

MCAS can evolve for a new era

BY NICK DONOHUE

MASSACHUSETTS IS RICH in so many ways. It's vibrant and diverse, with world-famous institutions and a storied history of improving the way many of its citizens live. That history is exemplified by the education reform movement launched more than 15 years ago. Driven by a true partnership between business, educators, and Beacon Hill, it was a bold initiative to secure a standards-based approach to learning as a way of educating our citizens in an equitable manner.

Following this approach, Massachusetts has moved to the head of the class on certain nationally calibrated measures of school success, such as the National Assessment of Education Progress. We have also seen an increase in MCAS scores for those who graduate from high school. However, roughly 20 percent of Massachusetts high school students do not graduate, and too few who do are prepared for higher learning. We also see too many teachers leaving the profession and higher turnover than ever among school officials. In short, we have made some progress through the implementation of MCAS, but we have much further to go.

Realizing the limits of our progress to date has brought us to an interesting crossroad in the debate over MCAS. There are a number of possible paths forward, each with a committed following. There are those who say "stay the course" with current reform efforts, including MCAS. The problem is, the "course" does not lead to the level of skills

and knowledge that students will need to lead economically and civically engaged lives. Thanks to the progress of education reform, we have more people learning more, but without a sufficient number learning enough.

The achievement gap is narrowing slowly, but there is a "learning gap" that remains vast. This learning gap is the distance between achievement as defined by current standards and what is needed in order to succeed. This gap is real and is growing, and staying the course with MCAS will not close it. The standards that underpin MCAS and the current methods of assessing student learning were created to focus on bringing underperformers up to acceptable levels. Unfortunately, the floor has become the ceiling for the system in many respects.

There are those who would argue that we need to abandon MCAS, and what some see as narrow and restrictive standards, and put education "back in the hands of educators." While we should certainly provide better support to our hard-working teachers, abandoning clear, high standards is unwise. If we aspire to the varied system necessary to meet the needs of a broad range of learners, then clear expectations are essential.

Some suggest accommodations to the current system. Mayor Lang says the debate over MCAS can be solved with a dual diploma system that recognizes success other than that defined by scores on the high-stakes test. His stance is not without its logic. Any review of what is necessary

for life in the 21st century reveals an array of skills and knowledge that is not sufficiently measured by MCAS. However, this dual approach could lead to “dueling” systems, and a broader gap in achievement between the haves and have-nots.

What we need is an evolution to the type of comprehensive, flexible system that will educate the largest number of learners possible at the highest levels. Such an evolution will require the wisdom to accept worthy aspects of the current system; the humility to renovate the system for a new era; the vision to articulate the standards and types of student engagement that truly provide educational opportunity for all; and dynamic leadership that will fight for profound changes.

The Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 actually can and should be the basis for this new system. The law is rooted in a commitment to standards, and defines an assessment system composed of a variety of instruments and methods that are sensitive to different learning styles and barriers to learning.

In *McDuffy v. Secretary of the Executive Office of Education*, a case significantly linked to the development and adoption of education reform, the court held that an educated Massachusetts child would possess (among other capabilities): “sufficient knowledge of economic, social, and political systems...sufficient grounding in the arts to enable each student to appreciate his or her cultural and historical heritage...[and] sufficient training or preparations for advance training in either academic or vocational fields so as to enable each child to choose and pursue life work intelligently.”

We need MCAS, but also a variety of measurements.

To date, this type of system has not been fully constructed and implemented. We need a robust “system of assessment” as intended by the Education Reform Act, a system that may include an on-demand testing component such as MCAS, but also a broad variety of measurement tools more closely aligned with the breadth of revised learning goals and consistent with MCAS’s original purposes.

The new system must honor learning that is acquired in different settings and demonstrated in a wider variety of ways. We must increase the number of internships and other “applied learning opportunities.” For example, learners could receive partial credit in English for work at a local newspaper; high-tech work sites are similarly rich in opportunities to learn math and other sciences.

High standards must guide these efforts. Experienced teachers should vet these experiences, and classroom

learning should complement and support these kinds of opportunities. If we want world-class thinkers and doers, we must have a system that asks learners to engage in and complete complex tasks that demonstrate competency in real-world contexts.

This will demand a change in how we regard accountability and delivery. Accountability should not be the sole burden of learners, but rather relate to outcomes that reflect a compact between learners, educators, and policy-makers. These outcomes must be rooted in integrity of purpose and must receive sufficient support. If we acknowledge that outdated methods are destined to deliver modest results, we should honor our teachers by allowing them to apply their creativity. Holding educators responsible for teaching students how to fly but only allowing them to use vehicles that run on the ground is simply unfair.

Implementing this type of system would admittedly be a challenge, but one well worth it. High standards can be measured fairly and accurately using both a state-administered test and locally-controlled performance assessments. The on-demand test would need to be shorter and complemented by a rich, reliable, and valid way of measuring the complex features of student learning to which we aspire. A number of our neighbors in New England are wrestling with similar issues. Collaboration with other states on these issues will only help. We can and should work together.

We cannot mention this type of K-12 system without briefly discussing its implications for higher education. In order to make good on the promise provided by such a K-12 system, we must broaden the notion of postsecondary education to embrace a wider array of opportunities that still includes the gold ring of four-year degrees. We are capable of creating high quality, varied pathways—based on strong, varied standards—to guide learners to the bright futures they choose. Commitment to this type of alignment will allow Massachusetts to once again lead the world by redefining an accessible and high quality system of “higher learning.”

We have a responsibility to build on our creative and productive history, and take the lead in evolving education. A century ago we moved out of the one-room school house. The time has come to move beyond the well-intended, important foundation started with MCAS and toward a system that is aligned with both our current and future needs—one in which creativity, teachers, and students can all thrive. **CW**

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