

**How Massachusetts Can Become a K-12 Education Leader Again**

By [Charles Chieppo](https://www.realclearpolicy.com/authors/charles_chieppo/) and Jamie Gass
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Even amid the frenzy of recent state and national elections, the decline in Massachusetts’ performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to a 19-year low made headlines. Conventional wisdom is that the poor performance is due to pandemic learning loss, but data show the problems began much earlier.

NAEP tests 4th and 8th grade students in reading and math. Between 2011 and 2019, before the pandemic, aggregated 4th- and 8th-grade [math scores in Massachusetts fell by 5.8 points](https://pioneerinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/NAEP-math-2011-19-2-1.pdf), more than in all but 17 states. Reading was even worse. The [decline of 7.9 points](https://pioneerinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/NAEP-reading-2011-19-2.pdf) was larger than in all but 14 states.

It’s quite a contrast from the years following passage of the 1993 Education Reform Act, which provided a substantial state funding increase in return for accountability, high standards, and expanded school choice options. In its aftermath, state SAT scores rose for 13 consecutive years.  In 2005, the Bay State became the first to have its students score tops in the country in all four categories tested on NAEP. By 2007, Massachusetts eighth graders even tied for first in the world on international science testing.

Some will dismiss this evidence, arguing that standardized tests are meaningless. Like all things, they aren’t perfect – and they’re not the only data on which we should rely. But the fact is that the [test scores correlate to probability of economic success, adaptability to retraining, civic integration, and even likelihood of incarceration.](https://pioneerinstitute.org/pioneer-research/transcripts/core-academic-knowledge/)

Well over a decade ago, Massachusetts began to turn away from the recipe that led to unprecedented success. It started with the elimination of an independent agency that performed comprehensive school district audits, ensuring accountability for the now $11 billion that state and local taxpayers invest annually in public schools.

Academic standards were next. In 2010, the Bay State ditched English and math standards that were a model for other states in favor of weaker national standards known as Common Core. Later, Massachusetts adopted less rigorous science and U.S. history standards as well.

Choice has also been restricted. A [recent Globe article](https://www.bostonglobe.com/2022/11/26/metro/boston-schools-lost-15000-black-students-past-20-years-where-did-they-go-will-they-ever-return/?p1=BGSearch_Overlay_Results) highlighted that the Black population in Boston Public Schools has fallen by half over the past two decades while Black enrollment in the city’s charter schools has surged. Overall, half the students in the city’s charter schools are Black, compared to just 30 percent of BPS students.

It shouldn’t come as a surprise that when Black parents were asked what school they would choose for their kids, 36 percent picked charters – more than chose BPS or even private schools.  A Stanford University study found that Boston charters were doing more to narrow achievement gaps than any other group of public schools in the country. But strict state caps prevent more Black parents in Boston from sending their children to charters, instead relegating them to BPS, where fewer than a third of students in grades 3 through 8 achieve proficiency in reading and math.

Much of the rollback of education reform was done in the name of enhancing equity, but it has had the opposite result. Between 1998 and 2005, Massachusetts was one of only three states to show significant increases in 8th-grade reading scores; it was also [in the top three for narrowing achievement gaps.](https://pioneerinstitute.org/pioneer-research/transcripts/core-academic-knowledge/)

The decline in Massachusetts’ NAEP reading and math scores accelerated after the state adopted Common Core. A 2020 Pioneer Institute study found that in the years following its implementation, [national](https://pioneerinstitute.org/pioneer-research/academic-standards-pioneer-research/the-common-core-debacle-results-from-2019-naep-and-other-sources/) [achievement gaps also grew](https://pioneerinstitute.org/pioneer-research/academic-standards-pioneer-research/the-common-core-debacle-results-from-2019-naep-and-other-sources/), with the largest performance declines occurring among students at and below the 25th percentile.

Deteriorating statewide performance can’t be blamed on money. Massachusetts already had among the best-funded schools in the country before a 2019 law wisely devoted an [additional $1.5 billion over seven years](https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2019/10/03/state-senate-passes-reform-bill/dvnWYRwFxQXsNaVXaxY33M/story.html) to reducing the spending gulf between poorer and more affluent school districts.

MCAS, the last vestige of reform, may be next on the chopping block. At a recent meeting of the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, Massachusetts Teachers Association President Max Page mocked the board for its [“obsession with a test invented some 20 years ago.”](https://www.bostonglobe.com/2022/08/23/opinion/mta-chief-max-page-tells-it-like-he-is/)

But the evidence suggests that Page has it exactly wrong. What we need is to end our dalliance with failed policies and return to the proven approach that narrowed achievement gaps and made Massachusetts a world leader in K-12 education.

*Charles Chieppo is a senior fellow and Jamie Gass directs the Center for School Reform at Pioneer Institute, a Boston-based think tank.*