

Reforming MCAS

Testimony before
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I Introduction

Thank you for opportunity to speak with you.

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for last two decades.
Director of the Educational Pipeline project, funded by Ford Foundation. (For more on
professional background, see <http://www2.bc.edu/~haney/>).

By way of introduction, I would like to summarize three general points:

- 1.1 State use of MCAS ought to be reformed, so that results not used in isolation to make decisions about students of schools.
- 1.2 Past misuse of MCAS results has been associated with increasing rates of attrition between grades 9 and 10.
- 1.3 Apparent improvement in MCAS results for 2003 is in part a reflection of more students missing between grade 9 and MCAS testing in spring of grade 10.
- 1.4 Conclusion.

II MCAS use ought to be reformed.

Use of standardized test results in isolation to make decisions about students, teachers and/or schools is contrary to professional standards regarding test use. (See for example the statement of AERA, <http://www.aera.net/about/policy/stakes.htm>). Decades of research on college admissions testing show that it is far more sound (more valid and with smaller adverse impact on minorities and females) to make decisions flexibly using test scores, grades and other information rather than to make decisions mechanically based on test scores alone. And, if nothing else, the recent expose of widespread errors in test scoring and reporting in the testing industry (Henriques & Steinberg, NYT, May 20, 2001; Steinberg & Henriques, May 21, 2001) should make clear how unwise it is to make important decisions mechanically based on test scores in isolation.

The Education Reform Act 1993 explicitly called for a “system of assessments” that would “employ a variety of assessment instruments” including “consideration of work samples, projects and portfolios.” Contrary to this requirement, the State now seeks to control whether students graduate from high school based on whether or not their scores on just the MCAS Math and ELA tests meet or exceed the arbitrary passing score of 220.

III Attrition between grades 9 and 10 has increased sharply

Thanks to a grant from the Ford Foundation, researchers at Boston College (WH, Anne Wheelock, George Madaus and a team of graduate students) have been analyzing grade enrollment data both nationally and for all the states for the last 20 years. The main reasons for these analyses are that state-reported dropout statistics are often unreliable and most states do not regularly report grade retention data, that is data on the rates at which students are held back to repeat grades. Hence the best way of studying long-terms rates of progress through K-12 educational systems is to examine grade enrollment data over time.

Here I would like to present only selected results for Massachusetts. Specifically, I present figures showing the percentage increases or decreases in grade 9 and 10 enrollments compared with grade 8 and 9 enrollments, respectively, during the previous academic year.

Figure 1 shows results for public school enrollments statewide from 1984 to 2001. As may be seen, the patterns in these two trend lines were quite stable until around 1997. After 1997 the percentage of students missing from grade 10, relative to grade 9 enrollment the previous year, increased steadily. In other words the rate of student attrition between grades 9 and 10 increased steadily between 1997 and 2001.

Figure 2 shows results for White students statewide. Attrition between grades 9 and 10 increased for White students to -8.7% in 2001, slightly less than for all students statewide (-12.4%).

Figures 3 and 4 show statewide results for Black or African American students and for Hispanic students. As is apparent, the attrition rates for Black students between grades 9 and 10 increased sharply beginning in 1998, rising all the way to -23.6% in 2001. The attrition rate for Hispanic students has historically been higher than for other ethnic groups, but note that by 2001, the grade 9 to 10 attrition rate for Hispanic students had risen all the way to -28.6%.

Figure 1: Massachusetts Total Public School Enrollments Grades 9 and 10, Percent Increase or Decreases relative to Previous Grade the Previous year, 1984- 2001.

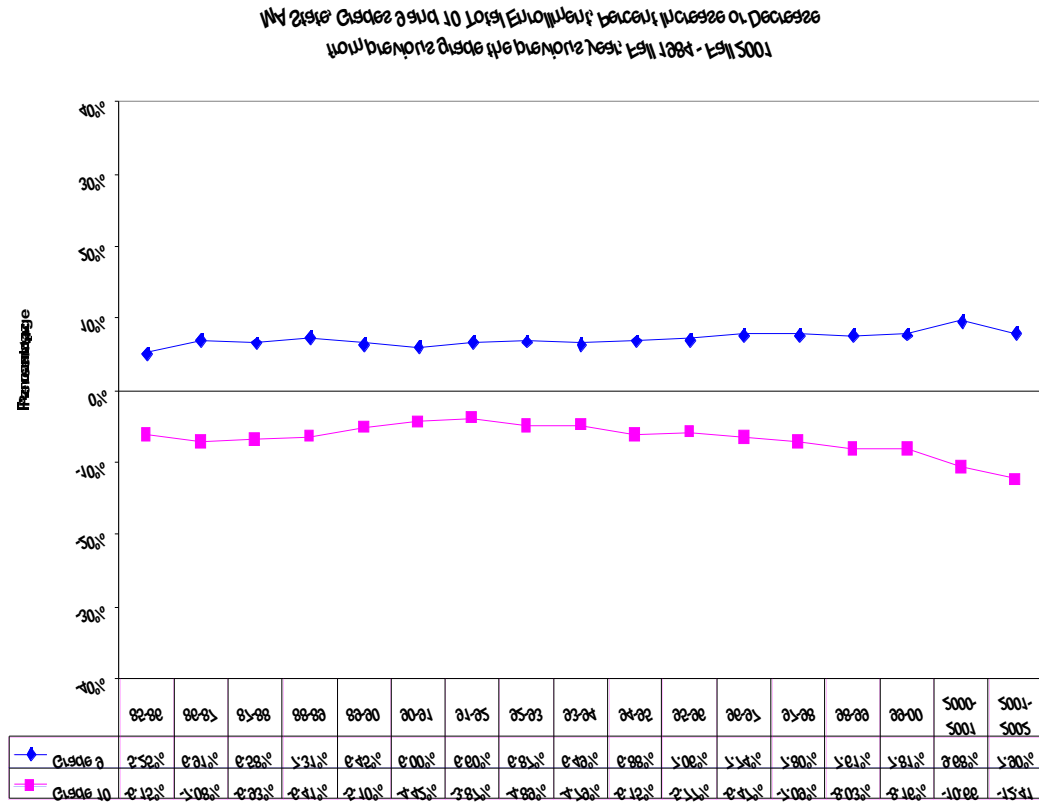


Figure 2: Massachusetts White Public School Enrollments Grades 9 and 10, Percent Increase or Decreases relative to Previous Grade the Previous year, 1984- 2001.

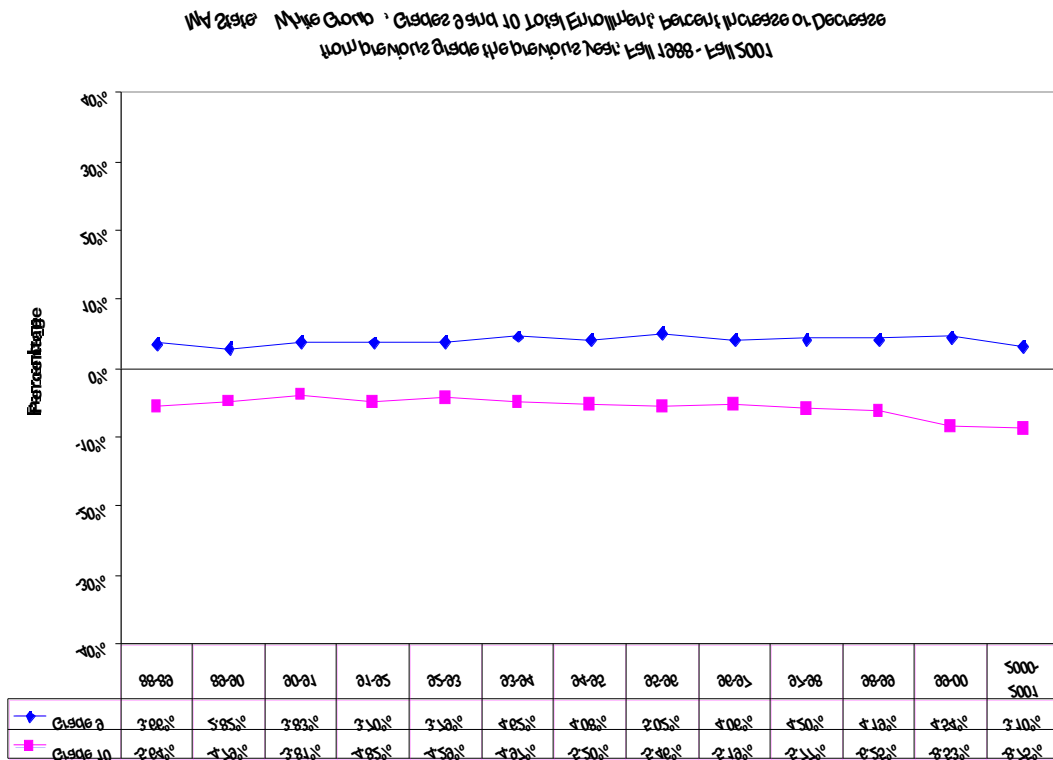


Figure 3: Massachusetts Black Public School Enrollments Grades 9 and 10, Percent Increase or Decreases relative to Previous Grade the Previous year, 1984- 2001.

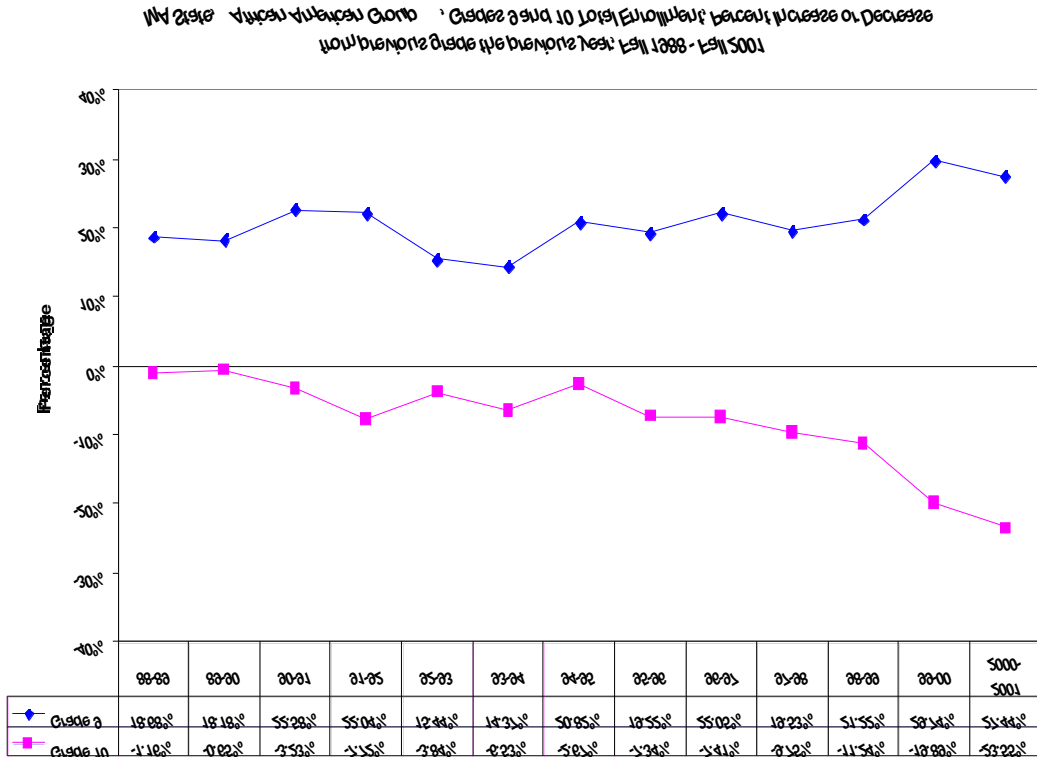
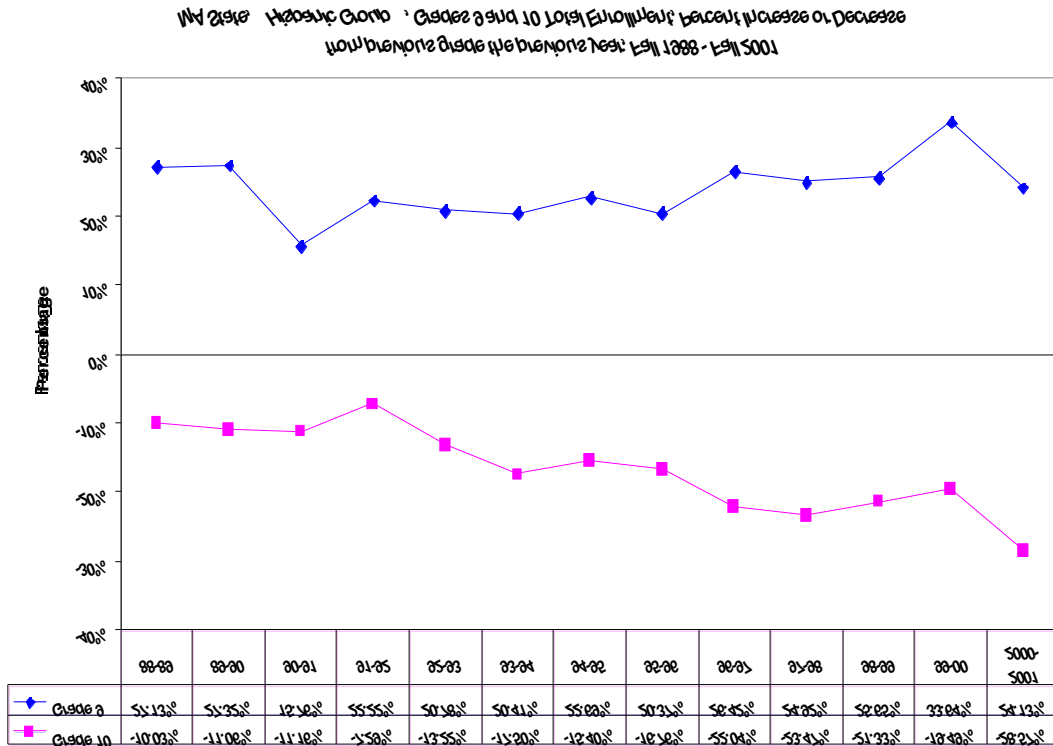


Figure 4: Massachusetts Hispanic Public School Enrollments Grades 9 and 10, Percent Increase or Decreases relative to Previous Grade the Previous year, 1984- 2001.



It is clear that attrition between grades 9 and 10 is caused in major measure by increased rates of flunking students to repeat grade 9.

This is an unfortunate development because research suggests that flunking students to repeat a grade is not a sound educational strategy (Shepard & Smith, 1989). Recent evidence from Texas indicates, for example, that only two out of ten students who are flunked to repeat grade 9 will persist in school to high school graduation (Haney, 2001).

III MCAS “Gains” for 2003 Misleading

Last week the state released a report titled “ Spring 2003 MCAS Tests: Summary of State Results” (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/2003/results/summary.pdf>). In his foreword letter, Commissioner Driscoll cites the 2003 results as showing “substantial progress” and even :”dramatic improvements.” Dr. Driscoll wrote, “In total, about 75 percent of the class of 2005 earned the competency determination on their first attempt, up from 68 percent for the Class of 2003, and 69 percent for the Class of 2004.” The report went on to cite “improved performance of racial groups.”

Unfortunately a portion of the apparent gains in 2003 results is illusory. A small part of the improvement in pass rates for the 2003 tenth graders may result from changes in the way pass rates were calculated. More important is attrition of students between grade 9 and MCAS testing in spring of grade 10. Table 1 summarizes data on the progress of the Class of 2005 from the fall of 2001 when they were in grade 9, to enrollment in grade 10 in fall 2002, and “inclusion in MCAS testing in spring of 2003.

Table 1: Progress of Class of 2005 Through Grades 9 and 10

	White	Hispanic	Black
Grade 9, Oct. 2001	59261	9285	7820
Grade 10, Oct. 2002	55141	7235	6449
Included in MCAS, spring 2003	43787	5081	3475
% of Grade 9 "included" in 2003 results	73.9%	54.7%	44.4%

As is evident there was substantial attrition between grades 9 and 10, doubtless reflecting an increasing rate of flunking students to repeat grade 9. The number of White students fell from 59,261 in grade 9 to 55,141 in grade 10 (a loss of about 7%). But the attrition between grades 9 and 10 was far greater for Hispanic and Black students. The number of Hispanic students fell from 9285 to 7235 (a loss of 22%) and the number of Black students fell from 7820 to 6449 (a drop of 18%).

Attrition before MCAS testing in the spring of 2003 was even greater. Of the total grade 9 enrollments in fall of 2001, according to last week’s report of state MCAS results for 2003, only 74% of White, 55% of Hispanic and 44% of Black students were included in grade 10 MCAS testing.

All of the causes behind the huge attrition of Black and Hispanic students are unclear. One likely cause is problems in DOE record-keeping. Another is that more students appear to be designated as “mixed race” or no race recorded rather than Black or Hispanic. But whatever the causes, the MCAS 2003 results, with around half of Black and Hispanic students disappearing between fall of grade 9 and MCAS testing in spring of grade 10 is cause for concern rather than celebration.

IV Conclusion

Misuse of MCAS results in isolation to determine high school graduation or to rate schools as exemplary or low performing is wrong. Long-recognized professional standards warn against using results from even well-developed tests in isolation to make important decisions. Yet the MCAS has been shown to be defective in several regards.

By trying to use MCAS results to hold both schools and students “accountable”, the State is helping to create massive numbers of failures, especially for minority students in Massachusetts schools. What is entirely clear, and wholly predictable, is that when a state agency tries to use the same fallible mechanism to hold both institutions and children accountable, the institutions will always be in a better position to protect their interests than are the children. Available evidence indicates that the dropout rate in Massachusetts schools is increasing. Even more worrisome, sharp increases in student attrition between grades 9 and 10 presage an even worse dropout problem in the future.

Some kind of state testing program should surely be continued. But test results ought to be used to inform, rather than determine, decisions of teachers and local education officials. The state might usefully establish guidelines on how results from tests like the MCAS might be used by local education officials, but high stakes decisions about students and schools should simply not be based in isolation on MCAS or any other test results

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