



Staying the course on MCAS

James Peysers statement before the Boston City Council

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There is a temptation to pull out the microscope and over-interpret the MCAS results, in our impatience to pass final judgment on whether our efforts at standards-based reform can be declared a success. As difficult as it is, we have to avoid jumping to conclusions, positive or negative, on the basis of still thin data. Nevertheless, looking at the big picture, there is reason to be cautiously optimistic and, in particular, there is reason for us to redouble our efforts and stay the course.

Over the past three years, there is a pattern of modest, consistent improvement across the grades in both English and math. Since 1998, with the exception of 10th grade English, failure rates are down and scaled scores are up.

For now, as important as the data, is the mounting evidence on the ground that standards-based reform is working. In most districts, MCAS-including the consequences that are attached for students and adults-is causing schools to broaden and elevate their curriculum for all students. It is giving effective school leaders the information and leverage they need to drive change and improve the quality of instruction. It is helping school districts confront the structural barriers to reform that for years have stood in the way of educational excellence.

Of course, not everyone sees MCAS the way I do. There is a chorus of critics that believes high stakes testing is punitive, especially with respect to poor minority students in urban school systems.

High stakes are not punitive, if the standards and assessments are fair, as I believe ours to be. A high school diploma is not an entitlement. It is something that must be earned through effort and achievement. Moreover, acquiring a diploma is not what education is about. Education is about acquiring knowledge and skill. It is unfair and unethical to hand young people a piece of paper and tell them they are ready for success when they are not.

In the absence of stakes for students and schools, MCAS would not be taken seriously and therefore would be an expensive and largely futile exercise. In effect, this is the system we had in place with the MEAP test. The first question people ask when taking a test is "does it count?" Unless it counts, no-one will feel compelled to give an honest effort, thereby making the data suspect. Moreover, without stakes, there is no accountability. Without accountability, there is no reform.

The critics, however, say that the high failure rates-especially among low income and minority students-prove that the test is simply too hard and inherently unfair. To be sure, if you look at the percentages only, the picture is not very hopeful. But when you look beyond the percentages to the actual numbers, you will quickly realize that this is a challenge we can meet.

For example, sixty percent of black 10th graders statewide failed this year's English Language Arts test. That translates into just over 2,000 students. The vast majority of these students are concentrated in a relative handful of districts and schools, indeed probably two-thirds live in Boston. These districts and schools are receiving new money as part of the state's \$40 million targeted MCAS remediation grant program, which the Board of Education has just recommended increasing for FY2002. In short,

we know who these young people are, we know where they go to school, we know what they need help on, and we are providing new resources to help deliver effective accelerated instruction.

Keeping in mind that students who fail in 10th grade will be able to retake the test at least four times before finishing 12th grade, it is clear to me that we can get these students over the bar, as long as we focus our energy on teaching and learning.

Thanks to the leadership of Tom Payzant and a number of highly motivated, highly qualified principals, Boston is helping to show the way. In particular, I want to draw your attention to the fact that since 1998, eight Boston schools have realized scaled score gains in both English and math of 5-to-10 points or more, while at the same time driving down failure rates by 15-to-30 points or more. Another school, the O'Hearn Elementary School has seen its failure rate in English go from 14 percent in 1998 to zero in 2000.

In short, this year's MCAS results should reinforce our confidence in the capacity of this reform movement to raise academic achievement throughout the Commonwealth and throughout this city.

Will dropout rates rise as students who fail in 10th grade conclude prematurely that they will never graduate? Possibly. But we should understand that the absence of standards and high expectations have themselves contributed to the already high drop out rates. Teenagers who are not challenged and are not learning rapidly reach the conclusion that school is a waste of their time. They may not be "A" students, but they aren't fools, either.

Nevertheless, for those students who are tempted to dropout in frustration, we must make every effort to keep them in school. We must also make clear that educational opportunities don't end at 12th grade, even for those students who don't graduate on time. Some students will need more than 12 or 13 years to earn their diploma. We must ensure that districts and community colleges keep their doors open to young adults who want to stay in school and earn their diplomas. In addition, we must work with non-profit organizations and businesses to develop community-based and work-based settings for young people to continue their education.

I want to close by reading a quote from an essay that appeared in the November 15 edition of Education Week, by William Taylor. Mr. Taylor served on Thurgood Marshall's staff at the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund. In the 1960s, he served as the staff director of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. He founded and directed the Center for National Policy Review, and is currently vice chairman of the Leadership Conference of Civil Rights, and vice-chair of the Citizens' Commission on Civil Rights. Here's what he had to say about high-stakes testing:

"The real high stakes are imposed not by a test, but by educational neglect. Students who receive a bad education are penalized whether or not they obtain a diploma.... If in our zeal to protect students we wage war on standards and standardized tests, then we continue the old regime of low expectations that has plagued poor and minority children for so many years."