

QUESTION 2

MCAS GRADUATION REQUIREMENT

On November 5, Massachusetts voters will decide whether or not to remove the MCAS as a graduation requirement. This brief guide offers an impartial overview of the question, key arguments from both sides, and additional resources to learn more.

A “YES” VOTE means removing MCAS as a Graduation Requirement

KEY ARGUMENTS FROM PROPONENTS

- The MCAS exams do not provide a comprehensive assessment of student learning, and relying solely on this exam to determine post-graduation readiness is insufficient.
- The high-stakes nature of the MCAS exam leads teachers and students to spend excessive time preparing for the test, reducing time that could be spent on instructional content more relevant to life after graduation.
- In Massachusetts, a disproportionate number of students who identify as BIPOC, English language learners, or low-income, as well as those with disabilities, are denied diplomas due to not meeting the MCAS requirement, despite having fulfilled all local graduation requirements.
- [Research](#) shows that leaving high school without a diploma has a lifelong impact on an individual's employment, earnings, health, and likelihood of incarceration, as well as significant ramifications on the economy as a whole.

“Standardized tests are imperfect and cannot measure the full scope of skills, knowledge, and competencies that we want to develop in our young people and are critical for their future success. Standardized tests also pose particular challenges for students with disabilities and students who are not native English speakers. Research has shown that test scores are highly correlated with student demographics, like family income.”

- Senator Jason Lewis, Chair of the Joint Committee on Education

A “NO” VOTE means keeping MCAS as a Graduation Requirement

KEY ARGUMENTS FROM OPPONENTS

- Leaving the decision of high school graduation requirements to individual districts will result in a lack of consistent standards and expectations across the state.
- High standards drive high expectations. The MCAS graduation requirement helps ensure students engage in rigorous coursework to fully prepare them for college and the workforce.
- The MCAS brings critical attention to achievement gaps across communities, leading to increased funding for under-resourced schools and enhanced learning opportunities and targeted support.
- Since the adoption of the MCAS as a graduation requirement, Massachusetts has [risen to the top](#) of the education rankings nationwide, consistently earning high scores on national assessments. Removing the requirement without any plan in place to promote high standards statewide jeopardizes this progress.

“I support the idea of there being a state standard for high school graduation. That question, if it passes, would deliver us to a place of no standard—essentially, 351 different standards for high school graduation. I don't believe that is the direction to go.”

- Secretary Patrick Tutwiler, Massachusetts Secretary of Education

RESOURCE ROUND UP

If you're looking to dig deeper into question 2 and the MCAS graduation requirement, we've curated a list of resources for further reading:

- [MCAS Ballot Initiative: A Foundation for the Conversation](#) (The Rennie Center)
- [MCAS Overview](#) (The Rennie Center)
- [MCAS Ballot Initiative Part 2: A Closer Look at the Graduation Requirement](#) (The Rennie Center)
- [Question 2: What to know about removing the MCAS graduation requirement](#) (Boston.com)
- [Question 2: Eliminating The MCAS Graduation Requirement](#) (The Center for State Policy Analysis)
- [MCAS: The debate over Question 2, an effort to drop the high school exit exam](#) (WBUR)
- [End the MCAS requirement? Question 2 is the focus of Worcester debate](#) (Worcester Telegram & Gazette)
- [Ballot Question 2: Digging into the proposal to disconnect MCAS from high school graduation](#) (New England Public Media)
- [The Competency Determination in Massachusetts](#) (Dept. of Elementary and Secondary Education)
- [Elected Officials Positions on Question 2](#) (State House News Service)

DOES THE MCAS GRADUATION REQUIREMENT LEAD TO BETTER OUTCOMES?

Perhaps the most important question in the debate over ballot question #2 is whether the MCAS graduation requirement leads to better or worse long-term outcomes for students. As the [Boston Globe states](#), the story is “nuanced and complex.” Research, most recently by [scholars at Brown University](#), has shown that the MCAS itself is predictive of long-term student success, including future academic and workplace success. In addition, low-income students who barely meet the competency determination are more likely to graduate than those that do not, and high-income students who just pass are more likely to enroll in college, suggesting that the assessment accurately captures skills essential for postsecondary success. However, as a [summary by the Harvard Graduate School of Education](#) makes clear, there is “no clear answer on whether the MCAS graduation requirement alone led to students developing skills, knowledge, and capacities to help them succeed in work and civic life.” Available evidence may also suggest that the MCAS graduation requirement represents a critical tipping point where students who barely fail the exam become more likely to disengage from school and drop out than peers with similar educational experiences who pass. For more information, check out additional Rennie Center resources on the ballot question and the [future of the MCAS](#).

BY THE NUMBERS

More than **ten percent** of students do not pass the MCAS on their first try and nearly **four percent** don't pass after multiple attempts or an appeals process. However, nearly **three percent** of students don't pass the MCAS and do not meet local graduation requirements. Less than **one percent** of students—approximately 700 students each year—receive a Certificate of Attainment, instead of a high school diploma, because of MCAS alone. In 2019, **281** of those 702 students were English Language Learners and **402** were students with disabilities.