



Bulletin

Massachusetts Parent Information & Resource Center (PIRC)

Available online in English, Spanish, and Portuguese at www.pplace.org



Why MCAS?

"I always say to parents, whether you like MCAS or not, take advantage of the knowledge you can gain about your own child and look to have your child improve from year to year."

—David P. Driscoll, Massachusetts Commissioner of Education

Most families and community members know that students must take lengthy MCAS tests every year. Yet, few know the connection between MCAS tests and improving education. This *Bulletin* introduces the MCAS assessment program and suggests ways families can use MCAS to improve their children's education.

CONNECTING THE DOTS

"MCAS" stands for Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System. It is a series of tests that students take to measure how well they are mastering basic academic subjects. MCAS tests are only one part of an overall approach to making education better. This approach is called "standards-based education reform." At the heart of both state and federal education reform laws is an emphasis on standards and assessments. Knowing the link between **standards** and **assessments** is a key to understanding how MCAS can be a valuable tool.

Standards spell out what all students should know and be able to do as a result of their education. In Massachusetts, these standards are called *Curriculum Frameworks*.

Standards are a first step toward making sure that schools hold high expectations for **all** students.

Many people have spoken about a quality education as the new civil rights struggle of our time. In that

light, standards are a student's Bill of Rights. They spell out what students have a right to be taught. Standards help make sure that all students in the state are taught the same material, no matter if they are rich or poor or have special needs.

Assessments are statewide tests, like MCAS. The first and most important thing to know is that the MCAS tests are based on the state standards. In other words, what gets taught is what gets tested. Testing can lead to better learning when teachers and principals use the test results to shape what they will teach. All students in Massachusetts take the same test.

"High Stakes" Tests. MCAS tests are high stakes tests. "High stakes" means that something important is determined by test performance.

- **MCAS means high stakes for students** because they must pass the 10th grade reading and math MCAS tests in order to receive a diploma. This graduation requirement is part of Massachusetts law.




"We knew we were smart. Now the world knows it, too."

Banner over the main entrance to TechBoston Academy, September 2006

TechBoston Academy is one of three academies created from Dorchester High School in 2003. The students who raised the banner were celebrating the announcement that the Academy had posted some of the state's biggest gains in the 2005–06 MCAS scores.

The students at TechBoston Academy were right to feel proud. Their test results proved they were among the best and highest scoring students in the state.

- **MCAS means high stakes for schools** because schools whose students do not do well on the MCAS must develop school improvement plans, and provide special options to eligible students such as free tutoring. After years of not improving, the school could even be taken over by the state. These consequences for schools are required by the federal *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB).

A Project of the  Federation for Children with Special Needs

Informing, Educating, Empowering Families

HOW CAN MCAS HELP ME HELP MY CHILD?

Early in each school year, families receive a *Parent/Guardian Report* from the school. Parents of students with disabilities who participate in the MCAS Alternate Assessment (MCAS-Alt) receive two *Reports*. The *Report(s)* describe in detail how a student did on the previous spring's MCAS tests. You can ask the teacher to help you use the *Report* to understand where your child did well and where more help is needed.

Around the same time that you receive the report at home, the Massachusetts Department of Education publishes the MCAS test questions and answers on its Website at www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/testitems.html. The educational standard that relates to each question is listed with each test question. Local libraries often have printed copies of the test questions and answers as well.

Did you know... ?
Massachusetts students who score Advanced on either the Math or English MCAS exam and Proficient on the other, or Advanced on both exams, and whose scores place them in the top 25 percent of their district, may be eligible to receive a John and Abigail Adams Scholarship. The scholarship pays for four years of tuition at any state university or community college. For more, see www.ofsa.mass.edu/programs.

Take Action!

- Review your child's MCAS *Report(s)*.
- Identify areas of strengths and weaknesses. For example, were scores higher in math or English? Were your child's math skills stronger in computation or in solving word problems? Are test scores consistent with report card grades? Your child's teacher can help you answer these questions.
- Develop a plan with the teacher to build on strengths and address weaknesses.
- Praise your child's testing and learning strengths.
- A score of 220, or a performance level of *Needs Improvement*, is the minimum passing score. If your child has scored below 220 at the *Warning/Failing* level, ask the school about extra tutoring or support. Also, ask whether the school is developing an Individual Student Success Plan for your child. (Students who score below 220 on the grade 10 tests will have "retest" opportunities to take and pass these tests.)
- Become familiar with the *Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks*. Use them to find out what your child should be learning. They are online at www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/current.html.

- Ask your child's school principal for a copy of the syllabus or curriculum for your child's grade. It should reflect the *Curriculum Frameworks*.

Parents are vital to a child's success in school and in life. Your interest and support let your child know you believe in him or her and that you value education. We hope these suggestions help you help your child be successful in school and in life.

For more on MCAS, call Massachusetts PIRC at 1-877-471-0980, or visit our Website at www.pplace.org. We look forward to hearing from you!

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Massachusetts PIRC thanks David P. Driscoll, Massachusetts Commissioner of Education, for his assistance in developing this Bulletin.

Parents' PLACE Bulletin is funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Innovation and Improvement, GAN# U310A060075. The views and opinions herein do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of Education.

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