



COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS
THE GENERAL COURT
STATE HOUSE, BOSTON 02133-1053

21 June 2022

Dear Commissioner Riley and Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education:

We, the undersigned Massachusetts legislators, write to urge you to reject a pending proposal to raise Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) passing scores.

Collectively, we represent thousands of public school students, parents, caregivers, educators, school officials, and concerned community members.

Raising MCAS passing scores is likely to intensify, not reverse, negative consequences of 24 years of the high-stakes MCAS. The negative consequences would be the most onerous for groups of students who already suffer and were disproportionately harmed by the COVID-19 pandemic, especially English learners and students with disabilities as well as Black and Latinx students. It is worth noting that these are the very students the MCAS purports to help.

If the state's goal is racial and social equity, this is the wrong way to go. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has said that closing achievement gaps is one of its top priorities. However, since the advent of high-stakes MCAS, test score gaps of Massachusetts' English language learners, African-American, Latinx, economically disadvantaged, and disabled students have remained larger than national gaps for those groups, based on National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results.

High-stakes tests, such as MCAS, focus learning on a narrow range of skills, to the detriment of skills needed in the wider world such as problem solving, innovation, communication, social skills, emotional resilience, appreciation of diversity, and teamwork skills.

We are deeply concerned about the impact on students' mental health because of the pandemic. This proposal would add even more stress to high school students' already stressful lives. Many students who fail high-stakes tests suffer from negative emotional consequences, including reduced self-confidence. Even those who pass face weeks of stress during test prep and testing.

Since MCAS became a graduation requirement for the Class of 2003, *more than 52,000* students have reached the end of 12th grade without passing the MCAS exams required for graduation.

Students who are denied diplomas based on MCAS scores have effectively been given the status of high school dropouts, regardless of whether or not they have successfully fulfilled all other graduation requirements. Their futures have been foreclosed. We believe that all kids in the Commonwealth are worthy of a bright future.

Massachusetts is an outlier – one of just 11 states in the nation still requiring standardized tests for graduation.

Raising the passing scores would be going in the wrong direction for the Commonwealth students.

We urge you to reject this unwise and unjust proposal.

Sincerely,

Patricia D. Jehlen
State Senator
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Jo Comerford
State Senator
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Worcester District*

James K. Hawkins
State Representative
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Brian M. Ashe
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Ruth B. Balsler
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Christine P. Barber
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34th Middlesex District

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Fourth Essex District

Natalie M. Blais
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11th Essex District

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Second Norfolk District

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Cynthia Stone Creem
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Third Bristol District

Mindy Domb
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Third Hampshire District

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35th Middlesex District

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15th Suffolk District

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Sixth Norfolk District

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13th Norfolk District

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Sean Garballey
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23rd Middlesex District

James Kelcourse
State Representative
First Essex District

1. National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) results from 2003 to 2019 show that MCAS-driven schooling has not significantly closed reading and math gaps by race or income.

<https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/ndecore/landingpdf>

<https://www.citizensforpublicschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/MCAS-Wrong-Answer-Report-2.pdf>

2. Gaps by income and race in four-year college completion have widened.

<https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/ndecore/landing>

<https://www.citizensforpublicschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/MCAS-Wrong-Answer-Report-2>.

<https://www.americaspromise.org/sites/default/files/d8/2021-10/BGN.pdf>