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**Ending MCAS requirement would be a step backward**

*The high-stakes graduation test promotes equity and educational excellence*

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**IN RECENT YEARS**, many Massachusetts public education policy decisions have been made with an eye toward increasing equity. It’s a worthy goal, but too many of the policies have proven to diminish both equity and academic excellence.

One aspect of the Commonwealth’s public K-12 education system that has promoted both equity and excellence is the MCAS graduation requirement, and that’s why Massachusetts residents should vote to retain it if, as expected, the question appears on the statewide ballot in November.

The Commonwealth’s 1993 Education Reform Act catapulted Massachusetts to the head of the national and global public education class. But over the last 15 years, the reform has been steadily dismantled, as an independent entity that performed comprehensive reviews of school districts was eliminated and high-quality academic standards were watered down.

As a result, between 2011 and 2019, before the pandemic, aggregated state National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) [math scores in grades 4 and 8 fell by](https://pioneerinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/NAEP-math-2011-19-2-1.pdf) more than in all but 17 states. Reading was even worse. There the [decline](https://pioneerinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/NAEP-reading-2011-19-2.pdf) was larger than in all but 14 states. As student performance deteriorated, race- and income-based achievement gaps have grown.

MCAS was at the heart of the most successful state-level education reforms of our lifetime. After its enactment, Massachusetts students became the first ever to lead the nation in all four categories tested on NAEP, state SAT scores rose for 13 consecutive years, and our eighth graders tied for first in the world in international science testing.

The law also required the Commonwealth to disaggregate data by student subgroup, which gives schools and districts the data they need to identify problems and develop appropriate strategies to address them. This is particularly important when it comes to diagnosing widespread pandemic-related learning loss and determining how to address it.

As a result, MCAS has become a tool that promotes both excellence and equity. Between 1998 and 2005, as student achievement was rapidly improving in Massachusetts, the Commonwealth was also among the top three states in the nation for narrowing achievement gaps. As the renowned academic standards expert E.D. Hirsch said in 2008, “If you are a disadvantaged parent with a school-age child, Massachusetts is the state you want to move to.”

Between 2006 and 2018, what had been a 23-point gap between statewide average MCAS math scores and those of low-income students narrowed to 18 points. The progress was even better in English language arts over that period; a 23-point gap narrowed to eight points.

MCAS has proven to be a reliable indicator of students’ college and career readiness. It ensures that *all* districts meet the same academic standard.  Eliminating the MCAS graduation requirement would replace an objective standard every student is expected to meet with more than 300 local graduation standards.

The performance-based assessments for which some advocate as a replacement for the MCAS graduation requirement can be useful, but they are not appropriate for high-stakes situations. They are less reliable and far less precise than MCAS, and would also require much more time on task for both teachers and students. We often hear complaints about the amount of time dedicated to assessments in the Commonwealth’s public schools, but replacing MCAS with performance-based assessments would significantly increase the time spent on assessments.

Such a regime is also unlikely to meet federal funding standards for understanding student outcomes at the individual, subgroup, and aggregate levels.

Ill-advised attempts to eliminate the MCAS graduation requirement should instead trigger renewed efforts to restore policies that are proven to promote both excellence and equity.

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