

Overview

This November, Massachusetts voters will weigh in on a ballot initiative that could end the MCAS graduation requirement. Though this ballot question will focus on just one aspect of MCAS, it is sure to spark wide-ranging conversations on the purpose and value of these assessments. Leading up to election day, we'll be releasing a series of resources for those looking to gain a better understanding of the context behind current MCAS debates. We are kicking off the series with this overview of what the MCAS is, the history behind it, and some helpful data points to serve as a foundation for the conversation.

HISTORY

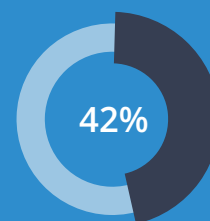
The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, also known as [MCAS](#), was developed following the Massachusetts Education Reform Act (MERA) of 1993. This law has its roots in the longstanding efforts by education reformers and business leaders to promote higher, more consistent standards for students. For more on the history and context of MERA, check out resources such as the following:

- [Building on 20 Years of Massachusetts Education Reform](#) (MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2014)
- [How The State's 'Grand' Education Bargain Came To Be — And How It Comes Up Short](#) (WBUR News, 2018)

While MERA resulted from years of reform efforts, it also served as an immediate response to the court case *McDuffy vs. Secretary* (1993), in which the Supreme Judicial Court held that children in less affluent communities were not receiving their constitutional right to an adequate education. MERA was the state's way of fulfilling this obligation. In addition to addressing inequitable school funding through a new school and district funding formula called "[Chapter 70](#)," the law established statewide curriculum standards and an assessment system to measure school performance and ensure accountability by requiring students to participate in standardized tests in grades 4, 8, and 10.

475,000

More than **475,000** students took the MCAS exam in 2023



Only **42%** of MA students in grades 3 - 8 and 10 had proficient scores on the 2023 Math MCAS exam

28% DROP

MCAS scores continue to lag behind pre-pandemic levels. **Overall Math scores** dropped from 50% proficiency in 2019 to 36% in 2021 (a 28% decline) before rebounding in 2023 to 42% proficiency.



Approximately **10%** of 10th graders who take the MCAS exam do not pass on the first try, though a substantial majority pass on subsequent attempts

700

Each year, approximately **700** high school students who would have otherwise graduated with a high school diploma are unable to do so due to not passing MCAS

For the reformers who had been advocating for higher learning standards, testing was a core component of an equitable system: the goal behind assessing all students was to ensure that appropriate and rigorous public education was being made equally available to all. For the first time, there would be a system in place to monitor each student's individual progress, so no child could slip through the cracks. This system would also allow state leaders to monitor the success of MERA's package of reforms and compare results across schools, districts, and student subgroups, helping inform future policy decisions.

Massachusetts was one of several states to pass laws in the 1990s that focused on establishing shared learning standards and statewide assessments. In 2001, the federal government passed a similar (but broader) set of requirements called No Child Left Behind (NCLB) that applied to all public schools nationwide. NCLB mandated that students participate in standardized tests in math and English Language Arts (ELA) each year between grades 3 and 8 and once in high school. It also required states to hold districts and schools accountable for achieving gains in performance by requiring schools to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward proficiency for all students. As intended, NCLB had the net effect of increasing both student testing and states' authority to intervene in low-performing schools. In 2015, the passage of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) reaffirmed student testing requirements, even as it allowed states to abandon AYP and establish their own accountability requirements within federal guidelines. Importantly, annual testing using a standardized assessment like the MCAS is still a federal mandate. For more information on NCLB and ESSA, view the following resources:

- [No Child Left Behind: An Overview](#) (Education Week, 2015)
- [No Child Left Behind: What Worked, What Didn't](#) (WBUR, 2015)

HOW IT WORKS

MCAS tests in math and ELA are administered to all students annually in grades 3 through 8 and again in grade 10. Students are also tested on Science, Technology, and Engineering (STE) in grades 5, 8, and 10.

The [test](#) is made up of several types of questions: essays, multiple-choice and open-response questions, and writing prompts. Students' performances are scored and MCAS reports are released in the fall in accordance with scoring guides that include samples of student work at different scores. The test results are reported at the district, school, and individual levels.

Schools, communities, and individuals use MCAS scores in many different ways. For one thing, students must pass high school MCAS exams in math, ELA, and STE in order to meet the Competency Determination requirement and earn a high school diploma. Students who do not pass these exams in grade 10 have additional opportunities to retake the tests in later grades, and students who do not earn a passing score on these exams may be able to participate in an [appeals process](#) that allows them to attain a high school diploma. Media outlets also frequently report on MCAS scores and use these to put forward [school and district ratings](#). Additionally, though scores are not released until after the end of the school year, individual schools and teachers can use MCAS results to identify overall strengths and areas for improvement and to monitor students' academic progress from grade to grade.

GENERAL PERCEPTIONS

What do MCAS supporters point to as evidence of success?

- On the whole, Massachusetts students tend to perform well on standardized tests relative to students in other states and are [highly ranked nationwide](#) in reading and math. MCAS has been helpful in identifying achievement gaps and areas in need of improvement for students, schools, and districts.
- Statewide testing helps parents, educators, and districts check their students' academic [progress](#) and proficiency, allowing them to monitor college and career readiness and prompting additional learning supports and interventions, as needed.
- Supporters argue that maintaining MCAS as a graduation requirement ensures that students earning a high school diploma have gained skills and knowledge that will help them succeed in college-level courses.

What do MCAS critics point to as ongoing concerns and challenges?

- Critics argue that a test cannot fully capture students' knowledge and that MCAS leads to "teaching to the test," which impacts curriculum and classroom learning time.
- MCAS reporting can be confusing for parents and comes too late in the school year for teachers to use the results to adjust instruction.
- There is a [strong correlation](#) between standardized test scores and students' socio-economic status, raising questions about how school performance on MCAS is reported and understood by the public.
- Each year, approximately [700](#) high school students who would have otherwise graduated with a high school diploma are unable to do so due to not passing MCAS.

WHAT'S NEXT

Over the coming months, we will be releasing a series of blog posts digging more deeply into the evidence underlying these perceptions as well as other essential questions like what standardized tests measure and how the graduation requirement impacts students.