

# MCAS has the potential to change education for the better

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**A**s we wait for the school-by-school results of last spring's MCAS tests, the tension is palpable and education is front-page news. Critics say that the MCAS is just another test, only harder and longer and with higher stakes. The MCAS is hard and long and students will eventually be denied a diploma if they don't pass. But the MCAS, with all its flaws, differs significantly from other standardized tests, and therein lies its potential to change schools for the better.

Traditional standardized tests are timed (pencils down!), multiple-choice (no essays or writing), and secret (almost impossible to study for). The MCAS is untimed, contains a substantial number of demanding open-ended questions (students have to write and explain their thinking), and open (actual test items for the last two years have been publicly released, along with examples of student work on the open-ended questions, scoring guides, and links to the state's curriculum expectations).

All this means the MCAS is less a test of how quick or clever or advantaged you are than of how much you have *learned*. It means that you can *study* for this test. It means that all students who get good teaching of an aligned curriculum, are exposed to examples of quality student work, get helpful feedback, and work hard should be able to do well.

Despite the disappointing state results so far, the results of a similar statewide test in Texas should give us hope. The Texas test is credited with boosting student achievement across the board and producing dramatic gains in the achievement of poor, black, and Hispanic students.

But will this happen in Massachusetts? Some local educators and parents worry about "teaching to the test" and giving up cherished curriculum units. There is a long-standing resistance in the United States to a centralized curriculum — a resistance that I used to share. As a young teacher in an inner-city Boston school in the 1970s, I bridled at any attempt to tell me what to teach.

But if every teacher is able to decide what is taught, there will inevitably be gaps in students' skills and knowledge as they move through the grades. Kids may never learn who Hitler was, what makes night and day, or how to write a persuasive essay. Middle-class children pick up a lot of this at home. Poor children generally do not. So it is incumbent on schools to present an organized grade-by-grade sequence that covers the funda-

mental skills and knowledge children need in order for them to have decent options in their lives. Someone has to decide what each grade level is responsible for (how the curriculum is taught can and should be wide open to teachers' individuality and creativity). Given the large amount of student mobility from school to school, the state is a logical candidate. What gets tested gets taught, so a rigorous statewide test was chosen as the prime mover of this process — and the MCAS is certainly getting people's attention.

In our school, the MCAS triggered a four-step process of change (accompanied by plenty of anxiety and some pain). First, it forced us to move from platitudes about "all children can learn" to the specifics of "can they learn this?" We sat down as a staff and took a selection of the fourth-grade MCAS ourselves and decided that the test was hard but appropriate to the 21st century and therefore an absolute must for our students.

Second, we thought through whether we believed that our students could master this material, given the severe disadvantages with which many enter school. Our answer: with the right teaching and support over a period of years, almost all of them could.

Third, we realized that we had to spread out the curriculum underlying the MCAS from kindergarten to fifth grade so every teacher could play a part in the challenge. This took a whole summer of work by teams of teachers and consultants, and much follow-up.

And fourth, we intensified our search for the best methods and materials to teach the curriculum, including the effective use of data on our students' efforts to give them the feedback they need to improve.

Are we teaching to the test? Absolutely. Few complain about high schools teaching to the Advanced Placement Tests, and AP courses are often the most focused and effective in students' school experience, precisely because there is a challenging test, a public curriculum, and readily available items from previous tests. If this approach is all right for elite high school students, why not for all students? As long as the test is valid and covers a rich variety of skills and knowledge, and as long as teachers don't take a drill-and-kill approach to teaching, there is nothing wrong with MCAS focusing our efforts.

These formidable tests are focusing the work of Massachusetts schools. The result over the next few years should be that students learn more, especially those who have the most to learn.

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