



Standards-based education reform in Massachusetts

James Peyser speech to the Boston Economic Club

February 21, 2001

In all the discussion about MCAS, we have lost sight of why MCAS exists. It's not about testing for testing's sake, it's about education reform. We have a serious problem in this Commonwealth and this country, and it's not testing; it's under-achieving schools and students. So before telling you about how we are implementing MCAS and what its effects have been, I want to go back to square one and revisit why we are implementing standards-based school reform in the first place.

The first reason is to help those stuck at the bottom achieve basic competency. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a highly regarded test that has been administered to random samples of students across the country for 30 years, 20-30 percent of Massachusetts' students score in the lowest performance category in reading and math. This average obscures an even more troubling reality: low-income and minority students are doing much worse.

The second reason for pursuing standards-based reform is to raise expectations across the board, in order to combat widespread mediocrity. According to NAEP results, well under half of Massachusetts' students are performing at grade level in reading and math. This low level of performance would not be so troubling if the indicators were moving in a positive direction. Unfortunately, there has been very little movement since NAEP began in the early 1970s. Which leads to the third reason for reform: to create a culture of continuous improvement.

Making reform work requires assessing student performance across the state, for the simple reason that you can't improve what you can't measure, and you can't measure without a consistent, valid yardstick--like MCAS. MCAS is a customized assessment tool that is specifically designed to evaluate performance vs. published academic standards, rather than simply the relative performance of one student vs. another. MCAS tests present a fair, balanced mix of multiple choice, short answer and essay questions, which encourages instruction that goes beyond basic skills to understanding concepts, solving problems, and applying knowledge.

Starting with the class of 2003, students must score at least one point above failing on the 10th-grade English and math tests in order to be eligible for graduation. MCAS also provides the foundation for school and district accountability system. Many people support MCAS, but object to its use for purposes of individual and collective accountability. Unfortunately, in the absence of stakes for students and schools, MCAS would not be taken seriously. In short, without consequences, there is no accountability. Without accountability, there is no reform.

High stakes are not punitive, if the standards and assessments are fair, as I believe ours to be. A high school diploma is not an entitlement. It is something that must be earned through effort and achievement. Moreover, acquiring a diploma is not what education is about. Education is about acquiring knowledge and skill. It is unfair and unethical to hand young people a piece of paper and tell them they are ready for success when they are not.

Aggregate MCAS performance in 2000 across all grades in both English and math is consistent with NAEP data. Twenty-six percent of Massachusetts students scored in the lowest performance category

on MCAS, compared to 27 percent on NAEP. The average failure rates in English and math mask declining performance through the grades. Specifically, average MCAS failure rates rise 10-15 points with each grade level, from 11 percent in 4th grade to 37 percent in 10th grade.

These failure rates are clearly unacceptable. So, what are we doing about it? The first thing to keep in mind that local schools and districts continue to carry the primary responsibility for intervening when students are failing and for developing strategies for raising achievement. Nevertheless, the state also has a role to play in helping students get over the bar.

The state's first obligation is ensure that students, parents and teachers know how to prepare for MCAS. Therefore, we have published curriculum frameworks in all subject areas and each year we release the MCAS questions themselves. In addition, virtually all of this year's 10th graders previously received MCAS results based on the 1999 8th grade tests, including detailed diagnostic data in each subject area. So, most students who are at risk of failing the 10th grade MCAS have been given an early warning, along with a roadmap for how to improve.

Over the past three years, the state has appropriated \$80 million for remedial and accelerated instruction targeted to students in districts with high failure rates. All districts receiving these funds must develop individual success plans for each student at risk of MCAS failure. For those 10th graders who do fail either the English or math portions of MCAS there will be four additional opportunities in 11th and 12th grade to take the test again, including two focused re-tests that are solely designed to determine whether students have crossed the passing threshold.

Students who believe their inability to pass the test is the result of mistakes in scoring or some unfairness in its administration will have the right to appeal their results to a regional panel of educators and seek either a re-scoring or test-taking accommodations. Students with disabilities that make it impossible for them to take paper and pencil tests are eligible for alternative assessments that evaluate a portfolio of student work.

The underlying premise of standards-based reform is that while the competency standards must be fixed, the time required to achieve those standards should be flexible. This means more time through after school and summer school programs. But, it also means that some students will need to continue their high school education beyond 12th grade. For these students, the administration has endorsed a life-long learning guarantee. Students who fail to pass MCAS prior to completing their senior year, will be eligible to continue their studies at no cost in public higher education programs, specially designed to help students get over the MCAS bar.

Are all these efforts having any effect? I believe they are. Standards-based reform is accelerating change, and MCAS--including the high stakes--is a big part of it. It is broadening and elevating curriculum for all students, it is providing school leaders and teachers with the information and leverage they need to drive change and improve instruction, and it is helping districts confront structural barriers.

Listen to what Boston superintendent Tom Payzant has to say about the impact of MCAS: "For the first time ever, we have the attention of the public and leadership. Teachers and administrators are focused on important measurable goals in English and math. Students who might have slipped through the cracks, earning Cs and Ds but never developing the skills those grades suggest, are getting the extra help they need."

Changes in the classroom are beginning to produce measurable progress. Over the past three years, there is a pattern of modest, consistent improvement across the grades in both English and math. Since 1998, with the exception of 10th grade English, failure rates are down and scaled scores are up. Forty-

four percent of schools in the Commonwealth approached, met or exceeded their improvement expectations, as established by the state Department of Education. In Boston, 50 schools approached, met or exceeded their improvement expectations and only 16 failed to improve. Eight Boston schools achieved 15-30 point drops in English and math failure rates, while the O'Hearn Elementary School reduced its English failure rate from 14 percent to zero.

Those who argue for delaying or doing away with MCAS as a graduation requirement are in effect saying that a high school credential should not be withheld from any student who shows up and who demonstrates other, non-academic qualities, such as creativity, persistence, artistic talent, good citizenship or vocational skill. This is not an argument against MCAS, or any statewide assessment system for that matter; it is an argument against statewide academic standards--which is the bedrock of the 1993 Education Reform Act.

The critics of standards-based reform are fond of saying the high-stakes testing program presents a civil rights issue. They are right, but they've got it completely backwards. The greatest civil rights issue confronting this country today is not discrimination or racism, although those problems remain all too real. The greatest civil rights issue today is the quality of our schools.

I want to close by reading a quote from an essay that appeared in the November 15 edition of Education Week, by William Taylor. Mr. Taylor served on Thurgood Marshall's staff at the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund. In the 1960s, he served as the staff director of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. Here's what he had to say about high-stakes testing:

The real high stakes are imposed not by a test, but by educational neglect. Students who receive a bad education are penalized whether or not they obtain a diploma... If in our zeal to protect students we wage war on standards and standardized tests, then we continue the old regime of low expectations that has plagued poor and minority children for so many years.

This is not easy work and there are no guarantees of success. But, I am convinced that our efforts are paying off and I believe we have an obligation to our children and ourselves to stay the course.