

Introduction

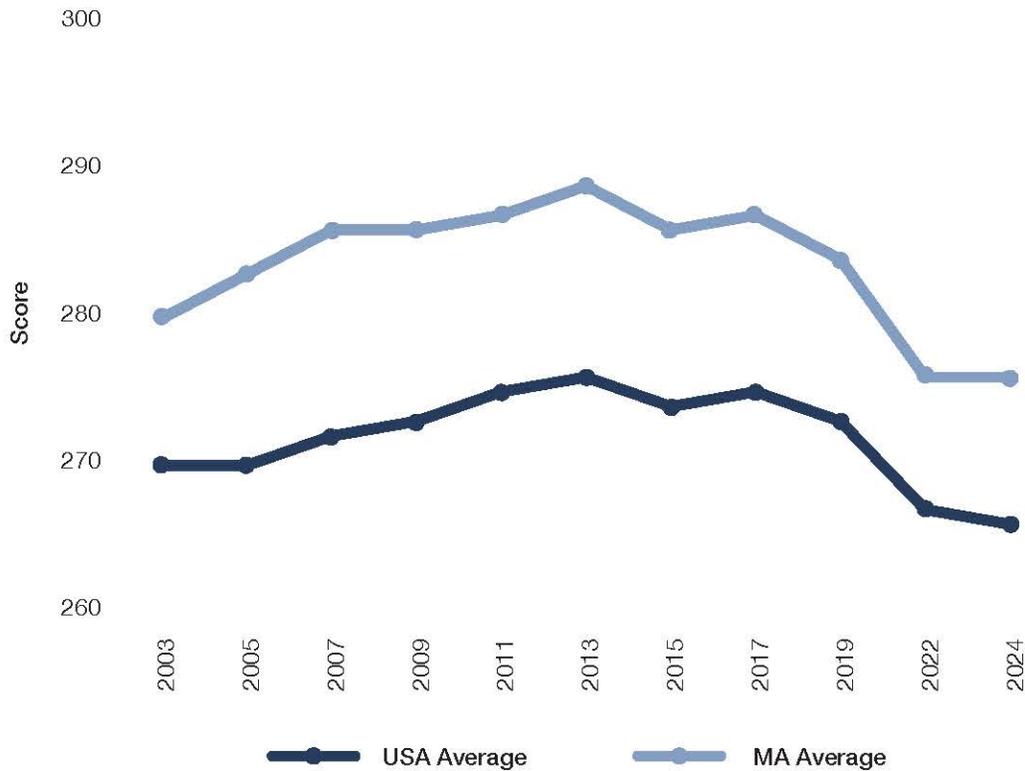
Massachusetts once stood as the undisputed policy leader in K–12 education. That rise began in earnest with the landmark 1993 Massachusetts Education Reform Act (MERA), which instituted rigorous academic standards, strong accountability mechanisms, and a groundbreaking funding formula. These state policies helped propel the Commonwealth from mediocrity in the early 1990s to best-in-the-nation National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores by the middle of the 2000s, with consistently strong performance across grades and subjects. For over 20 years, Massachusetts was the national model for state-level education reform.

Our hard-won education progress is unraveling.

But that hard-won progress is unraveling. Since 2013, Massachusetts’ NAEP performance has declined sharply (see figure 1). Eighth-grade math scores, which rose from 279 in 2000 to a peak of 301 in 2013, have now fallen back to 283, nearly erasing a decade of gains. Reading scores have followed a similar pattern. The state’s education system has regressed to late 20th century levels.

The fall 2024 repeal of the MCAS graduation requirement—the capstone of the state’s standards-based reform—marks a substantive break from the MERA era. Despite Massachusetts still ranking near the top nationally, that position now masks steep decline on NAEP, known as the nation’s report card. The Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) outperformed Massachusetts in every tested subject in 2022 and 2024, and other states such as New Jersey and Minnesota have caught up or surpassed Massachusetts on several measures.

Figure 1. Average NAEP Scores, Massachusetts and the U.S.¹



Meanwhile, reform-minded states like Mississippi and Louisiana have seen remarkable progress. Mississippi’s commitment to the science of reading, targeted teacher training, and data-informed interventions has elevated it from the bottom to 21st in 4th-grade reading. In just five years, Louisiana has leapt from 42nd to 16th on the same metric through similar literacy reforms, accountability, and school choice policies.

Massachusetts has many advantages those states do not—world-class universities, robust biomedical, and technology sectors, and a long-standing civic commitment to K–12 education reform. Massachusetts also has the best charter, public, vocational-technical, private, and parochial schools in the nation. But those assets are being squandered as our public education system increasingly succumbs to anti-intellectualism, bureaucratic inertia, and a refusal to reckon with poor performance. The widespread adoption of ideologically driven, academically empty “social justice” curricula in many schools—even urban charter schools—has compounded pandemic-related learning loss, especially for the students most in need of rigorous instruction.

It is time for renewal. We must recommit to academic excellence, reject distractions that devalue core learning in the liberal arts, and expand access to the kinds of educational opportunities—charter schools, vocational-technical programs, inter-district choice, and METCO—that once made Massachusetts a leader in public school innovation. The following recommendations outline a path forward for the next governor to restore Massachusetts’ education policy standing and build a system worthy of the Commonwealth’s history, aspirations, and schoolchildren.

Civic Education to Restore Civil Public Discourse

In 1993, the Education Reform Act called for rigorous instruction and testing in U.S. history and civics to ensure that students could fully participate in public affairs as informed, responsible citizens. The law emphasized foundational content—such as the U.S. Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, Massachusetts and U.S. history, and labor history—to ground students in the workings and principles of our democratic system.

But today, civic knowledge is alarmingly low. Pioneer Institute polling shows many Massachusetts students cannot identify the three branches of government or explain basic constitutional rights. This vacuum of civic knowledge has fueled rising political polarization, as emotion and ideology replace shared facts and a wider sense of common good. Many other states now do a better job preparing students for citizenship than does Massachusetts—a state steeped in American history. As the birthplace of the American Revolution and constitutional self-government, the Commonwealth has a special responsibility to lead in teaching U.S. history. Reestablishing rigorous civics instruction is essential to self-government in our democracy.

Providing Adults a Pathway to Career Success

Massachusetts has a problem: an exodus of talent and capital due to poor state fiscal and economic policies. Compounding the issue is a workforce development system that is bureaucratic and expensive; spending \$2.5 billion annually. Dozens of opaque state agencies and publicly funded programs operate with no unified leadership, inconsistent data reporting, and limited alignment with actual labor market demand. As a result, many residents cannot access—or even find—training that leads to sustainable careers.

The state has several options to redefine the workforce development system, including the centralization and alignment of programs with employer needs, standardized outcome tracking, and creating a clear public inventory of workforce programs to improve access and eliminate duplication. With savings from centralizing programs, the state can invest in expanding the number of seats in our vocational-technical high schools and after-school adult career training on the campuses of the state’s nation-leading voc-tech schools.

Excellence

Recommit to Academic Excellence & Accountability

Since 2013, Massachusetts has experienced a marked decline in academic achievement, especially in math and English language arts. Between 2013 and 2019, New England saw the steepest NAEP declines in the country—4th grade math dropped 5 points and 8th grade math by 7 points, compared to national declines of only 2–3 points. The downturn accelerated after Massachusetts replaced its nationally benchmarked academic standards with Common Core-aligned frameworks in 2010 and again in 2017.

These newer standards degraded high-quality academic content in favor of vague skill-building objectives based on educational fads. In English, the amount of classic literature students read was cut by 60 percent, and the curriculum became dominated by fragmented excerpts and process-based learning. Math progression was similarly delayed: Algebra I was pushed from 8th to 9th or 10th grade, and students are no longer introduced to key concepts like ratios and division until years later than in high-performing countries. As a result, Massachusetts students are now 2–3 years behind peers in Singapore, Japan, and South Korea in math achievement.

This pedagogical shift has eroded Massachusetts' previous gains. From 2005 to 2013, Massachusetts led the nation on NAEP across all tested subjects. In 2007, its 8th graders tied for first globally in science on the Trends in International Math and Science Study (TIMSS) exam. But since adopting Common Core, Massachusetts' NAEP and SAT scores have declined steadily. Eighth-grade reading scores dropped from 277 in 2013 to 268 in 2019—nearly back to 1990 levels.⁷

By rejecting mediocrity and rebuilding a culture of academic rigor, Massachusetts can again lead the nation in education outcomes.

Recommendation: Restore academic excellence by:

- Reinstating strong, content-rich standards for English, math, and science modeled on pre-2010 frameworks. Require students to read full texts—not excerpts—and prioritize classic literature, poetry, drama, history, and foundational knowledge.
- Returning to phonics-based reading instruction and structural literacy, which have proven to be most effective across demographic groups.
- Reintroducing traditional math sequencing, including early mastery of multiplication, division, fractions, ratios, and Algebra I by 8th grade.
- Using transparent statewide assessments aligned to these standards to hold schools accountable, without necessarily tying passage to graduation. Assessments should serve as a check on systemwide performance and drive targeted improvement efforts.

Rebuild External Quality Control for Our Public Schools

The 2014 repeal of the MCAS graduation requirement eroded a central element of Massachusetts' post-1990 accountability system. While the Commonwealth remains a high performer, student achievement has declined sharply, with 4th-grade NAEP reading and math scores falling toward early-2000s levels. At the same time, other states—notably Florida, Mississippi, and Louisiana—have improved outcomes through early diagnostics paired with targeted intervention. The end of a single high-stakes exit exam creates an opportunity to replace a “lumpy, low, late” measure with a more coherent, systemwide quality-control framework.

Research shows accountability works best when it relies on fewer, strategically placed external checkpoints rather than frequent testing or a single high-stakes endpoint. Massachusetts' reliance on a lone 10th-grade exam forced a low bar and limited its usefulness