

# MCAS, NAEP, and Educational Accountability

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## Executive Summary

In 1993, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts—the birthplace of American public schools—dramatically overhauled its K–12 education system. It created a new school finance formula and built an educational accountability structure to ensure every child has access to a high-quality education.

The Massachusetts Education Reform Act (MERA) established academic standards in core subjects, mandated assessments to measure student outcomes on those standards, and established a system for holding schools accountable when students failed to meet basic expectations.

This system has helped Massachusetts’ public schools become the highest performing in the country. Student outcomes in all tested subjects and across demographic groups have improved steadily over time. In 2022 and for the 11 years preceding it, Massachusetts ranked at the top or near the top of state rankings on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), as well as being the only state that’s internationally competitive in math and science. These achievements have made Massachusetts and its ambitious education reform a beacon for other states.

But work remains. Even with great improvements in academic outcomes across demographic groups, disparities in achievement and attainment exist between the Commonwealth’s most privileged students and their less privileged counterparts, many of whom are black or Hispanic. These disparities are unacceptable and indicate that access to top-performing schools is heavily weighted toward the state’s wealthy white suburbs. However, without the MERA and its requirement to assess every student and publish aggregate academic outcomes, policymakers may not understand the extent of disparity or how to address it.

Student outcomes data are integral to understanding where Massachusetts’ public schools have been, where they are going, and how they can get there. The following paper relies heavily on data to illustrate the importance of the Massachusetts Education Reform Act and how it has positively impacted students over time. It explains why the current accountability system evolved as it did and why preserving the most important aspects of that system is critical if the state is going to fulfill its constitutional obligation to educate all children to a high common standard.

## Introduction

In a country known for large investments in K–12 education but middling results, Massachusetts is a success story. For almost 30 years, the Commonwealth has led the nation on national and international tests of student achievement.<sup>1</sup> Researchers praise Massachusetts for its strong academic standards, and surveys find its public schools are among the best in the country.<sup>2</sup>

But the picture isn’t perfect. Like almost every other state, the Commonwealth has failed to ensure that all its public schools perform to the same high standard. Low-income students and students of color disproportionately lack access to the best-performing schools, leading to a persistent achievement gap between these groups and their wealthier, largely white counterparts. The state’s largest school system, the Boston Public Schools, is an example of this inequity. Students admitted to Boston Latin, an exam school consistently cited as one of the nation’s best, are more likely to be white and Asian, while the lowest performing schools in the city are largely populated with black and Latino students.<sup>3</sup> Some of the city’s charter public schools stand out as exceptions: Many enroll higher rates of black and Latino students than their district school counterparts, yet consistently outperform their demographic peers in the district.<sup>4</sup>

Understanding student outcomes is important for holding schools accountable and helping them improve. Until the 1990s, policymakers had little reliable data to help them understand how Massachusetts public schools fared in comparison to one another.

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In the 1980s, the Commonwealth had academic standards and curriculum frameworks for schools to follow, but they were more of a suggestion than a policy lever because the state didn't hold schools accountable for teaching them. As a result, poorly funded, underperforming local schools could graduate students who lacked even basic literary and numeracy skills. This alarmed key stakeholders, especially the business community, which found it difficult to hire high school graduates with the skills necessary to succeed in a changing job market. That community was instrumental in bringing a case for change to the highest court in the state.<sup>5</sup>

In *McDuffy v. Robertson* (1993), the Supreme Judicial Court (SJC) of Massachusetts mandated that the Legislature fix the Commonwealth's school funding formula. The *Robertson* case had revealed yawning differences in the amount of local revenue towns and cities were able to raise through property taxes and allocate to schools, creating a highly inequitable school funding system.<sup>6</sup>

Anticipating the SJC's ruling, the Legislature, led by then-House and Senate Education Committee chairs Mark Roosevelt and Thomas Birmingham, began drafting and debating the Massachusetts Education Reform Act (MERA).

Once passed, the law modernized the school funding formula by establishing a process for the state to periodically determine the base funding level (foundation budget) each school district needs to adequately educate students. It also required the state to assess which districts cannot raise that base amount from local tax revenue and provide state funding to make up the difference. The result of this new approach to funding schools was an unprecedented investment in K–12 education.<sup>7</sup>

In exchange for this infusion of resources into schools, the Legislature required the Commissioner of Education to establish rigorous academic standards for every school in the Commonwealth to follow and to create a system of assessments—the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS)—to understand whether schools were educating students to meet those standards.<sup>8</sup>

To this day, the state uses MCAS as a monitoring tool, requiring criterion-referenced assessments at key inflection points in every student's school experience. Since 2003, students have also been required to pass grade 10 MCAS tests to earn a high school diploma.<sup>9</sup>

Massachusetts wasn't alone in its re-examination of public school funding and its conclusion that increased state investment in schools, in combination with curriculum standards and accountability for outcomes, could be the key to boosting student performance and local economies.

In 1983, the federal government published *A Nation at Risk*, which described low student achievement as a pervasive problem and a national security issue. The language of the report was alarmingly clear: "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war."<sup>10</sup>

The climate surrounding *A Nation at Risk* and an increased awareness that state governments needed to invest more equitably in public schools spurred other states to action as well. Reform-minded advocates in Kentucky and Texas brought school finance lawsuits in those states before *McDuffy v. Robertson*, but with the MERA, Massachusetts would set a new standard in education reform.<sup>11</sup>

The law was effective because it was so comprehensive, linking the provision of adequate resources to measurable student outcomes while also setting a standard for teacher certification and establishing school choice in the Commonwealth by creating what has become one of the nation's highest-performing charter school sectors.<sup>12</sup>

In the decades that followed the MERA, Massachusetts would come to lead the nation in student performance on the National Assessment of Student Progress (NAEP). It would also lead the world on international tests of student achievement, such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Trends in International Math and Science Study (TIMSS). More

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importantly, post MERA, the state would begin to nudge access and achievement gaps between low-income and wealthier students in the right direction, though, 30 years on, that work is far from done.<sup>13</sup>

In recent years, Massachusetts has maintained its position as a national leader, but progress has slowed and, in some cases, reversed.<sup>14</sup> The state's NAEP results were in decline even before the COVID-19 pandemic, while states like Florida have garnered attention for dramatic performance gains on NAEP in the last decade, due in large part to a strong system of standards, accountability, and a focus on early literacy.<sup>15</sup> Policymakers wouldn't be aware of this reversal were it not for the MCAS or NAEP tests.

As important as it is for shining a light on what happens in our schools, MCAS has become a flashpoint in Massachusetts education politics. Whereas the Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA)—the state's most powerful teachers' union—once “appreciated MCAS as a guide,” in recent years it has come to vocally oppose the system, making its abolition a top priority.<sup>16</sup>

MCAS also became more controversial with parents over time, especially as a federal accountability system, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), layered additional accountability measures—many of which affected the lowest-performing districts in the state—on top of state requirements. Critics charge that MCAS and No Child Left Behind narrowed what happens in classrooms, forcing teachers to “teach to the test,” which emphasizes core competencies in math and English language arts over other subject areas, although Massachusetts does administer a science MCAS test.<sup>17</sup>

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has generally held the line on accountability, underscoring the importance of using assessment data to understand whether all schools are serving students and holding them accountable when they don't. But the COVID-19 pandemic both underscored the need for MCAS-style test-based accountability and emboldened those who want to abandon it.

Like states across the country, Massachusetts was forced to halt assessments and waive the MCAS graduation requirement for the class of 2022 because of school closures.<sup>18</sup> For the first time since the MERA, students who were unable to pass the grade 10 MCAS could earn a high school diploma. And while it's clear that large-scale assessments are the best way to diagnose and understand how to address the widespread and devastating learning loss that occurred during the long period of school closures, an anti-MCAS coalition now has the wind in its sails.

That coalition, spearheaded by the MTA, has made the MCAS graduation requirement its first target. In September 2023, Attorney General Andrea Campbell found a proposed ballot question to abolish the MCAS graduation requirement constitutional, which means the coalition could succeed in putting the question to a vote in November 2024 if they collect enough signatures to make it to the ballot.<sup>19</sup>

The risks of abandoning MCAS, whether in whole or in part, are high. Abolishing or watering down the system could leave the state without the outcomes data it needs to intervene when school districts aren't doing their job. This could be especially detrimental to groups that already suffer the most—students who don't have access to our top-performing district and charter schools.

Abolishing the MCAS graduation requirement could hurt students and the economy, as it would remove a key signal to the labor market that high school diploma holders have the basic skills the state deems necessary for success. Understanding the past 30 years of education reform through data can shed light on where the Commonwealth has been and the road ahead.

## Understanding Education Reform Through Student Outcomes

The purposes of a comprehensive accountability system are twofold: It shines a light on the extent to which schools are helping students meet basic standards and provides a mechanism for the state to intervene, ideally with supports, when schools aren't performing to standard.

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MCAS and similar systems function as a tripod consisting of standards, assessments, and a pre-defined set of consequences when schools or districts fail to help students master standards. The tripod functions as follows:

- The state promulgates academic standards in core subjects at each grade level and requires districts to administer assessments aligned to those standards.
- The state publishes school and district assessment outcomes in aggregate, providing transparency into which schools help students meet standards and which do not.
- When a school or district fails to help large swaths of students, the state may intervene with some sort of corrective action.

Historically, consequences for low performance (sometimes called corrective action) have entailed state-provided resources and support for schools, while also curtailing some autonomies. For example, if the majority of fourth grade students in a district aren't reading at grade level, the state may require that district to adopt a different type of reading curriculum. It may also provide resources that allow students to access reading tutors. In Massachusetts, when districts chronically fail to help most students achieve, the state may take more drastic measures, such as appointing an "individual, group, or organization, known as a receiver, with broad authority to revamp district systems and processes to improve student achievement."<sup>20</sup>

When it works, accountability can also shine a light on whether schools are serving their most vulnerable students. When NCLB became federal law in 2001, MCAS had already been underway for several years. NCLB required all states to design the accountability systems Massachusetts and a handful of other states, such as Texas, had pioneered. It additionally required all states to disaggregate outcomes data by student subgroups. This additional transparency measure is important because it can help the state understand whether schools are failing pockets of children. For example, in a large school or district, overall average test scores might suggest that students are mastering basic standards, but a closer look could reveal that a much higher percentage of minority students in a school are performing below standard. This result would prompt the state to ask why some students aren't learning and take appropriate action to correct the inequity.

**In the past 30 years, MCAS has helped Massachusetts dramatically improve its public schools. In the post MERA-era it has become the highest performing state in the nation, as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).<sup>21</sup> MCAS has also injected more transparency and equity into the system, though inequities based on race, ethnicity and income remain. Because of MCAS, stakeholders can see those inequities and try to address them. They aren't common enough, but there are examples of schools and districts (especially charter public schools, which were also created under the MERA) that have closed the access and outcomes gaps MCAS revealed.<sup>22</sup>**

The most compelling case for MCAS is the data it has generated over time. Since 1998, when the system was fully rolled out, the data show a general upward trajectory for all students in most subjects, with some interruptions. That trajectory is shown in the charts on the following pages, but it's worth noting where and why the data show interruptions to progress.

For example, NCLB requirements forced the state to better disaggregate data starting in 2006. Disaggregation allows policymakers to track access gaps between groups of students. Around that time, there was also a gap in the grade 8 English language arts scores, as the Commonwealth reassessed its standards for learning and relied upon grade 7 ELA results to track student progress.

In 2015 and 2016, when the state aligned its curriculum to the Common Core, there is another gap in the data because students took the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) exam and then transitioned to the Next Generation MCAS.

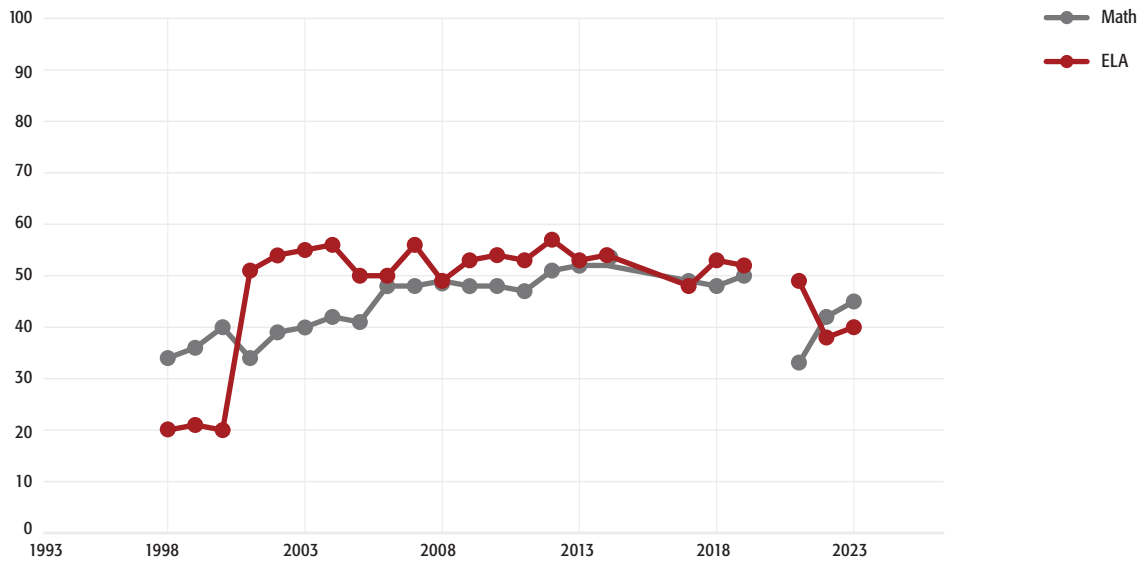
**MCAS and similar systems function as a tripod consisting of standards, assessments, and a predefined set of consequences when schools or districts fail to help students master standards.**

With every transition to a new standard the data dips, suggesting that students and teachers are adjusting to a new curriculum and/or a different standard. Most telling, however, are data from recent years, when scores have generally held steady or in some cases declined. MCAS data from 2022 reveal the devastating impacts of the pandemic, demonstrating how little students learned in basic subjects during long periods of school closures.

Longitudinal student achievement data are critical to understanding the importance of MCAS. The following charts capture student outcomes in basic subjects and other measures, such as graduation rates and participation in and achievement on college entrance examinations. All data presented here are drawn from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and are publicly available, unless otherwise indicated.<sup>23</sup>

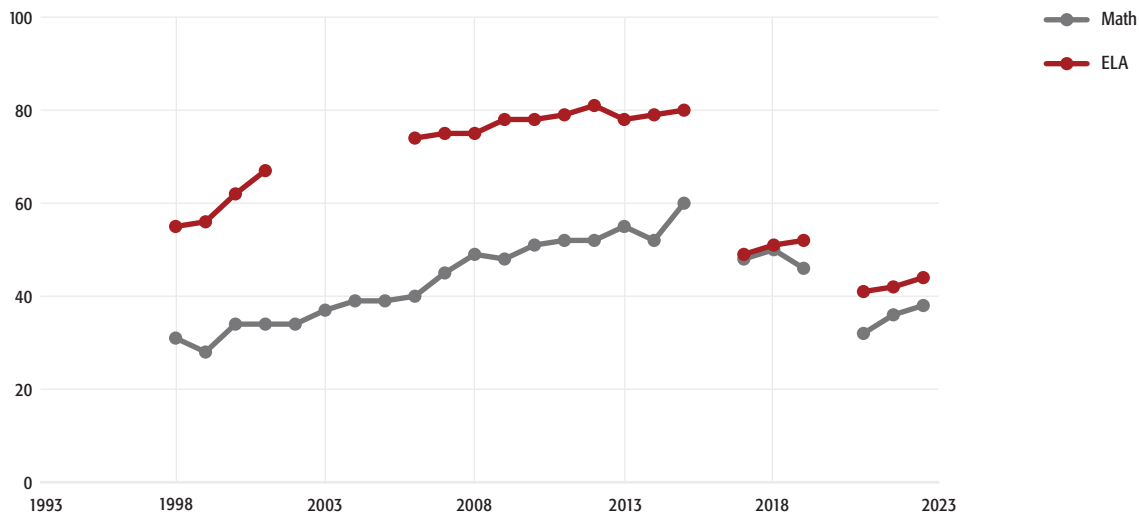
**MCAS data from 2022 reveal the devastating impacts of the pandemic, demonstrating how little students learned in basic subjects during long periods of school closures.**

### Grade 4, Math and ELA, Percent Proficient or Higher, Statewide



\* 2015 and 2016, students took the PARCC examination; transition to Next Generation MCAS in 2017

### Grade 8, Math and ELA\*, Percent Proficient or Higher, Statewide

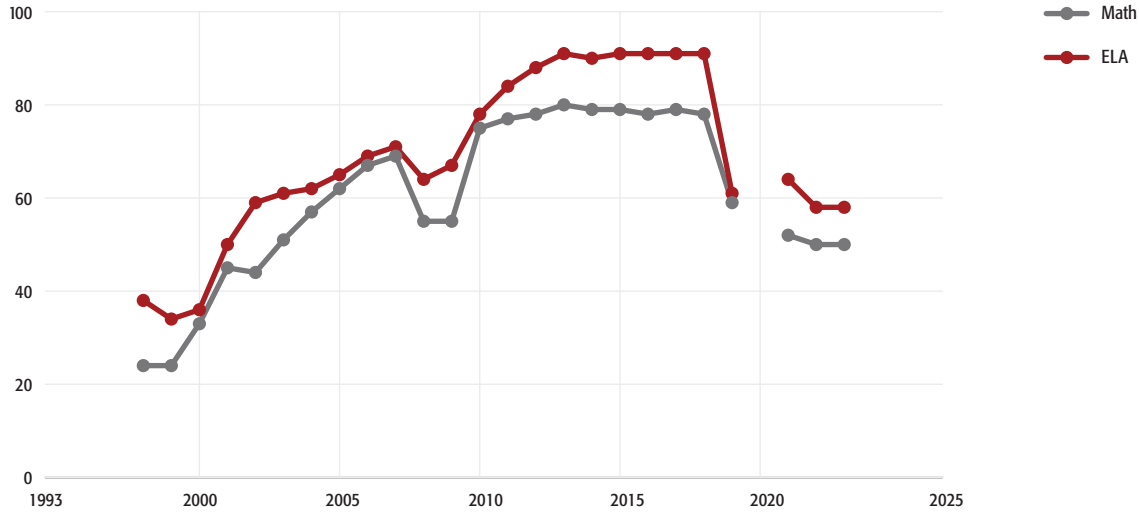


\* Between 2002 and 2005 the ELA MCAS was not administered in grade 8

\* 2015 and 2016, students took the PARCC examination; in 2017 the state transitioned to Next Gen MCAS



### Grade 10, Math and ELA, Percent Proficient or Higher, Statewide



\*2019 scores reflect full transition to the Next Generation MCAS assessment

These charts reveal three compelling details about the impact of the MERA and its MCAS requirement: First, between 1998 and 2020, Massachusetts schools and districts helped considerably more students become proficient in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics. Second, the state has maintained (in comparison to its counterparts) steady expectations for students over time. It has done this by recalibrating curricula and generally holding or raising the score students must achieve on MCAS to be considered proficient. In some states the response to lackluster student achievement is to lower expectations for proficiency.

Finally, even the controversial<sup>24</sup> transition to the Next Generation MCAS, which is based in part of the Common Core state standards, tells us something important about the system: Declines and subsequent upticks in outcomes as students adjust to new curricula suggest that teachers are teaching the standards they have been given. Prior to 1998, when the state had standards but did not enforce them with a comprehensive accountability system, schools and teachers did not feel compelled to teach to the standards and would often choose not to.

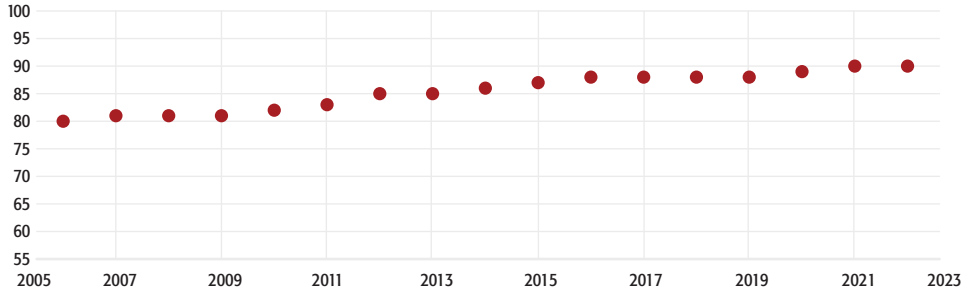
Today, Massachusetts can also say that students who receive a high school diploma have mastered the basic skills necessary for college and career. In 2003, the Legislature made passing the grade 10 MCAS a graduation requirement.

This legislation drew from a body of research suggesting that test-based graduation requirements send an important signal to the labor market about student competencies, extrinsically motivate students and teachers to achieve at higher levels, and may help close access and outcomes gaps between groups of students.<sup>25</sup>

Four-year graduation rates in the Commonwealth over time support these claims, suggesting that the Commonwealth is graduating more students who are better prepared.

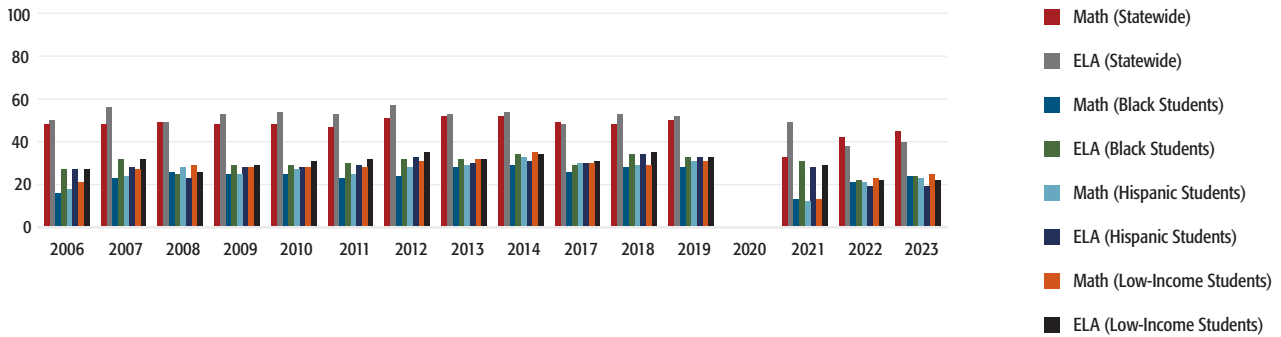
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### Four-Year Graduation Rates, 2006–2022, All Students

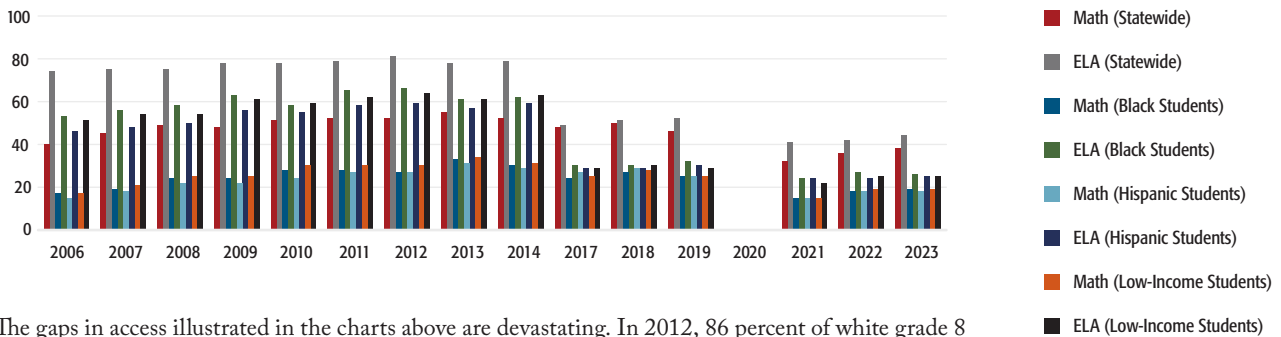


These positive impacts of the system are important, but MCAS also reveals the Commonwealth’s shortcomings. A closer look at MCAS data shows persistent inequities in the state’s public schools. The charts above demonstrate that, at best, less than 60 percent of fourth graders read and compute at grade level. While those outcomes improve slightly in grade 8 ELA and even more in grade 10 math and ELA, a large swath of Massachusetts students still don’t achieve mastery on basic state standards. Too many of those children are low-income students of color who have the least access to high-quality public schools and other resources outside of school that enable student achievement.

### Grade 4, Math and ELA, Percent Proficient or Higher, Statewide and Subgroups



### Grade 8, Math and ELA, Percent Proficient or Higher, Statewide and Subgroups



The gaps in access illustrated in the charts above are devastating. In 2012, 86 percent of white grade 8 students scored advanced or proficient on the MCAS ELA assessment and 60 percent of that group were advanced or proficient in math. In the same year, 50 percent of Hispanic students and 66 percent of black students were advanced or proficient in ELA. And only 27 percent of students in each of these subgroups were advanced or proficient in math.

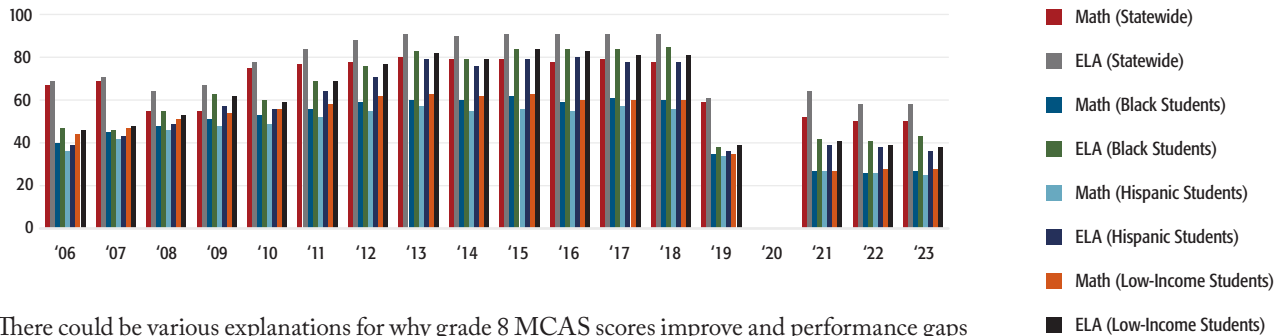
**The data are not an indicator of student ability; they are an indicator of the inability of the Commonwealth’s schools to equitably serve all students to a high common standard. Over time, the performance of traditionally disadvantaged subgroups has improved, but the difference in performance between these subgroups and their whiter, wealthier peers has remained constant, with some exceptions year over year. The ability to track these performance gaps is an argument for the existence of MCAS. Without these long-term, reliable data, policymakers would not be able to describe the extent of the access gap in the Commonwealth, nor would they have recourse to intervene when schools persistently fail to meet the needs of groups of students.**

In 2006, there was a 23-percentage-point difference between the statewide average MCAS score in ELA and the average score for low-income students. By 2016, that gap had closed to an 8-percentage-point difference.

As students enter high school, outcomes improve slightly over grade 8. Math and ELA scores increase across all groups, though differences in group performance persist. Over time those differences have become smaller. In 2006, there was a 23-percentage-point difference between statewide math scores and scores for low-income students. By 2016, that gap had closed to 18 percentage points.

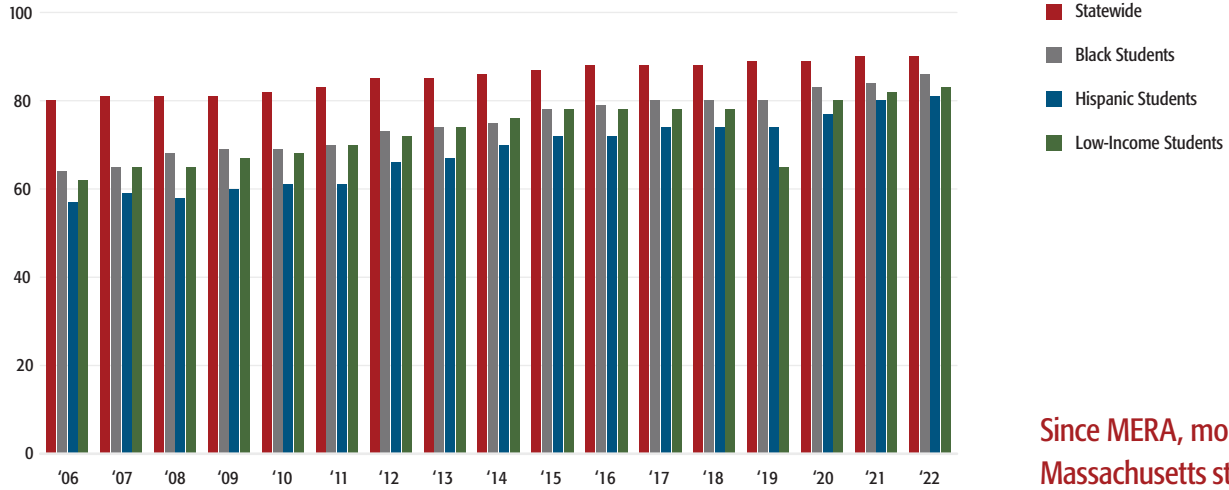
The story is even better in English language arts. In 2006, there was a 23-percentage-point difference between the statewide average MCAS score in ELA and the average score for low-income students. By 2016, that gap had closed to an 8-percentage-point difference. Importantly, even when the state fully transitioned to the Next Generation MCAS test in 2017, the gap for high school students continued to close, with a 19-percentage-point difference in grade 10 math and a 10-point difference in ELA.

### Grade 10, Math and ELA, Percent Proficient or Higher, Statewide and Subgroups



There could be various explanations for why grade 8 MCAS scores improve and performance gaps close as students get closer to graduation. Students could feel more motivated to succeed on the grade 10 examinations because it is a graduation requirement. A less positive explanation could be that some students who wouldn’t have otherwise passed the MCAS— even after multiple attempts— have dropped out of school or will leave school with a certificate instead of the official diploma. If this were true, however, we could expect to see a steady or declining four-year graduation rate among the Commonwealth’s most vulnerable students. Instead, we see a pattern of rising graduation rates for all students and smaller graduation rate gaps between students over time.

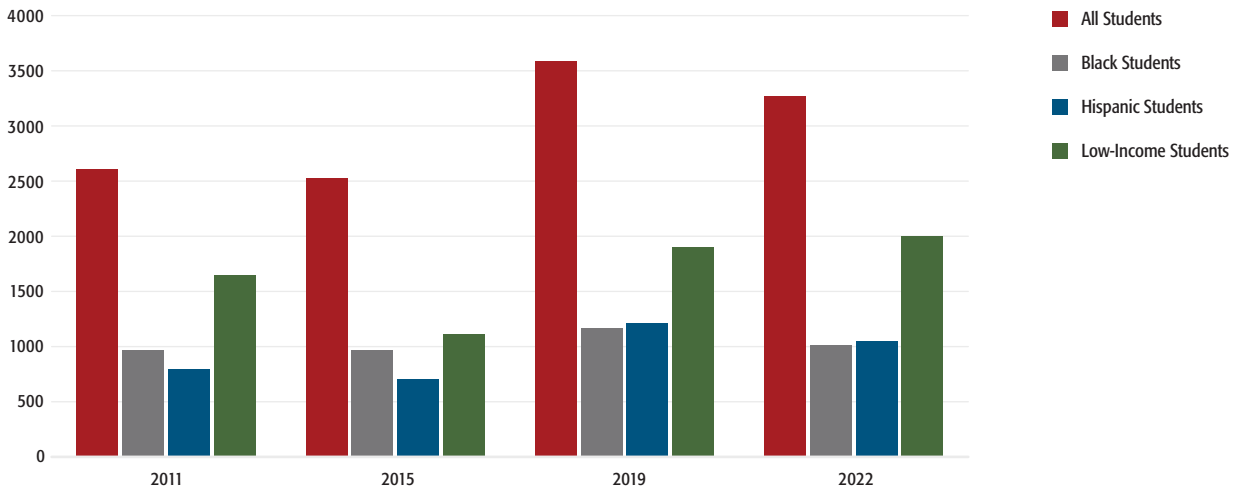
### Four-Year Graduation Rates, 2006–2022, Statewide and Subgroups



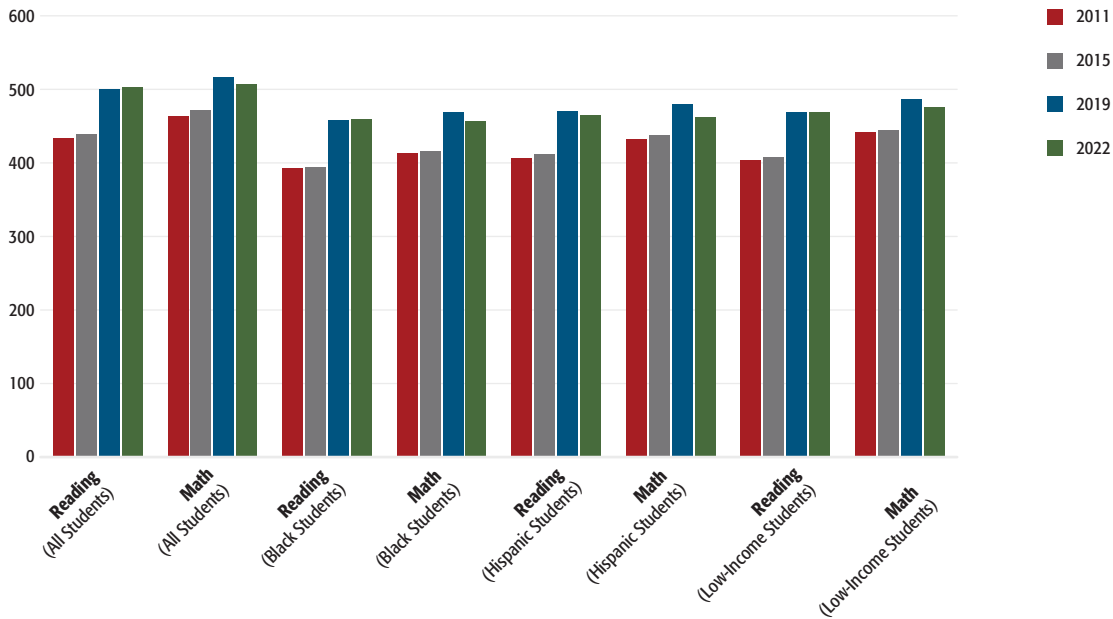
Since MERA, more Massachusetts students have graduated high school and taken the steps necessary to enter college.

In addition, more students who graduate are looking to higher education. An uptick in Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) participation and performance over time suggest that a steady increase in graduation rates is at least in part due to improved school performance across student groups. Since MERA, more Massachusetts students have graduated high school and taken the steps necessary to enter college.

### SAT Test Takers Over Time, by Subgroup



### SAT Performance Over Time, by Subgroup

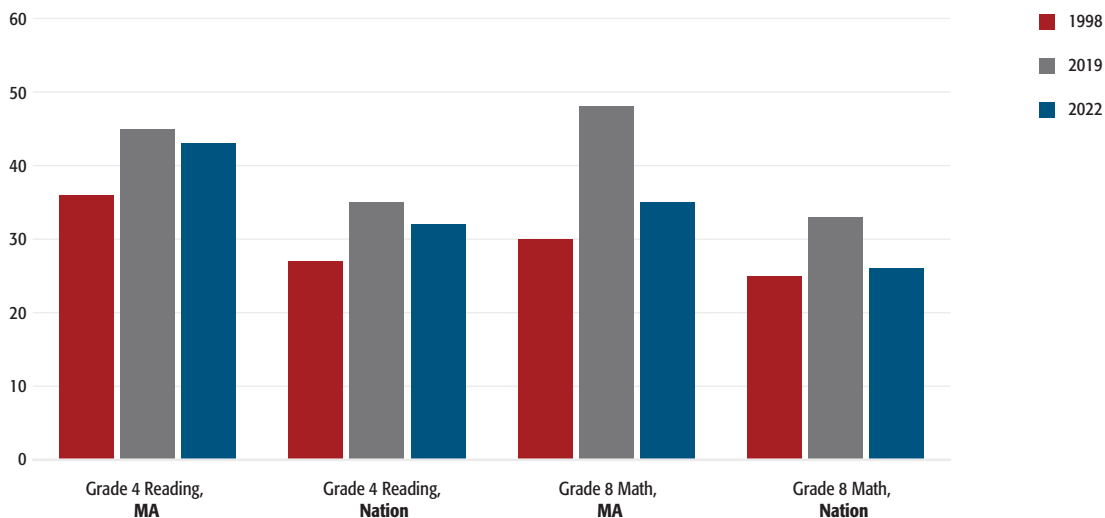


Improvements in MCAS over time show up in national and international data. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is given to a representative sample of students across the nation in different subject areas each year. Since its inception in 1969, NAEP has served as a check on how students in different states perform academically.<sup>26</sup> In a country where 50 states teach to 50 different sets of academic standards, NAEP also reveals something about the rigor and quality of those standards. For example, if large numbers of students pass a state-administered assessment but fail to meet proficiency in core subject areas on NAEP, policymakers could deduce that state standards aren't rigorous enough.

Massachusetts' rise to the top of NAEP rankings coincided with the positive impacts of the MERA. Since 2011, Massachusetts students have consistently earned at or near the top ranking on NAEP mathematics and reading assessments,<sup>27</sup> despite dips in performance and the rise of other states (those also known for high-quality standards and assessments) in recent years.

**Massachusetts' rise to the top of NAEP rankings coincided with the positive impacts of the MERA.**

### NAEP, Students Scoring Proficient or Advanced Over Time, MA and Nation<sup>28</sup>



Strong performance on NAEP translates into national recognition for the Commonwealth as well. On international examinations, such as the Program for International Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Math and Science Study (TIMSS), Massachusetts outperforms other states and many other countries.

A 2015 study of student performance on these two examinations found that Massachusetts students “perform roughly the same on the PISA reading test as students in the top-scoring countries (i.e., Canada, Finland, and Korea) and high-scoring newcomer countries (i.e., Poland and Ireland), and higher than students in the post-industrial countries (i.e., France, Germany, and the United Kingdom).” The same study finds that between 1999 and 2011, when the impacts of MERA were accelerating, Massachusetts students “made average TIMSS mathematics gains at least as large as students’ average gains in Finland, Korea, and England.”<sup>29</sup>

As with MCAS, there is a caveat to these results: large performance gaps between the Commonwealth’s advantaged and disadvantaged students. This justifies the claim of the Massachusetts Education Equity Partnership (MEEP), that the Commonwealth is only “number one for some.”<sup>30</sup>

While it is true that Massachusetts has managed to close access gaps—and therefore outcome gaps—at rates higher than most states, it needs to move toward a future where those gaps no longer exist. A system of high-quality standards and accountability for outcomes is an important part of that continued effort. But that system is in jeopardy and students across the Commonwealth—most of whom are already suffering because of the pandemic—won’t be able to catch up or perform to a high standard if the state no longer has the tools to understand whether its schools are educating students to a high standard.

## The (Dangerous) Politics of the Moment

Despite the correlation between education reform in the Commonwealth and increases in student achievement and attainment across demographics, accountability is under siege. The powerful and well-funded Massachusetts Teachers Association has begun to vocally oppose accountability in the past decade. In 2023, it began a concerted effort to chip away at the MERA and related reforms by moving to abolish the requirement that students pass the grade 10 MCAS to graduate from high school.

In September 2023, Attorney General Andrea Campbell determined that the state Constitution allows the people of the Commonwealth to put the graduation requirement to a vote. If the MTA and its allies can gather enough signatures, a question seeking to abolish the MCAS graduation requirement could be on the ballot in 2024.

The MTA proposes that districts certify that students have taken relevant coursework and proven mastery of content.<sup>31</sup> Mastery can be a subjective concept, dependent upon the interpretation of school and district officials, and could be inconsistent within and across schools.

While not officially part of the ballot question, some advocates suggest replacing the MCAS graduation requirement with non-standardized, classroom embedded “performance-based” assessments.<sup>32</sup> Research shows that performance assessments aren’t appropriate for high-stakes situations, such as graduation, primarily because they are not as reliable as standardized tests in aggregating information about groups of students.

Put another way, it is difficult to compare the performance of one student consistently and accurately to another (or many others) on the same extended task. This means that two students with very different levels of mastery on a standard could pass the task.<sup>33</sup> Performance assessments also require much more time on task for students and teachers.

Research shows “that a lot of tasks are needed to get a stable estimate of individual student achievement—in the range of six to twelve tasks.”<sup>34</sup> One of the arguments against MCAS is that it takes time away from learning. Replacing the grade 10 MCAS with performance tasks would likely require more, not less, time dedicated to testing.

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This is not to suggest that performance tasks don't have a critical role to play in student learning. Used formatively or as part of a student's overall class grade, they are conducive to helping individual students learn and succeed. They are simply a poor substitute for more reliable standardized tests, which provide objective information about whether individuals and groups have mastered a distinct standard.

Another problem the Commonwealth would have to reckon with should an anti-MCAS coalition succeed is federal requirements. State performance assessments are unlikely to meet the federal government's high technical standards for funding under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Starting with *No Child Left Behind*, Congress demanded that states understand student outcomes at individual, subgroup, and aggregate levels, specifically so they couldn't miss pockets of failure and overlook a school or district's failure to serve some students.<sup>35</sup>

Performance assessments and MCAS can work together because they serve different purposes. MCAS, when used as intended, should be a tool for students, teachers, and parents. It can help teachers and school leaders understand, though the most objective data available, where students are succeeding and where they need to focus instruction. It can help students understand what they've mastered, what they have yet to master, and what they need to do to close gaps in understanding. It can also inform parents about their school's performance in general, equipping them with the information they need to ask the right questions about teaching and learning and make informed choices about the schools they choose.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Over the past 30 years, a comprehensive approach to education reform in the Commonwealth—an approach that includes rigorous standards and assessments and accountability for outcomes—has propelled Massachusetts public schools to be the best in the nation. Outcomes have improved in all subject areas and across demographic groups since the MERA became law.

But this is no time to rest on our laurels. Even before the pandemic, MCAS and NAEP results were stagnating or declining. Standards were watered down over time and some school districts, especially those serving the Commonwealth's most vulnerable students, have struggled to bring those students to basic proficiency. Pandemic-induced school closures have led to immense learning loss, from which students are only now starting to recover. Too many won't recover at all.

Some suggest these problems warrant taking away the “pressure” of MCAS, but that positive pressure is exactly what the Commonwealth needs. If we chip away at standards and accountability, starting with the repeal of the graduation requirement, students, schools, and districts won't have an external incentive driving them to learn. Taking away the high-stakes component of MCAS would weaken the whole system, rendering assessments in lower grades less meaningful and leading stakeholders to de-emphasize assessment data and the extent to which it can and should drive high-quality instruction.

It may be time to modernize MCAS, but we can do that while also doubling down on accountability for outcomes and the light the system shines on our public schools. The following recommendations can help us do that.

***Ensure timely assessment results and train teachers and parents to understand MCAS data and use it to drive instruction.***

Over time, the Commonwealth has become more effective in calculating and disseminating student outcomes on annual assessments so teacher and school leaders can communicate it to parents and make data-driven decisions about student instruction. Continued training for all stakeholders, including parents, on *why* MCAS is important at the individual, group, and aggregate levels will increase buy-in to a system of accountability that has led to great academic gains for Massachusetts students.

Replacing the grade 10 MCAS with performance tasks would likely require more, not less, time dedicated to testing.

Over the past 30 years, a comprehensive approach to education reform in the Commonwealth—an approach that includes rigorous standards and assessments and accountability for outcomes—has propelled Massachusetts public schools to be the best in the nation.

***Continue to highlight and close the access gaps that MCAS reveals.***

Education reform has led to improvements in academic outcomes across all student groups, but it hasn't done enough to ensure that all Massachusetts students receive the education to which they are constitutionally entitled. Unacceptable disparities in achievement and attainment persist, especially between low-income students and students of color and their wealthier white and Asian peers. MCAS should be a tool that reveals these disparities, but the Commonwealth needs to do more to address them. Providing schools and districts that exhibit poor academic outcomes with materials, programs, training, and other supports that are proven to help vulnerable students succeed should be a top priority in the coming years.

***Curtail overtesting in public schools in favor of MCAS, a high-quality, annual assessment.***

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education should assist schools and districts in performing an assessment audit. Schools should use various tools to formatively assess where students are throughout the year, but they should also understand the extent to which those tests are providing high-quality information about students' mastery of standards. Formative assessments can be informal, low-stakes, moments in time—a good teacher can check for understanding without repeatedly using formal assessments in the classroom. Fewer tests throughout the year provide teachers with more time to teach, and a high-quality annual assessment like MCAS should be a reflection of what students already know, not the culmination of a series of smaller, shorter high-stakes tests.

***Provide schools and districts with the opportunity and tools to innovate, finding new ways to measure student understanding that are compatible with the existing accountability system.***

The Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks provide standards for teachers to teach to, but they do not dictate what that teaching should look like. Schools should have the tools and freedom to innovate with alternative approaches to teaching and learning, and alternative means for students to demonstrate mastery of standards. For example, schools should be able to adopt a competency-based approach to education, allowing students to demonstrate mastery of a standard in various ways, whether an in-class formative assessment or a performance task. Students should be allowed to progress at their own pace through a curriculum as they demonstrate mastery of standards. Innovative approaches like this are not at odds with the Commonwealth's existing system of standards and accountability. Summative MCAS tests, including the grade 10 graduation requirement, are culminating opportunities for students to show what they can do. They do not have the power to dictate how students get to mastery.

***Strengthen and empower the pro-MCAS coalition to tell the story of education reform and its positive impact on our students.***

The politics of the moment could lead to the gradual chipping away at a system that has served the Commonwealth well. A powerful, well-funded anti-MCAS coalition is poised to dramatically change that system. Too many stakeholders, including parents and students, don't know the history of education reform in Massachusetts, making a system that works difficult to protect. The data are clear: MCAS has led to improved student outcomes. More importantly, they tell us how our public schools are faring, and who they are and are not serving well. The pro-reform coalition exists, but it needs to grow its ranks to include legislators, policymakers, and most importantly, parents.

**MCAS is important at the individual, group, and aggregate levels will increase buy-in to a system of accountability that has led to great academic gains for Massachusetts students.**

**The data are clear: MCAS has led to improved student outcomes. More importantly, they tell us how our public schools are faring, and who they are and are not serving well.**



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