

# Myopia in Massachusetts

*The state's focus on scores harms students and ignores crucial indicators of school quality.*

Anne Wheelock

Since 1998, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) has been a hallmark of the education landscape in Massachusetts. MCAS involves the annual testing of all students in every grade, except 9th, from 3rd to 10th grade. High school graduation depends on passing the tests in English and mathematics, and students with especially high marks can receive financial aid to attend the state's college and university system. State officials use the annual test results to judge whether or not school systems are meeting the state's standards and to reward or sanction schools on the basis of gains or declines in school scores.

State officials formally adopted the test-based accountability program in May 1999, explicitly rejecting the use of multiple indicators to describe school performance (Vigue & Engley, 1999). In 2001, the Massachusetts Department of Education began using test results to report performance trends in schools and districts. Researchers and educators have pointed out that the poor quality of test questions, mathematical errors in determining ratings, and the strong correlation between test results and community income levels indicate that the school rating system is misconceived and misleading (Boion, 2001; Hanev, 2002; McElhenny, 2001;

Tuerck, 2001). State education officials, however, continue to describe this accountability system as "the shining star of education reform" (cited in Tantraphol, 2001).

## **Luck and School Score Gains**

Do changes in test scores accurately reflect school performance in Massachusetts? Not necessarily, for two reasons.

### *The Changing Population of Test Takers*

The most obvious flaw in the use of gains or declines in test scores to track school performance lies with the different composition of schools' test takers from year to year. In 2000, 19.6 percent of the state's students entered or left their school district during grades 1, 2, and 3, with student transience ranging from 12 to 51 percent in some districts (Massachusetts Department of Revenue, 2000). Because students relatively new to a school can make up a sizable portion of its enrollment, score gains and declines may reflect little more than the chance composition of test takers.

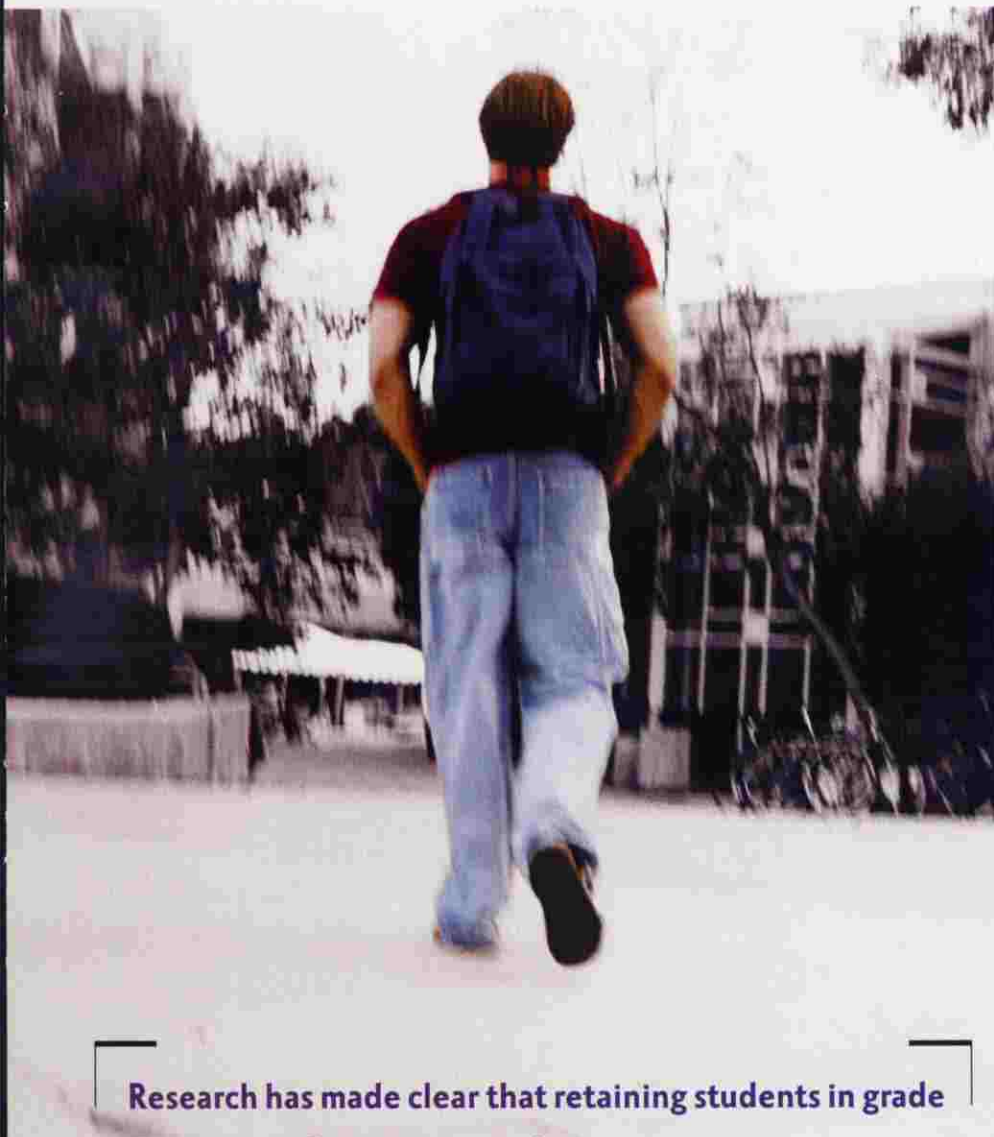
School closings, mergers, and reconfigurations contribute to the problem. For example, Cambridge Public Schools, an urban district of about 7,000 students, has recently closed 8 of 17 elementary schools, merging them with other schools and dispersing whole classrooms of English language learners

to different schools citywide. Around the state, a middle school closing or the decision to switch a district's elementary schools from K-8 to K-5 can disrupt the stability of a school's enrollment. Under such circumstances, test score shifts provide little insight into a particular school's quality.

### *Unreliability of Score Changes in Small Schools*

Even with stable enrollments, chance plays a part in test score changes from year to year, especially in schools testing small numbers of students. In examining scores from North Carolina, Texas, and California, researchers have found wide fluctuations in scores from one year to the next, especially in small schools, which have led them to conclude that 70 percent of test score changes in such schools reflect little more than random variation (Kane & Stager, 2002). Score changes in small Massachusetts schools replicate this pattern. In a review of four years of 4th grade MCAS results from 977 elementary schools, Hanev (2002) found that math scores in schools testing fewer than 100 students could swing 15-20 points from year to year, compared with score shifts of five points in schools testing 150 or more.

Research findings such as these suggest that a school's test score changes may be indicators of luck, rather than of school quality.



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rest of the space less visible, so the focus on MCAS scores as evidence that school reform is “working” obscures other measures of education well-being that have not fared so well during the years of MCAS testing. As state officials applaud rising MCAS scores and pass rates, they discount indicators that signal weaker *school holding power* and *graduating power*.

***Weaker School Holding Power***

School holding power—that is, schools’ capacity to hold on to all students while they move in a timely fashion from 9th to 12th grade—is a strong indicator of overall school health (Balfanz & Legters, 2001). In light of research showing higher dropout rates in states with high school graduation exams (Jacob, 2001), indicators of school holding power merit attention as part of accounting for education reform. But when policy-makers tell the story of Massachusetts education reform, they ignore these indicators.

*Increasing student attrition between grades 8/9 and grade 12.* School holding power is strong when the number of students enrolled in the first year of high school approximates the number enrolled the final year. At Boston College, researchers in the Progress Through the Education Pipeline Project—a Ford Foundation-

October 1991 who failed to reach grade 12 in 1995. For the class of 2003, attrition was highest for Latino students, who showed an overall enrollment decline of 42 percent from 8th to 12th grade and a decline of 27 percent from 9th to 12th grade.

*Increasing rates of grade failure, especially in grade 9.* Research has long made clear that retaining students in grade depresses achievement, undermines motivation, and puts students at higher risk for dropping out (Hauser, 2001; Shepard & Smith, 1989). In 2000–2001, the last year for which state data are available, 24,640 students





rates calculated on the basis of 8th grade enrollments will also decline, from a range of 80–83 percent over the seven-year period prior to the implementation of MCAS as an exit exam to 76.5 percent for all students—79.9 percent for white students, 65.7 percent for African American students, and 51.6 percent for Latino students.

### Public Accounting or Public Relations?

The official account of education reform in Massachusetts is one of rising test scores, high pass rates, and dozens of exemplary schools. At best, this narrative is incomplete. In fact, the story of MCAS pass rates and school records is less straightforward, and official statements sound like a public relations campaign designed to promote high-stakes MCAS testing.

#### *Miscalculated Pass Rates*

The official narrative of school reform often emphasizes the story of hard-working students rising to meet the challenge of high-stakes testing. After the first round of testing, 67 percent of the class of 2003 had passed MCAS (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2001). Three retests followed, and in March 2003, state officials announced that 90 percent of the class had passed MCAS and could graduate from high school (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2003a, 2003b).

Basing pass rates on the number of high school seniors in October 2002 and not on the number originally enrolled in 9th grade in October 1999, however, inflates rates considerably. In short, the pass rates increased not only because about 8,700 more students passed the tests after the first round of testing, but also because approximately 17,000 students between grades 9 and 12 disappeared from the total number of enrolled students and were excluded from the accounting.

When all students were included in the calculation, pass rates were 70 percent, not 90 percent, for all students. Pass rates were 54 percent, not 75

percent, for African American students; and 40 percent, not 70 percent, for Latino students. Moreover, although the state reported that 15 districts had pass rates of 93 percent, the actual “on time” pass rates for those same districts ranged from 88 to 55 percent, depending on the district’s student attrition rate (Haney, Madaus, & Wheelock, 2003).

### A complete account of reform requires attention to a wider variety of indicators, including those that highlight the status of the state’s most vulnerable students.

Inflated pass rates reported by the state and repeated over and over in the media have clearly helped neutralize public opposition to the state’s graduation requirement. In Massachusetts, achieving high pass rates reflects not just students’ hard work, then, but also student attrition combined with a method of calculating the rates that discounts the students who did not progress to 12th grade with their class.

#### *Award-Winning Schools: Exemplars of Progress?*

The Massachusetts accountability policy awards \$10,000 to individual schools designated as Compass Schools because of their exemplary MCAS gains. Although the stated purpose of the program is to identify model practices for replication by other schools, the program has repeatedly favored elementary schools that typically test small numbers of students, reaching as few as 27 in one school (Wheelock, 2002). State officials use the program as occasion to tout the benefits of education reform, but, in fact, the small numbers tested make it difficult to distinguish good schools from lucky schools.

At the same time, many high schools recognized for gains in 10th grade scores also show increases in student attrition between 9th and 10th grade (Wheelock, 2002). School score gains in

this context hardly seem cause for celebration. To the contrary, they raise concerns that an accountability policy that relies on MCAS scores to describe schools as exemplary may actually discourage schools from holding on to students whose test score prospects threaten their ratings.

The claim that the reform is working in Massachusetts is plausible only as

long as the focus is on test scores alone. But test scores are dependent on other indicators that are not part of the accountability system. A complete account of reform requires attention to a wider variety of indicators, including those that highlight the status of the state’s most vulnerable students.

#### Alternatives to Test-Based Accountability

The narrow test-based accountability system does a disservice to the public and to the students of Massachusetts. Using MCAS scores as the sole basis of the state’s accountability program may appear to offer a clear account of reform in the state, but it actually hides from public view the full picture of how well schools are working for all students.

What are the alternatives? The Coalition for Authentic Reform in Education (n.d.) has proposed an accountability plan for Massachusetts that would draw a more comprehensive picture of school performance. The plan calls for limited standardized testing in reading and math, but it would also require locally developed performance-based assessments, such as portfolios, exhibitions, and performance tasks tied to the state’s broad learning goals in all subject areas. In addition, the plan envisions school-quality reviews conducted on a



three- to five-year cycle by teams of educators and trained community participants from other districts. The process is similar to a review process in place in Rhode Island and a review already conducted for charter schools in Massachusetts. Finally, schools would be required to describe the status of students' academic progress, allocation of school resources, and schools' holding power in an annual report to their own communities.

By including indicators of school holding and graduating power, the plan would produce a less triumphant picture of education reform. But such a plan is necessary if accountability is to serve school reform policies that attend to the status of all students, especially the most vulnerable. ■

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