* **OPINION •**

**McAnneny, Chieppo: Voters should reject ballot effort to end MCAS**



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By Eileen McAnneny, Charles Chieppo

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Retaining and attracting talent are among state lawmakers’ and the business community’s top priorities. “An educated population is uniquely important for Massachusetts,” the late Thomas Birmingham, former Senate president and senior fellow at Pioneer Institute, once said, “because the commonwealth is blessed with little in the way of natural resources. We live by our wits.”

That’s why it’s so important to defeat an initiative, proposed for the 2024 state election ballot, that would ask voters to eliminate the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS).

Created in 1993 as part of the landmark Massachusetts Education Reform Act, MCAS consists of standardized tests in English, math, and science that public high school students must pass to graduate.

Those who seek to eliminate MCAS would have the public believe that the requirement is oppressive, punitive, and an impediment to graduation for many students. That is simply not the case.

As explained by state officials at an [August 2022 meeting](https://livestream.com/madesestreaming/events/10559613/videos/232579963) of the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, approximately 99% of high school seniors in Massachusetts pass MCAS.

Given that a talented workforce is the backbone of the Massachusetts economy, it is critical that our state retains this important tool, one that assures colleges and employers that our K-12 public education system is producing high-quality graduates. Indeed, ensuring that students have mastered their high school curriculum should be a top priority for all of us — including the Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA), the major proponent of this ill-advised proposal.

**Mass. outmigration hurts our economy**

The timing of the MTA’s action is particularly bad. Between 2009 and 2021, the commonwealth saw a sharp rise in the net number of folks leaving the state. Massachusetts moved from ninth to fourth among all states in net outmigration, and now trails only California, New York and Illinois — all of which are much larger states.

That outmigration means fewer people to fill the talent pipeline essential to our state’s economic success.

Massachusetts’ economy, the envy of so many states, did not happen by accident. The 1993 education reform law was a primary factor driving the commonwealth’s transformation into an innovation-fueled, economic powerhouse.

The state’s vocational-technical high schools, which embraced MCAS and other reforms, were transformed into a national model for academic and vocational excellence. Voc-tech schools are now schools of choice, producing graduates that help ensure a healthy supply of talented workers.

Between 2010 and 2020, employment in Massachusetts grew by more than 15%, well above the national average.

Massachusetts’ culture of innovation and excellence helped the state earn WalletHub’s top ranking for innovation in 2022. And the state retained its top spot in innovation and placed second for human capital in [WalletHub’s 2023 survey](https://wror.com/2023/09/06/massachusetts-is-one-of-the-most-innovative-states-in-the-country/).

Despite this long record of success, state leaders have steadily moved in the wrong direction, removing or undermining the elements of education reform crucial to our economic future. In 2008, they eliminated an independent entity that had performed comprehensive audits of public-school districts. In 2010, officials scrapped the state’s national-model English and math standards and replaced them with the much weaker Common Core standards. Since then, science and history standards have also been weakened.

The effects have been predictable. Between 2011 and 2019, before the Covid-19 pandemic, aggregated MCAS [math scores in Massachusetts fell by 5.8 points](https://pioneerinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/NAEP-math-2011-19-2-1.pdf) in Grades 4 and 8 — a larger decline than in all but 17 states. The decline of [7.9 points in reading scores](https://pioneerinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/NAEP-reading-2011-19-2.pdf)was larger than in all but 14 states.

**Without MCAS, educators would lack a standardized measure**

MCAS remains a key component of education reform. No test is perfect, but removing MCAS as a graduation requirement will deprive schools, families, and the public of an important tool for measuring the effectiveness of the sizable new investments in K-12 education. The recently passed Student Opportunity Act and adoption of the income surtax means significant additional taxpayer dollars will be dedicated to education in our state.

Without MCAS, educators will lack an important standardized measure to determine how public-school students are performing and where improvement is needed.

Massachusetts needs a talented workforce to ensure its economic vitality and the health and well-being of the nearly 1 million students enrolled in our public schools. Sending our high school graduates into the world with a diploma that may not reflect even a basic grasp of the material they need to know would be an injustice to them and threaten to exacerbate the shortage of qualified and competent workers the state already faces.

Eliminating the MCAS graduation requirement would move Massachusetts in exactly the wrong direction. Voters should reject the MTA’s ballot initiative.

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