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Massachusetts Coalition for Authentic Reform in Education

What's wrong with the MCAS -- -- and CARE's plan for change.

What is the MCAS?

The MCAS (Mass. Comprehensive Assessment System) is a series of tests that are given in grades 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 10 in English language arts, science, social studies and math. The MCAS is *not* a "basic skills" test but is supposed to measure high level academics.

There are four scoring levels: advanced, proficient, needs improvement and failing. **Beginning in 2003 (or with 10th graders who take the exam in spring 2001) all students must receive a passing score on the MCAS in order to graduate from high school.** This includes special needs, bilingual, recent immigrant and vocational education students. All students must obtain a score of 220 on both the language arts and math exams; later, science and social studies tests will be added and the passing score will be raised. Public schools must administer this test; private and parochial schools are exempt from taking the exam.

How did the MCAS come about?

In 1993, the Massachusetts legislature passed the Education Reform Act. This law called for the creation of curriculum frameworks or guidelines for what should be taught in all schools in different grade levels. This law also called for a "comprehensive assessment system" that would measure whether schools were teaching the state curriculum. Students would have to "demonstrate competency" in four subject areas in order to graduate. This *system* was to use multiple assessments - student work from classrooms, portfolio reviews, and exhibitions. Instead, the state created a single test - the "MCAS" and made it a "high-stakes" exam meaning that the score alone is used to make a final decision about whether a student can graduate from high school.

What is wrong with MCAS?

MCAS undermines high standards. Parents and educators report that the overemphasis on this single test causes too many schools to "teach to the test". Many successful schools drop challenging and meaningful programs, or subjects not tested such as music and art, in order to focus on raising test scores. Schools that should provide more and varied learning opportunities instead start to drill students to pass the test. This "dumbing down" to the test hurts all students.

No single test should be used as a sole criteria to make important decisions about students or schools. Testing experts warn us that ALL standardized tests are limited. Decisions about student promotion or graduation should always be based on more information than a single test score. No student's knowledge, skills, talents or potential can be summed-up by a single one-shot exam.

Even those students with good grades and attendance would be denied a diploma. If you don't pass the MCAS, you don't get a diploma. Many students will be seriously harmed by this narrow definition of "success". For instance:

****Students who don't test well, but who know and can do the material.**

****Students attending under-resourced schools** will be punished for what is not in their control - their larger class sizes, fewer qualified teachers and overall lower level of resources.

****African American and Latino students.** MCAS scores in 2000 showed that over 70% of both groups failed the English or Math test; other data shows growing drop-out rates among these students. The MCAS will result in a greater divide in our society by race and class.

****Vocational education students** work to achieve specific skills and knowledge, but they will not get credit for what they have learned unless they pass the MCAS.

****Students in bilingual education and ESL programs.** Students working to gain mastery of English can't perform well on a test requiring high level English skills like the MCAS.

****Special needs students** who cannot demonstrate skills on the test, and/or who cannot reach the standards required of other students will be labeled "failing" and be denied diplomas despite hard won progress.

****Recent immigrant students** who are adjusting to a new residence, school, language and culture who will be expected to know far more than basic English or math to pass the MCAS.

****Transfer students** who have not been taught the Massachusetts curriculum but who will be expected to pass MCAS to get a diploma.

But don't we need the MCAS to push schools to do a better job?

Using tests to "force" improvements out of teachers and schools has been tried before, but these costly efforts have not been successful in raising student achievement. More often, they "push" schools to narrowly focus on the tests, depriving students of a good education. We are spending millions on a test that tells us what we already know: schools in our poorest communities are under-resourced and need help. Our resources should be spent on directly improving schools and classrooms, providing professional development for teachers, and on developing better ways to measure what students are learning.

But don't we need some form of accountability for all schools?

Yes! There are far better ways to reach standards and to assess students and schools. CARE has developed a statewide plan - a *system* that uses multiple assessments to measure student learning and school improvement - as called for in the Education Reform Law. CARE's authentic accountability plan would combine limited standardized testing (in English and math), with classroom assessments (such as portfolios), whole-school quality reviews conducted by outside experts, and annual school reports. This would replace the current reliance on the MCAS exams to make decisions about students and schools.

Are we stuck with the MCAS?

No! Public action can change these tests. In Wisconsin, parents organized and defeated their state's high-stakes test. Parents in MA are petitioning in their schools, holding town forums, speaking to their school committees and legislators, writing letters to newspapers and appearing on TV and radio, and keeping their children home on test days. Many have formed local CARE chapters and are working to get the word out to everyone.

Can you do something to help?

YES! Join CARE and distribute CARE information to friends and family, other parents and teachers in your community. Join CARE's E-mail discussion group (send email to care-subscribe@egroups.com). Sign the CARE petition and get more signatures. Write your legislators, school committee members and local newspapers. Organize a community forum.

Join other actions or boycott the tests. CARE can provide support to all these efforts.

However you choose to respond, we need your help to make our public schools places where all children have the opportunity to achieve at the highest possible level. We believe the MCAS is a barrier to achieving better schools. Help us stop this unfair and harmful test. Contact us today!