

# *Just the Facts*

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## **Requiring a Comprehensive Assessment System for Students, Schools, and Districts (SB 257)**

*Filed by Sen. Cynthia Creem and Rep. Alice Wolf*

**Concern about our current accountability system creates the need for this legislation.** Educators and parents are increasingly concerned that the current state accountability system will not help improve our schools and ensure all students a high-quality education. The new standards, embodied in the curriculum frameworks, were delayed and were developed with little professional involvement, while high-stakes testing has begun, despite the lack of curriculum alignment. Inadequate assistance to schools and districts and a lack of helpful oversight threaten the credibility of the current system. Additionally, educators are opposed to the current MCAS system because it labels students as “failures” at an early age and limits their opportunities to succeed in life based on the results of a single test.

**One important goal of the legislation is to end the use of the MCAS tests or any other state-developed standardized tests to determine which students may graduate from high school.** This bill is intended to ensure a truly comprehensive and fair assessment system for students, schools, and districts. The elements of the bill were based upon surveying MTA members and working closely with practitioners to replace the state’s current high-stakes MCAS testing program with a comprehensive assessment system that includes state standards, testing for diagnostic purposes, and a rigorous school accreditation requirement. Through accreditation, state oversight and community reporting, all schools would be held accountable for implementing high standards and developing valid assessments for determining high school graduation eligibility.

Highlights of the bill include:

- ✓ **High standards** – Curriculum Frameworks will be reviewed and be subject to approval by professional associations of educators in each content area.
- ✓ **Standardized tests** – The Iowa Test of Basic Skills Reading Test will be administered in Grade 3, and state-developed tests in math and English will begin in Grade 4. End-of-course assessments will be administered in science and history in Grades 9

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and 10. Scores will be used for diagnostic and accountability purposes, but not for high-stakes decisions. Tests will be reviewed by professional associations of educators in each content area and by an external board of assessment experts and educators.

- ✓ **Local assessments for other Frameworks** – Each district will develop assessments of student performance relative to the curriculum frameworks in world languages, the arts, and health.
- ✓ **High school graduation requirement** – Districts will be required to develop comprehensive assessment systems to determine which students have met state standards and are eligible for a high school diploma. The locally developed assessment systems will be submitted to the Department of Education. Local systems may include, but are not limited to, portfolios, performance evaluations, exams, and oral presentations. Districts would be prohibited from using the MCAS or other state-developed standardized tests to determine requirements for high school graduation.

**The MTA supports high standards and accountability, but opposes the use of a single test to make decisions about students or schools for these reasons:**

- **No single test can accurately measure what a student knows and can do.** The assessment community, the testing industry, a majority of teachers, and a majority of the general public believe that high-stakes decisions should be made based on multiple measures, not a single test. The original Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 called for multiple assessments. MTA believes that the Board of Education has misinterpreted the law by relying on a single test.
- **The current system is unfair to students who have not had an opportunity to learn the material on which they are being tested.** The standards themselves have been in effect for only a few years and are undergoing significant revisions even now. Many schools, especially those serving low-income students, do not have the resources they need to meet the standards required by these difficult tests. Denying diplomas based on this test will increase drop-out rates and limit future college and employment opportunities, particularly for minority and special education students.
- **Too much emphasis on a single test is having a negative impact on the quality of education in some of our schools and districts.** Many teachers report that they have had to eliminate or limit innovative inquiry-based teaching methods in favor of content “coverage” in order to prepare students for the MCAS.

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- ✓ **School accountability through accreditation** – All schools must become accredited by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC). The process begins with a two-year in-depth self-study of the seven critical elements of schooling, followed by an on-site evaluation by educators from across the region. They will judge whether the school curricula are aligned with the curriculum frameworks and whether the school’s assessment program uses multiple measures of student achievement to determine what students know and can do, as defined by the frameworks. Schools that fail to meet NEASC standards may lose accreditation and face possible takeover by the state.

Currently, no public schools are required to be accredited, although most high schools go through the process. This bill would require that all public schools in the state – elementary, middle, vocational, and high schools – be accredited by the NEASC. The NEASC is the nation’s oldest regional accrediting association. Its mission is the establishment and maintenance of high standards for all levels of education. Its accreditation process, as developed over the years, will be used to help bring about educational improvement in all of our schools. The Department of Education will be required to provide technical assistance to schools and districts to achieve the accreditation and implement the evaluation systems required by this bill.

- ✓ **District accountability** – The state will conduct periodic fiscal and governance audits of all school districts.
- ✓ **Accountability to community** – Each school will be required to publicly release an annual report on student academic performance, including samples of student work and evidence of progress toward meeting NEASC recommendations.

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