A NEW EDUCATION ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM IN MASSACHUSETTS

Education Commonwealth Project

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About the Education Commonwealth Project

The Education Commonwealth Project (ECP) works to support assessment of student learning and school progress that is valid, democratic, and equitable. Pushing back against the overreliance on standardized testing, ECP offers free and open-source resources that all schools can use. And thanks to support from the Massachusetts State Legislature, ECP offers additional support for public schools and districts in Massachusetts.

Introduction

The 1993 Massachusetts Education Reform Act (MERA) was enacted by the state legislature shortly after the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court declared the state's education funding formula unconstitutional, contributing to inequities in students' learning opportunities and outcomes based on race, income, language, and disability. MERA set in place a new, more equitable funding formula, first-time curriculum standards, and state standardized tests, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), with passing the tenth grade tests in English language arts and math a graduation requirement. A central MERA goal was to close historical disparities in achievement and outcomes across student groups. After more than 20 years of implementation, has the MCAS assessment and accountability system made meaningful and sustainable progress towards closing opportunity and achievement gaps by race, income, language, and disability?

Wide Inequities Persist

The National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) tests, often called the "Nation's Report Card," compare performance in reading and math across all states in grades four and eight (grade 12 data was incomplete in the early years of MCAS, so is not used here).[1] Massachusetts officials tout that the state has scored first or second in the nation in all four comparison points for multiple years. However, if you examine the performance of students in historically underserved groups, a more troubling story emerges. Despite apparent successes, Massachusetts continues to have some of the nation's largest disparities across student groups.

Multilingual Learners

From 2003 to 2022, differences in learning outcomes among multilingual learners and native speakers increased in 4th and 8th grades in reading and math, with disparities increasing between four and 15 points. Nationally, score disparities have lessened or stayed the same. In 2022, MA ranked in the quarter of states with the highest score disparities in all comparisons, with the largest inequities of any state in 8th grade math.

Table 1

Multilingual Learners and Non Multilingual Learners				
	2022 MA Rank Nationally	**Gap Size (points)**	**Gap Change 2003-2022***	**Improvement Greater/ Less than Nationally**
4th Grade Math	31 (of 41 states)	30	+4	Less
4th Grade Reading	42 (of 46 states)	46	+10	Less
8th Grade Math	41 (of 41 states)	60	+15	Less
8th Grade Reading	40 (of 42 states)	63	+11	Less
(* Note: + = gap increase; - = gap decrease				

Students with Disabilities

In 2022, Massachusetts ranked 8th in the nation with the smallest score disparities for students with disabilities in 8th grade reading. In all other tested grades and subjects, however, the state has score discrepancies higher than the national average, and these gaps have increased from 2003 to 2022. Progress in addressing disparities for students with disabilities has been slower than the national average in every comparison.

Table 2

Students with Disabilities and Non Disabled Students				
	2022 MA Rank Nationally	**Gap Size (points)**	**Gap Change 2003-2022***	**Improvement Greater/ Less than Nationally**
4th Grade Math	36 (of 50 states)	34	+13	Less
4th Grade Reading	24 (of 50 states)	44	+11	Less
8th Grade Math	21 (of 50 states)	42	+4	Less
8th Grade Reading	8 (of 50 states)	39	0	Less

Low-Income Students

In 2022, score disparities for low-income students were higher than the national average for all comparison points. Massachusetts ranked in the quartile of states with the largest gaps in 2022, except in 8th grade reading where it ranked 35th. From 2003 to 2022, score disparities decreased in 4th grade math and 8th grade reading, although by only one to three points. Score disparities for low-income students increased in 8th grade math and 4th grade reading.

Table 3

Low-Income and Non Low-Income Students				
	2022 MA Rank Nationally	**Gap Size (points)**	**Gap Change 2003-2022***	**Improvement Greater/ Less than Nationally**
4th Grade Math	41 (of 50 states)	29	-1	Greater
4th Grade Reading	46 (of 50 states)	33	+7	Less
8th Grade Math	48 (of 50 states)	35	+1	Less
8th Grade Reading	35 (of 50 states)	26	-3	Greater

Inequities for Latinx Students

From 2003 to 2022, Massachusetts closed gaps in 8th grade reading and math, while national gaps closed in both reading and math at both the 4th and 8th grades. In 2022, each gap was higher than the national average. Massachusetts ranked in the quartile of states with the largest gaps in all comparison points.

Table 4

Latinx and White Students				
	2022 MA Rank Nationally	**Gap Size (points)**	**Gap Change 2003-2022***	**Improvement Greater/ Less than Nationally**
4th Grade Math	39 (of 47 states)	27	+2	Less
4th Grade Reading	44 (of 47 states)	32	0	Less
8th Grade Math	39 (of 47 states)	29	-8	Greater
8th Grade Reading	37 (of 47 states)	23	-9	Even

Inequities for Black Students

From 2003 to 2022, Massachusetts score disparities for Black students declined in 8th grade math and reading, although the declines were only two and six points respectively. In 2022, the disparities were smaller than the national average, except 4th grade reading where they were the same. Massachusetts had the sixth smallest gap in 8th grade reading. However, the state ranked 26th of 39 states in 4th grade reading and had a gap increase of one point.

Table 5

Black and White Students				
	2022 MA Rank Nationally	**Gap Size (points)**	**Gap Change 2003-2022***	**Improvement Greater/ Less than Nationally**
4th Grade Math	10 (of 39 states)	26	0	Greater
4th Grade Reading	26 (of 39 states)	28	+1	Less
8th Grade Math	12 (of 38 states)	31	-2	Less
8th Grade Reading	6 (of 41 states)	21	-6	Greater

In summary, while small improvements were made in closing inequalities in education outcomes with low-income, Latinx, and Black students, the gains have been incremental over 20 years. Improvements in achievement outcomes were smaller than the national average in all comparison points for multilingual learners and students with disabilities. In 2022, Massachusetts score disparities were larger than the national average in all comparisons for multilingual learners, low-income students, and Latinx students, and in three of four comparisons for students with disabilities. The state ranks among the quartile of states with the largest inequities in all comparisons for Latinx and English Learner students and in three of four comparisons for low-income students, while gaps for students with disabilities and Black students remain large.

This data is particularly alarming as the demographics of the state's public school student enrollment continue to become more diverse. Over the past 20 years, the percentages of Latinx students and multilingual learners have more than doubled, the percentage of low-income students has grown by more than 70%, and the percentage of White students has shrunk by 26%. In other words, MCAS has *least* served the very groups that have grown *most* in Massachusetts.

Table 6

MA Public Schools Student Enrollment		
Demographic Group	**2022**	**2002**
Black	9.3	8.6
Asian	7.2	4.5
Latinx	23.1	10.8
White	55.7	75.7
Multi-Race	4.3	N/A
SPED	18.9	15.4
English Learner	11	4.7
Low-Income	43.8	25.3
Massachusetts Department of Education, 2022[2]		

MCAS Has Not Changed the Disparities in Students' Future Opportunities

MCAS has done little to change the wide disparities by race, language, income, and disability that exist with high school graduation and college-going rates.

Table 7

College-Going and Graduation Rates			
Student Group	**4-Yr Graduation Rate**	**College-Going Rate (2-year & 4-year)**	**4-Year College-Going Rate of Those Going to College**
All Students	89.8	62.7	81.9
Multilingual Learner	71.8	30.7	51.9
Low-Income	81.7	45.1	66.6
Students w/ Disabilities	76.6	42.8	64.9
Black	84.4	55.9	70.1
Asian	96.1	77.1	89.6
Latinx	80.0	39.3	61.7
White	93.2	69.2	85.7
Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education 2021			

White students graduate high school and enroll in college, including four-year colleges, at significantly greater rates than Black and Latinx students. The total student population graduates high school and enrolls in two- and four-year colleges at significantly greater rates than multilingual learners, low-income students, and students with disabilities. Atwell and colleagues found that "In 2018-19, Massachusetts had the 5th largest graduation gap (18 percentage points) in the US between Latinx and White students, and the 6th largest graduation gap (26 points) between multilingual learners and non-English Learners. In addition, Massachusetts' graduation gap between African-American and White students (13 points) was larger than the national average gap (10 points) for these groups. Similarly, Massachusetts' graduation gap between economically disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students (10 points) was larger than the national average gap for these students (6 points)."[3]

One cause of the disparities in high school graduation rates is the requirement to pass the MCAS test. In a 2008 paper, *The Consequences of MCAS Exit Examinations for Struggling Low-Income Urban Students,* Papay and colleagues reported that "...for low-income urban students on the margin of passing, failing the 10th grade mathematics examination reduces the probability of on-time graduation by eight percentage points….this effect is quite substantial."[4] And yet, MA remains one of only eight states that uses a state standardized test as a graduation requirement.[5]

Papay and colleagues (2020) report that college completion gaps have widened in Massachusetts (p. 19): "The percentage of low-income students who graduated from a four-year college increased from 10% for 2003 MCAS test-takers to 18% for those who took the 10th grade MCAS in 2011. The comparable college graduation rates for higher income students are 38% and 52%. Thus, the gap in the graduation rate widened from 28 to 34 percentage points over an eight-year period."[6]

In sum, wide disparities by race, income, language, and disability continue to exist in K-12 achievement, high school graduation, college-going, and college completion, with little progress made over 20 years in closing them.

Limitations of MCAS

Using MCAS as the primary tool to measure student learning for school accountability has failed to close persistent opportunity and educational outcomes gaps. Similarly, using MCAS scores as the primary data to assess school quality, leading to declaring some schools as underperforming and to placing schools and districts into receivership, has failed to be a useful driver of school improvement. Additionally, the use of MCAS as part of the state's accountability system has had a negative influence on teaching and learning, particularly in schools and districts that serve high percentages of Black, Latinx, low-income, multilingual learners, and students with disabilities.

The Wrong Assessment Paradigm for Today's World

In their 2020 report, *Lifting All Boats?: Accomplishments and Challenges from 20 Years of Education Reform in Massachusetts,* Papay and colleagues (p. 4) conclude that "While MCAS tests assess students' academic skills, they do not measure most dimensions of social skills. This asymmetry creates a problem in assessing the progress of Massachusetts public education." They note that the development of social skills is increasingly important in the work world, skills such as "...the ability to work productively in groups with people from different backgrounds, reliability, persistence in the face of challenges, listening, cooperating, negotiating, and communicating effectively."[6] (Ironically, the Massachusetts Board of Elementary & Secondary Education used the findings of this report in August 2022 to raise MCAS cut scores for passing.) Similarly, Conley (2014) found that high school graduates need key cognitive strategies (e.g., problem solving, research, interpretation, communication) and learning skills (e.g., goal-setting, persistence, self-awareness, collaborative learning) to be successful in college.[7] A potential reason why the sustained use of MCAS to drive student learning hasn't been effective is that it does not measure the skills found to be most supportive of student learning and success. Papay and colleagues (p. 25) go on to say that, "Too much emphasis on the test, rather than the skills it is designed to measure, can result in higher scores without improving the academic and social skills of students in the Commonwealth."[6] In other words, an overreliance on test preparation for a test largely consisting of multiple-choice questions and short answer response questions does not necessarily result in acquisition of valuable academic and social skills needed for higher order learning and skills that students will need in higher education and careers.

No Single Test Can Ever Adequately Measure Student Learning or School Quality

In addition to failing to measure the most important set of knowledge and skills for today's world, when used as the sole measure, standardized tests are poor and invalid instruments to measure student achievement. Researcher Daniel Koretz found that, "Even in assessing the goals that can be measured well, [standardized] tests are generally very small samples of behavior that we use to make estimates of students' mastery of very large domains of knowledge and skill."[8] In other words, we are misusing standardized test scores to make important and sometimes life-determining decisions about what students have learned.

MCAS Has Narrowed the Curriculum in Districts with High Percentages of Students from Historically Marginalized Groups, and Resulted in Excessive "Teaching to the Test"

Papay and colleagues (2020, p.4) also note that the high school graduation requirement to pass MCAS tests, as well as MCAS scores being the primary determinant for the state to identify underperforming schools and districts, has resulted in some schools "...narrowing the curriculum or focusing on test-taking strategies." [6] Many schools and districts that serve high percentages of underserved students have devoted additional

time to English language arts and math to the detriment of time devoted to the arts, social studies and civics, world languages, wellness, and electives, all of which contribute to students' academic, social, and citizenship skills.

Standardized Testing Represents Dominant Cultural Norms, Values, and Ways of Knowing

Standardized test development has not kept pace with the science of learning, which recognizes the central importance of culture and identity in making meaning and constructing knowledge. Current test development seeks to strip out what might be perceived as culturally-specific references from passages and item contexts. As a result, the assessment reflects only the most dominant cultural references and points of familiarity.[9,10] Multiple choice and short answer response tests divorced from the curricular and cultural context may limit the ability of those from non-dominant cultures to demonstrate what they know and can do.

Test Performance Does Not Equal School Quality

Under the current accountability system, public schools and districts are identified by the state as underperforming based primarily upon MCAS scores. The state does not consider the many facets of what makes a quality school such as safe and welcoming culture, appreciation for diversity, teachers' relationships with students, rich curriculum offerings, family and community partnerships, engaged instruction, and wraparound services. Every school has strengths and areas for improvement. The current state system does not capture the more complex and useful picture of the reality in schools, instead reducing schools to coarse designations based on performance on a narrow set of indicators.[11]

Standardized Tests Have Led to Increased School and District Segregation

Schneider, Carey, Piazza, and White (2020) found that in a span of 11 years between the 2008-2009 and 2019-2020 school years, the percent of intensely segregated non-white Massachusetts public schools had increased thirty-four percent.[12] They cite the state's accountability system that relies primarily upon MCAS test scores as the main reason for this shift, "Existing [Massachusetts] accountability mechanisms currently produce sanctions mostly for schools with majority populations of color; at the same time, they single out predominantly white schools for praise, drawing the attention of families with the privilege to choose where they live and send their children to school." The current state accountability system, the authors claim, has contributed to shifting demographics that led to this increase in segregated schools.

Time for a New Assessment and Accountability System

MCAS and the state accountability system have failed to meaningfully and sustainably reduce inequalities in educational outcomes for students from every historically marginalized group in terms of academic performance, high school graduation, and college attendance. Despite its equity-minded intentions, the system has had documented harmful effects on schools and districts, particularly those serving high percentages of marginalized students through narrowing the curriculum, teaching to the test, and failing to develop students' academic and social skills needed for higher education and careers.

Rather than doubling down on a state education accountability system that has not lived up to its promise for the past 20 years, it's time to envision a new model for accountability that could better serve our communities. The state legislature should convene an independent commission, composed primarily of educators of diverse backgrounds and informed by research, to develop recommendations for what a new state education accountability system could look like.

This new system should be informed by alternative accountability and assessment initiatives inside and outside the state. One Massachusetts example, currently funded by the state legislature, is the Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment (MCIEA). While still in development, the consortium of eight districts and their local teacher unions is developing a model of what a new assessment and accountability system could look like:

MCIEA Vision

MCIEA believes all students, particularly those who have been historically underserved, should have access to equitable and transparent education communities with authentic, fair, and responsive learning and assessment systems. Robust measures of accountability should highlight strengths and areas for growth of students and schools.

MCIEA Principles

- Community members identify what is most important to know about school quality
- Multiple measures provide a robust picture of student learning and school progress
- Students demonstrate what they know and can do through real-world application of teacher-designed, curriculum-embedded performance assessments
- Benchmarks based upon the full characteristics of a high-quality school establish a fair measure for school performance
- Local leaders, teachers, parents/guardians, and students use data from multiple measures to make decisions that meet the assets and needs of their schools and communities

- State support and resources, rather than high stakes tests and sanctions, build capacity of schools and districts, which leads to improvement

MCIEA seeks to create robust assessment systems and engaged learning for every student through two overlapping frameworks: School Quality Measures (SQM) and Quality Performance Assessment (QPA). In this envisioned system, educators design standards-based, culturally responsive performance assessments, and students demonstrate what they know and can do in ways that are authentic, culturally responsive, and engaging. Teachers across schools and districts regularly convene to engage in blind scoring of student work to ensure reliability and consistency in scoring. Drawing on many sources of data, SQM captures school strengths and areas needing improvement across school culture, community and wellness, resources, teachers and leadership, and academic learning. School communities examine this data, celebrate strengths, identify gaps, and create and implement plans to address the gaps. Together, QPA and SQM make up a holistic form of student and school assessment that fosters a more accurate and nuanced understanding of strengths and areas for improvement for both students and schools. Importantly, decisions are made at the local level, including high school graduation, with the state playing a role of guidance, resource support, and technical assistance. State assessments are used for diagnostic purposes to provide one consistent data source on student learning to schools and educators, without the requirement of passing the tests in order to graduate high school.

There are other initiatives around the country which could inform a new state accountability system, such as the New York Performance Standards Consortium, California Office to Reform Education (CORE), Michigan Assessment Consortium, and Colorado Department of Education's Collaboratively-Developed, Standards-Based Performance Assessment initiative.

After 20 years of a failed state accountability system, it's time for a change. Massachusetts needs to join the growing number of states that are designing a new generation of state education accountability systems.

Notes

[1] NAEP Data Explorer. https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/ndecore/landing.
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[11] Gagnon, D & Schneider, J. (2017). Holistic School Quality Measurement and the Future of Accountability: Pilot-Test Results. Educational Policy. 33. 089590481773663. 10.1177/0895904817736631.
[12] Schneider, J., Piazza, P., Carey, A. J., and White, R. S. (2020). School integration in Massachusetts: Racial diversity and state accountability. Beyond Test Scores Project and Center for Education and Civil Rights.

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