

EDUCATING STUDENTS FOR SUCCESS

Executive Summary

A Comparison of the
**MCAS and PARCC
Assessments**
as Indicators of
**College- and
Career-Readiness**

FEBRUARY 2015



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February 2015



ABOUT MBAE

The Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE) was established in 1988 by employers concerned about the educational attainment and skills of graduates entering the workforce. Our core work – improving public education by influencing state policy – is driven by the business community’s commitment that all students graduate prepared for success in college, career, and citizenship.

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ABOUT THE CENTER FOR ASSESSMENT

The National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment, Inc. (The Center for Assessment) is a Dover, NH based not-for-profit (501(c)(3)) corporation that seeks to improve the educational achievement of students by promoting improved practices in educational assessment and accountability. The Center for Assessment does this by providing services directly to states in conjunction with the states’ large-scale assessment and accountability programs. The Center also works with organizations that work directly with states, or whose work impacts states, including the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), WestEd, The National Center for Educational Outcomes (NCEO), the U.S. Department of Education. The Center also seeks to develop and disseminate broadly policies and practices that will improve educational assessment and accountability.

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IN A RECENT SURVEY CONDUCTED FOR THE MASSACHUSETTS BUSINESS ALLIANCE FOR EDUCATION (MBAE), employers representing a wide range of industries across Massachusetts told us that our education system is out of sync with their expectations and needs. Sixty-nine percent of employers report having difficulty hiring people with the right competencies to fill open positions. Many cited a lack of applied, real world skills as the problem and expressed concerns about current standardized tests that don't measure abilities needed for success outside of school.

The good news is the Commonwealth began implementing learning standards in 2011 that emphasize the critical thinking, communications, and problem solving skills students need to succeed in a competitive global economy and society. As Massachusetts considers changes to our assessment system to align it with those standards, it is critical that new tests also provide a true measure of what is required to be ready for higher education and the workforce. The stakes are high for employers who depend on a well-educated and highly skilled workforce to thrive and grow. What Massachusetts chooses to assess inevitably influences what is taught in our schools.

For that reason, the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE) commissioned this report. As a business organization committed to an education system that prepares all students to be productive citizens in a global society and economy, we believe that the decision about new assessments is an important opportunity. Not only is it a chance to address high, costly remediation rates at public colleges and employer dissatisfaction, but it is also time to give educators, students and families an honest indication of whether they are on track to meet postsecondary demands.

The Board of Elementary and Secondary Education will vote next fall whether to replace the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) exams with those developed by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) or choose an alternative course. Evidence of whether the current MCAS test measures readiness for college and career and how it compares with PARCC, at its current point of development in this regard, is necessary for an informed decision.

As more information becomes available from PARCC development and field testing, MBAE will continue to share our questions, concerns and views with the business community. This study is part of that effort to gather and share information, and to focus attention on the need to go beyond measures of proficiency to ensure education assessments are aligned with the real world expectations our children must be prepared to meet in the future.

— MASSACHUSETTS BUSINESS ALLIANCE FOR EDUCATION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE 2014-2015 SCHOOL YEAR IS AN UNUSUAL ONE FOR STATE ASSESSMENT IN MASSACHUSETTS. For the first time in more than a decade, MCAS¹ tests will not be administered to students in all districts and schools. Elementary and middle school students in about half of the school districts in the state will take the traditional MCAS tests, while students in the rest of the districts will take the new PARCC tests. At the high school level, all tenth grade students through the class of 2019 will continue to take the MCAS tests as part of their graduation requirement, but 71 public school districts (including charter schools) across the state will also administer PARCC tests to their ninth and/or eleventh grade students². The split MCAS and PARCC administration in 2014-2015 is the final phase of what Mitchell Chester, Massachusetts Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education, has described as a “two-year test drive for the PARCC assessments.” The Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education is expected to decide by the end of 2015 whether MCAS or PARCC will be the state’s assessment program. A major factor in the Board’s decision will be which test proves to be the better gauge of students’ college- and career-readiness. In 2013, the Massachusetts Boards of Elementary and Secondary Education and Higher Education described college- and career-ready students as those students who “demonstrate the knowledge, skills and abilities that are necessary to successfully complete entry-level, credit-bearing college courses, participate in certificate or workplace training programs, and enter economically viable career pathways.”³

To inform that decision, the analysis reported here has been commissioned by the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education to compare MCAS and PARCC as indicators of college- and career-readiness. To do that, we ask three questions of each program:

- *Does the test identify students who are college- and career-ready?*
- *Does the test contain the right content to measure college- and career-readiness?*
- *Do the elementary and middle school tests provide good information about student progress toward college- and career-readiness?*

The first two questions focus on the MCAS and PARCC high school tests. The first question on whether the test identifies students who are college- and career-ready addresses rigor: Will students who meet the standards established for the test, in fact, be college- and career-ready? The second question regarding the content of

the tests is particularly important if the answer to the first question is no, the test does not do a good job of distinguishing between students who are college- and career-ready and those who are not. If the college- and career-ready bar is set too low or too high, but the test contains appropriate content then the bar can simply be adjusted until it is correct. However, if the test does not contain the content needed to determine students’ college- and career-readiness then no amount of adjustment to the passing score will get that bar in the right place.

The third question focuses on the entire system of tests at grades three through high school. To provide useful feedback to students and parents and to support the improvement efforts of educators and policy makers, the assessments at each grade level must produce detailed information about student performance – information that is tied directly to student achievement of the content standards at that grade level. The tests must also provide coherent information across grade levels about how students are progressing toward college- and career-readiness.

FOR MCAS, our answer to each of the questions is a clear “No.” The current MCAS high school tests do not identify students who are college- and career-ready, and they do not contain the right content to measure college- and career-readiness. Across the entire program, MCAS provides limited information about the content and skills demonstrated by students performing at each achievement level, and it is difficult to interpret differences in achievement level results from one grade to the next.

FOR PARCC, our answer to each of the questions is a cautious and conditional “Yes.” As we are preparing this report in early 2015, the PARCC tests hold the promise of being a good indicator of college- and career-readiness, but it is not possible to know how much of that promise will be fulfilled.

The tables on pages 5-7 summarize the answers to each of the three questions for the current MCAS tests and the PARCC tests to be administered for the first time in the spring of 2015.⁴

CONCLUSIONS

In the following section, we summarize our findings on MCAS and PARCC as indicators of college- and career-readiness. It will become clear through our discussion that in many ways the examination of MCAS and PARCC undertaken in this report is a comparison of apples and oranges. We are comparing MCAS tests that have been in place for more than a decade to PARCC tests that are still under development and will not have their first full-scale administration until the spring of 2015. We are comparing MCAS tests designed for a variety of purposes – none of which include measuring college- and career-readiness – to PARCC tests designed specifically to measure students’ progress toward and attainment of college- and career-readiness. This comparison of apples and oranges is relevant and important, however, because it provides information and identifies key questions that must be addressed prior to the decision the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education will be making next fall when they choose the future direction of state assessment in Massachusetts.

MCAS

The answers to our three questions strongly indicate that the current MCAS tests are not a good indicator of college- and career-readiness. This should not be a surprise. MCAS was not designed for that purpose. Developed in response to the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 (MERA), the MCAS high school English Language Arts and Mathematics tests were designed to measure student proficiency on the state’s tenth grade standards. The passing score on the tenth grade MCAS test represents the minimum level of proficiency that all students have to meet to be eligible

for a high school diploma. Demonstrating competency on the tenth grade standards was a necessary condition for high school graduation. It is clear from the law, however, that competence on the tenth grade standards alone was not considered sufficient for college- and career-readiness. In addition to creating the tenth grade competency requirement, MERA established criteria for two additional certificates that went beyond students demonstrating proficiency on the tenth grade state assessment and are more closely tied to current views of college- and career-readiness:

- **Certificate of Mastery** – based upon a determination that students have demonstrated mastery of a comprehensive body of skills, competencies and knowledge comparable to that possessed by accomplished graduates of high school in the most advanced education systems in the world. The criteria for a certificate of mastery may include, but not be limited to, any of the following: high school graduation standards, superior performance on advanced placement tests, and demonstrated excellence in areas not reflected by the state’s assessment instruments, such as artistic or literary achievement.
- **Certificate of Occupational Proficiency** – awarded to students who successfully complete a comprehensive education and training program in a particular trade or professional skill area and shall reflect a determination that the recipient has demonstrated mastery of a core of skills, competencies and knowledge comparable to that possessed by students of equivalent age entering the particular trade or profession from the most advanced education systems in the world. No

student could be awarded the certificate of occupational proficiency without also meeting the tenth grade MCAS requirement.

The current MCAS tests were designed in the mid- to late-1990s. Features that are emblematic of MCAS represented the state-of-the-art in assessment technology when they were introduced in 1998:

- Including a mix of multiple-choice items and items that required students to produce written responses to items on all tests;
- On the Composition test, providing students the opportunity to write a first draft of their essay before preparing the final version to be scored;
- Providing virtually unlimited time for students to complete each test session; and
- Releasing all items on all tests each year for the first nine years of the program, and continuing to release half of items in subsequent years.

For every one of those visible features, there was a corresponding behind-the-scenes design and technical feature that was also state-of-the-art in the 1990s. In assessment, as in other fields, however, much has changed.

In 2001, the year that the tenth grade MCAS tests became a high-stakes requirement for graduation, Apple's introduction of iTunes® and iPods® revolutionized the way that we purchase and listen to music. A decade later, that same technology is still functional but seems archaic as the ways in which we consume music have continued to evolve. The iPod® gave way to the iPhone®, tablets, the cloud, and streaming music. Apple continues to sell songs and albums through iTunes, but Version 12.0 of iTunes released in October 2014 bears little resemblance to the iTunes of 2001.

MCAS, in contrast, remains virtually unchanged since the release of Version 1.0 in 1998. To be sure, there have been upgrades and tweaks to the assessment system since then as well as refinements to the content to keep up with revisions to the state's Curriculum Frameworks. But those have been incremental changes moving MCAS from Version 1.0 to 1.1, 1.2, etc. There has been no effort to build Version 2.0 of MCAS – a new state-of-the-art testing system fully aligned to the 2011 Curriculum Frameworks.

PARCC

At this point in time in early 2015, PARCC holds the promise of being a good indicator of college- and career-readiness. The high school tests are designed to assess college- and career-ready standards.

Plans are in place to ensure that students whose performance is classified as college- and career-ready not only have the required knowledge and skills in high school, but are actually prepared to enroll in credit-bearing courses in college. Finally, the entire assessment system from grade 3 through 11 is being designed to provide solid, detailed information to parents, students, and educators about student progress toward college- and career-readiness.

Of course, it is not possible to know with certainty how much of that promise will be fulfilled. The first full-scale administration of the PARCC tests is months away. The process for classifying students as college- and career-ready at the end of eleventh grade or on track to college- and career-readiness at grades 3 through 10 will not be implemented until the fall. Parents, teachers, and administrators will not begin to delve into the first set of PARCC results, data files, reports, and interpretive materials until well into the 2015-2016 school year. It will be several years before the first cohort of students to take the full battery of PARCC high school tests graduates from high school and enrolls in entry-level, credit-bearing courses in college.

Many important questions about PARCC, however, should be answered by the time the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education comes together in the fall of 2015 to make a decision on the future of the state assessment.

- In spring 2015, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and the Human Resources Research Organization (HumRRo) will conduct a full-scale evaluation of how well aligned PARCC, MCAS, and other national assessments are to the Common Core State Standards and the extent to which they meet the criteria for high-quality assessments established by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO).
- By summer 2015, the first full-scale administration of the PARCC tests will be complete, providing the opportunity to collect valuable feedback about the test and the test experience from students and educators in Massachusetts as well as from other states across the country.

1 MCAS refers to the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System. PARCC refers to the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers.

2 Based on the October 2014 *Spring 2015 District Assessment Decision Update* released by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

3 Read the full text of the Massachusetts Definition of College and Career Readiness at <http://www.mass.edu/library/documents/2013College&CareerReadinessDefinition.pdf>

4 The analysis of the MCAS and PARCC tests presented in this report is based on information about each program that was publicly available in the fall of 2014.

5 Among the 71 districts administering the PARCC high school tests, 50 districts will be administering PARCC tests to their ninth and eleventh grade students, and 21 districts will administer PARCC tests to only their ninth grade students.

- In fall 2015, initial PARCC results will be released. This will provide the opportunity for comparisons between student performance on PARCC and MCAS, between the performance of Massachusetts and other states on PARCC, and between the performance of Massachusetts on PARCC and other national assessments such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

Each of those events should yield valuable information to inform the Board’s decision.

An additional key piece of information about PARCC is how Massachusetts high school students perform on PARCC tests. Because of the state’s high school graduation requirement, all tenth grade students through at least the class of 2019

will continue to take the current MCAS tests. High schools are not required to administer the PARCC tests in addition to the tenth grade MCAS tests. In 2015, however, 71 districts (including charter schools) have volunteered to administer PARCC high school tests to their ninth and/or eleventh grade students.⁵ Although the students in those districts may not be representative of the state, their performance on the PARCC tests should be of considerable value to the Board. In evaluating the PARCC college- and career-ready tests, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education will have to supplement the information gained from this limited sample of students with all of the other information available about the content and design of the PARCC high school tests as well as results from other states. ◆

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Does the test identify students who are college- and career-ready?

| MCAS | PARCC |
|---|--|
| <p>The Proficient bar on the MCAS high school tests is set very low compared to all other indicators of students’ college- and career-readiness.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The percentage of students performing at the Proficient level or higher on the MCAS English Language Arts and Mathematics tests is much higher than the percentage of students meeting the college readiness benchmarks on other tests such as the SAT or NAEP. • More than one-third of Massachusetts high school graduates who enroll at one of the state’s public colleges or universities place into one or more noncredit-bearing, remedial courses. | <p>PARCC intends to establish a college- and career ready bar that ensures that students who meet it “are academically prepared to engage successfully in entry-level, credit-bearing courses” in English and mathematics in college.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students receiving the PARCC college- and career-ready determination may be exempt from having to take and pass placement tests in two- and four-year public institutions of higher education. • PARCC plans to conduct studies with colleges to ensure that students who are designated as college- and career-ready have a high probability of passing entry-level, credit-bearing English and mathematics courses. |

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Does the test contain the right content to measure college- and career-readiness?

MCAS

The content of the MCAS high school tests is limited to what can be assessed on a single test administered at the end of tenth grade.

- MCAS tests high school students only one time at the end of the tenth grade.
- MCAS high school tests measure content no higher than the end of tenth grade standards.
- A large proportion of the items on recent MCAS tenth grade Mathematics tests measure sixth, seventh, or eighth grade standards.
- The tenth grade MCAS Composition test measures only one type of writing, literary analysis, and requires students to produce only one written composition.
- The tenth grade MCAS Reading test contains a mix of literary and informational passages with approximately half of the total points on the test coming from each type of passage.

PARCC

The series of ninth through eleventh grade high school tests will enable PARCC to assess a wide depth and breadth of content.

PARCC will test high school students three times, once per year in the ninth, tenth, and eleventh grades.

- To earn college- and career-ready designations in English Language Arts/Literacy and Mathematics, students will have to take and be successful on the eleventh grade tests.
- The PARCC mathematics tests will require students to apply skills, concepts, and understandings to solve multi-step problems requiring abstract reasoning, precision, perseverance, and strategic use of tools.
- The PARCC English Language Arts/Literacy tests will require students to produce a variety of types of writing. PARCC will require students to write effectively when analyzing literary and informational text.
- The PARCC English Language Arts/Literacy test will be more heavily weighted toward informational than literacy passages, as indicated in the Common Core.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Do the elementary and middle school tests provide good information about student progress toward college- and career-readiness?

MCAS

There is a lack of consistency in the structure of the MCAS tests across grade levels; and Proficient performance was defined separately and at different times across grade levels.

- Across grades three through ten, MCAS is a patchwork of tests introduced at different times and for different purposes from 1998 through 2006.
- In English language arts, the MCAS tests include writing at only grades four, seven, and ten.
- Proficiency standards for the MCAS tests at grades three through eight were established independently from the high school standards and independently from each other at different times between 1998 and 2006.

English Language Arts

Grade 10 – 1998

Grades 3, 4 and 7 – 2001

Grades 5, 6, and 8 – 2006

Mathematics

Grades 4, 8, and 10 – 1998

Grade 6 – 2001

Grades 3, 5, and 7 – 2006

- Limited information is available to support the interpretation of MCAS proficiency results at grades 3 through 8 in relation to the content standards in the Curriculum Frameworks.

PARCC

The PARCC tests will have a consistent design across grade levels and results at each grade level are intended to signal whether students are on track to college- and career readiness.

- The PARCC tests at grades three through eleven are being developed and implemented together as a complete system of assessments.
- The PARCC English Language Arts/Literacy test will assess writing at every grade level.
- The college- and career-ready (grade 11) or on-track to college and career-ready (grades 3-10) standards for the PARCC tests will be established at the same time, with careful attention paid to the consistency of standards across grade levels.
- PARCC has prepared detailed descriptions of the content knowledge and skills expected of students performing at each achievement level on each of the grade 3 through 8 tests.

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This analysis has given us an understanding of the purpose and design of the MCAS and PARCC assessments, and how these compare as college and career readiness indicators. The conclusions are clear – MCAS is an outdated assessment that was not intended to measure college and career readiness and is not a tool to do that. The PARCC assessments are being created for that purpose and currently appear to be on course to realize that potential.

As the PARCC development process moves ahead, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education must provide the Board and the public with much more detail about a number of issues. Among these are the following:

Passing Scores – The score set to “pass” the exam, often referred to as “cut scores,” must be set at a high enough level to truly align with college and career readiness expectations. Although there may be resistance to setting a cut score that reveals student performance inconsistent with results on MCAS, we must endure that transition and help the public understand the need for this adjustment. If we are going to be honest about whether our students are on track for success, and reduce the remediation rates that cost our students and education system time and money, an accurate cut score is necessary.

Cost – There are legitimate concerns from school districts and others about how the expense of new assessments will compare to MCAS costs. The exact price for next year and cost estimates for the future must be provided.

Time on Testing – Employers, educators and parents have expressed concerns about the time devoted to test preparation and administration. Among the concerns is that testing consumes a disproportionate amount of learning time, making it difficult to schedule other subjects and activities that are important to developing the range of knowledge and skills that students need. Although test preparation decisions are made locally and vary widely, this is a fundamental issue that must be addressed.

There are other important concerns that also require complete and detailed responses. How will data be used and shared with educators and families? What assurances can be given that the state will determine that standards have been fully implemented, so students are being tested on what they have been taught, before new assessments are used to meet graduation requirements? How will revisions and updates be handled in the future? Will individual states be able to adapt the assessments or will the PARCC consortium regularly convene collaborative reviews? Additional questions are likely to arise in the months ahead. MBAE offers the conclusions of this report as one step in the process of ensuring that Massachusetts has the high quality assessments our students and citizens deserve.

— MASSACHUSETTS BUSINESS ALLIANCE FOR EDUCATION

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

MBAE is grateful to the staff of The Center for Assessment for helping us understand the complex issues related to academic assessments and making the implications of this information for policy decisions comprehensible. We appreciate the work of Project Director Scott Marion, Ph.D., Associate Director, Center for Assessment and project staff Charles DePascale, Ph.D., Senior Associate; Brian Gong, Ph.D., Executive Director; and Thanos Patelis,

Ph.D., Senior Associate. We also appreciate the assistance of Carrie Conaway, Associate Commissioner for Planning, Research, and Delivery Systems at the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education for reviewing drafts for errors of fact. MBAE also thanks Ann Duffy, Senior Consultant at Education First for her guidance, expertise and assistance. This work was made possible by a grant from Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors ◆

ABOUT MBAE'S WORK

In 2014, the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE) commissioned a review of Massachusetts's education system that sounded the alarm: student achievement has levelled off and the state risks falling behind global competitors who are outpacing the Commonwealth in educating a highly skilled workforce and informed, engaged citizens. The state's knowledge-based and innovation economy depends on an urgent response to the challenges outlined in the report. "The New Opportunity to Lead: A Vision for Education in Massachusetts in the Next 20 Years," lays out a comprehensive plan to make Massachusetts the best education system in the world. Drawing on experience from playing an instrumental role in bringing about major education reforms twenty years ago, MBAE is committed to driving the policy changes needed to achieve this goal.

Over the next several years, MBAE will translate The New Opportunity to Lead proposal into action that can lead to reinvention of the school and classroom, support for effective teachers and school leaders, personalized learning to close opportunity gaps, and funding focused on the students in schools with the autonomy to use it most productively. A key recommendation in the report is that Massachusetts strengthen the implementation of world class education "standards, curriculum, and assessment to ensure all students develop what is needed for success." This report was commissioned to inform that effort.

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