

HOW MASSACHUSETTS SCHOOLS ARE USING MCAS TO CHANGE CURRICULUM, INSTRUCTION, ASSESSMENT, AND RESOURCE ALLOCATION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND / PURPOSE / METHODS

The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), as a key component of Massachusetts Education Reform, was conceptualized and designed to serve as a tool to support efforts of schools and districts to improve student learning by providing a consistent measure of achievement linked to the statewide curriculum frameworks. This system assumes use of the results by educators to make appropriate changes in curriculum, instruction, assessment, and allocation of resources. As in other states, different aspects of this strategy are under discussion on many levels and receiving praise and criticism from a variety of stakeholders. This particular research study has been designed and conducted with a relatively narrow focus on how educators in the state are actually making use of the MCAS results. It does not address whether or not the changes being made are desirable or seek to understand the impact that reported changes have on student achievement.

The primary purposes of this research study were to:

- Determine to what extent and in what form teachers are receiving MCAS results;
- Identify common practices among Massachusetts schools and districts in utilizing MCAS results to change curriculum, instruction, assessment, and resource allocation;
- Identify and disseminate information about positive or initially successful practices in such utilization, as well as any “negative” implications of changes (should they exist), to schools throughout the Commonwealth; and
- Promote discussion and sharing of effective strategies for using MCAS results among participating superintendents and other district administrators, school principals, and teachers.

Data collection for this study included regionally conducted focus groups of superintendents, principals and teachers as well as a broad questionnaire survey and extensive telephone interviews and site visits.

FINDINGS AND REFLECTIONS

Based on the findings of this study, educators in the state are certainly making strides toward using MCAS in the way it was designed—to serve as a tool to support efforts to improve student learning by providing a consistent measure of achievement linked to the statewide curriculum frameworks. Clearly, in the districts that participated in this study (that were regionally representative as well as representative of the variety of types of communities identified by the Massachusetts Department of Education), school and district administration and staff are analyzing, distributing, and studying student achievement data in ways and toward purposes that were rare only a few years ago. Based on this work, they are also making significant changes in the areas of curriculum, instruction, assessment, and allocation of resources. Perhaps most importantly, MCAS results are reaching teachers—the change-makers in the

classroom—and teachers are using the data in important ways. Over 70% of the teachers responding to a scaled item on the questionnaire indicated that their use of MCAS data has had an effect on the instructional strategies they choose to use in their classrooms. The degree to which this sort of activity is taking place in non-participating districts is, of course, unknown. Nevertheless, even though it is still too early to draw many conclusions about the impact of this work on student learning, clearly these important efforts are moving in a positive direction.

In this new direction:

- *A broad range of educators is taking responsibility and ownership of the task of deeply examining student achievement data.* It is no longer just the assistant superintendent or a few others who look carefully for patterns, trends, and reasons for student achievement results being what they are. It is becoming common practice for curriculum leaders, principals, and teachers to take on this responsibility, identifying student strengths and weaknesses, recognizing gaps in curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and making the kinds of changes they believe can make a difference.
- *Teachers are working together more by grade level, subject area, and across grades.* They are talking, sharing, comparing, troubleshooting, taking responsibility, and more actively looking at the impact of their teaching on at least one measure of student achievement.
- *Significant changes are being made in the areas of curriculum, instruction, assessment, and allocation of resources.* Most commonly cited changes made in curriculum, instruction, and assessment based on MCAS results were indicated in English/Language Arts, mathematics, and writing. Most commonly cited changes in allocation of resources included providing professional development and curriculum work, obtaining new textbooks and materials, providing MCAS support for students, and, to some extent, hiring of staff.
- *All staff are being held accountable for student achievement, not just those in a few disciplines or grade levels.*
- *Educators throughout the state are developing positive educational practices using MCAS results as a basis.* Many such practices have emerged through this study (some of them shared in this report) including instructional and assessment practices of individual teachers, data use strategies for groups of educators, as well as whole district approaches to maximizing the use of MCAS in support of student learning.

However, some questions arise as educators in the state move in this new direction:

- Can this analysis of student achievement data become a consistent and important part of the culture of schools and districts? Will it become a way of working and troubleshooting that will be continued, built upon, and deepened?
- Will efforts continue so that more and more teachers and administrators, especially new arrivals to the scene, become adept and comfortable with examining student scores and student work effectively?
- Once significant changes are made in curriculum, instruction, and assessment, will results be revisited year after year to determine the impact of these changes over time within a range of settings, disciplines, and learners?

- Will changes go beyond curriculum as it is written and reach the level of curriculum that is taught?
- Will educators continue to probe and question their instructional and assessment practices and make changes that go well beyond helping students with test-taking skills and writing process?
- Will school and district resources continue to be invested in critical professional development and curriculum review activities that are so vital for educators in our schools?

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is most clear from this study that timing, communication, attitude, and process matter if MCAS is to achieve its purpose within Massachusetts education reform. Given these and other findings of this study—both encouraging and challenging—we offer the following recommendations:

To the Department of Education

- Make it a priority to provide MCAS results to districts before the beginning of each school year, as opposed to November or December. A great deal of momentum and effectiveness of use is lost by not having the data available in a timely manner.
- Listen and respond to suggestions from the field, especially concerning the quality of the MCAS result reports and CDs provided to districts.
- Support opportunities for districts and schools to share and troubleshoot their approaches to using MCAS results, through in-person and on-line forums that are non-threatening and non-monitoring in nature.
- Review district and school utilization of MCAS results and actively disseminate identified positive practices.
- Continue efforts to develop other measures of student achievement to be used within education reform efforts.

To District and School Educators

- Keep the beat going—not fear of MCAS or needless threat or competition—but the importance and usefulness of using MCAS results openly and responsibly. Encourage educators on all levels to continue probing curricula and classroom practice, moving to higher levels of reflection and change.
- Set and communicate clear expectations and responsibilities for all within schools and districts for using MCAS results and other measures of student achievement to improve student learning.

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- Distribute the appropriate MCAS results to teachers so that they can maximize the use of these to support and prepare their students. In order for teachers to make appropriate changes in curriculum taught and in instructional and assessment strategies used, it is imperative that they receive the results of the students they taught previously as well as those of their current students.
- Support and encourage expansion of collaborative efforts in using MCAS results, especially drawing together grade level, subject area, and cross grade groupings of educators.
- Continue to develop staff leaders in all schools who have confidence and expertise in using data for making decisions about curriculum, instruction, assessment, and allocation of resources. Support their efforts to bring other staff members into this work.
- Reward and recognize the accomplishments of collaborative efforts. Celebrate improvements in student achievement that are manifested by MCAS results as well as other measures.
- Encourage development, use, and sharing of wider varieties of instructional and assessment strategies that show promise in better preparing students to meet the rigorous requirements of MCAS as well as those of future academic or work-related activities.
- Encourage the development and use of other measures of student achievement that complement the MCAS data.
- Document intentional change efforts and the shifts in student achievement that may be linked to those efforts.