



SUMMARY OF THE REPORT:
Using Data to Inform Decision-Making in the Boston Public Schools
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Abstract

Student assessment results have been an important factor in the decision making process within the Boston Public Schools for more than a decade. According to researcher Richard Murnane of the Harvard Graduate School of Education and his team, Elizabeth City and Kristan Singleton, student assessment occurs within public schools for at least four reasons: there are state and federal testing requirements, leadership teams require assessment data in order to oversee achievement and accomplishments, student placement decisions need to be based on academic performance data, and instruction can be assessed by reviewing and analyzing students' achievement within certain skill levels. In his paper, Murnane and his research team discuss student assessments and the specific database systems and technical tools educators in the BPS have developed to inform different levels of decision-making.

Areas of Progress

- Technical tools provided by the district have progressed over the past ten years.
- The district has consistently used MCAS data to make informed decisions.
- Creation of Benchmark Assessments for district educators.
- Creation of mid- and end-of-year course specific exams for students.
- The supply of formative assessments for teachers has begun to increase with the creation of a bank of test items.

Challenges

- **Knowing what to do next.** The solution over the last five years has been to do a better job in implementing reading workshops and math curricula. The slow pace by which MCAS scores are improving show that this is not enough.
- **Accountability for Action.** In most schools, there is not accountability system principals use to monitor teacher action after data analysis. There is no system to ensure that school improvement plans are implemented. There needs to be greater accountability during the implementation process after data analysis.
- **Assessing Improvement.** While schools are much better at examining MCAS data to identify student learning problems, the MCAS system does not provide information on whether instructional changes have resulted in an improvement in student skill level and knowledge.

Recommendations

- **Right Assessments.** Leadership needs to determine the next steps in building a comprehensive assessment system. There are two pressing assessment needs as the Boston Public Schools move forward: 1) more formative assessments that provide information for teachers to quickly assess student skill levels, and 2) assessments that measure growth in student skill levels.
- **Knowledge and Tools.** The available tools used to assess student data have limitations. The data is not currently stored in a flexible data warehouse to expand analysis capability. Also, student assessment patterns are not able to be examined outside of the MCAS data. Flexible software and a large data warehouse are needed to overcome the current limitations.
- **Better Decisions and Actions.** Additional support is needed to increase proficiency levels in reading, writing and problem solving for Boston Public School Students. Additional supports and pressures are needed to improve these levels of proficiency. One suggested support is instructional coaches for teachers to use assessment analysis to change instruction for the better. Also, central office administrators can offer constructive pressure for change with performance data and over time improvement data from different schools across the district.