



Helping Your Child Prepare for MCAS

M-C-A-S. Four letters that can spell anxiety, both for parents and for students! They stand for Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System.

This issue of *Pointers* gives a brief overview of MCAS, offers tips for how parents can help prepare their children, and points to resources for more information.

Why MCAS?

There's a saying: *You measure what you treasure*. Testing is one way to measure something very valuable—a student's learning. "Assessment" is another word for test. In 1993, Massachusetts set out on a road to educational reform. That year the state passed the Massachusetts Education Reform Act (MERA). Standards for all students and assessment of students' learning are key parts of the law. Here, in a nutshell, is how the reform effort is designed to work:

- The first step is for the state to develop lists of skills and knowledge that all students should know and be able to do as a result of their education. These lists of skills and knowledge are called "standards." Standards mark an important first step toward improving education by raising expectations for all students.
- These standards are then used to guide what teachers teach, and students should learn, each year—the "curriculum." Teachers use instructional methods to help individual and groups of students learn the curriculum.

- Assessments, like the MCAS tests, measure how well students have learned the standards. They give students an opportunity to demonstrate what they know.
- The results of the assessments are then used to guide school improvement efforts and to identify student needs and schools that need assistance.

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In other words, what students should know, what they are taught, and what they are tested on are all aligned, or linked. This approach to improving education is called "standards-based reform."

In 1997, Congress passed IDEA-97, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. This law requires that all students with disabilities take state tests, and makes certain that these students are given test accommodations.

Those students who cannot take tests, even with accommodations, are offered "alternate assessments," called the MCAS-Alt in Massachusetts. The alternate assessment includes a portfolio of work plus other important materials.

The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) added even more testing for all students. Now, reading and mathematics tests must be given each year in grades 3–8 and once in high school, plus science in elementary, middle, and high school.

The purpose of these assessments is to find out if schools are educating every student in important academic areas. The tests are a way to hold schools accountable for doing a good job by rating them on their students' performance. The tests help identify where schools need to improve their teaching. Students are also held accountable to ensure they are doing their very best. In Massachusetts, students must pass the Mathematics and English portions of the MCAS before they can receive a high school diploma, in addition to meeting all local graduation requirements.

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What is MCAS?

MCAS refers to a series of tests given to public school students in Massachusetts that measure students' progress toward meeting state educational standards. Standards are statements of what students should know and be able to do by the time they reach a specific grade level. These standards are spelled out in the "Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks" in seven core academic subjects. MCAS tests are based on the Curriculum Frameworks and are given in the following areas: English Language Arts (ELA), Mathematics, Science and Technology/Engineering, and History and Social Science. The tests consist of multiple-choice, open-response, and short-answer questions, plus a writing prompt for the ELA composition.

Tips to Help Your Child Prepare for Tests

Parents and families can do several things to create a positive test-taking experience and help students prepare for tests. Here are some ideas:

THROUGHOUT THE YEAR

- Make sure your child gets enough sleep, eats properly, and gets to school on time. During test time, make this a special effort.
- Encourage your child to READ, READ, READ. No activity is linked to academic success as much as reading. Even the math portion of the MCAS uses word problems to test problem-solving ability.
- Write test dates on your home calendar. The MCAS test schedule is online at www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/cal.html.
- Talk with your child's teacher(s) often to see what you can do at home to support our child's work in school. Ask for regular progress reports.
- Review your child's previous year's MCAS report. See "After the Test" on the next page.)
- Encourage your child to participate in practice-test opportunities.
- If your child is having difficulty with a subject, call the school and ask if extra support in that subject is offered.
- Praise your children for working hard and for the things they do well.
- Set times each day for study and homework.
- Ask about homework every day, and check to see that it is completed.
- Give your child a quiet, well-lit, comfortable place to study.
- Help your child practice MCAS test questions. Review the test together so you will all get familiar with the expectations. (Previous years' MCAS tests are online at www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/testitems.html.)
- If your child has a disability, meet with the Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 Team to decide how your child will participate. A student with a disability is entitled to receive appropriate accommodations for test taking, similar to the ones they need for everyday learning. Some students are entitled to take the MCAS-Alt—an "alternate assessment"—in order to better demonstrate what



they know. The Team's decisions are written in the student's IEP or 504 Plan, and are subject to parent approval. (Refer to the participation requirements manual to learn more about test accommodations and alternate assessments at www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/part_req.html.)

THE DAY OF THE TEST

- Make sure that your child is well rested and eats breakfast.
- See that your child arrives at school on time and is relaxed.
- Comfort counts. Send a sweater if it's a cool day. Dress in layers for a warm day.
- Send along all the needed tools—sharpened pencils, pens, rulers, etc.
- Encourage your child to do the best work possible and to have a positive attitude.
- Encourage your child to listen/read carefully to all test-taking directions and to ask questions if any directions are unclear.
- Remind your child not to get stuck on any one item.
- Encourage your child to check answers for accuracy if time permits.

AFTER THE TEST

Early in the school year, families will receive a *Parent/Guardian Report* from the school which describes in detail how your student did on the previous spring's MCAS tests. Parents of students who participate in the MCAS Alternate Assessment (MCAS-Alt) receive two *Parent/Guardian Reports*—one standard report, which indicates that the student took the alternate assessment, and one report that shows how the student performed on the alternate assessment.

You can review the actual test items on the Department of Education's website at www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/testitems.html. Local libraries often have printed copies of the test questions and answers as well.

- Review all parent reports.
- Identify areas of strengths and weaknesses. For example, were scores higher in math or English? Were your child's math skills stronger in computation or in solving word problems? Your child's teacher can help you.
- Praise your child's testing strengths and make a plan to address identified weaknesses.
- If your child's test score is not consistent with his or her grades, contact your child's teacher or counselor.
- A score of 220, or a performance level of *Needs Improvement*, is considered the minimum passing score. If your child has scored at the *Warning/Failing* level, ask if the school is offering him or her extra tutoring or support. Encourage your child to take part in the academic support programs your school or district offers. Also, ask whether the school is developing an Individual Student Success Plan for your child.

- Students who score below 220 on the grade 10 tests will have more opportunities to take and pass these tests. "Retest" opportunities are provided each fall and spring for 11th and 12th graders who did not pass, and for out-of-school youth.
- See your child's teacher if you need additional help to understand how your child did on the test.
- The MCAS Performance Appeals process provides another way for students who have taken the test three times to show that they have the necessary knowledge and skills needed to meet grade 10 standards. For more on the appeals process, contact your high school principal or guidance office, visit the parents' page at www.doe.mass.edu/mcas-appeals/, or call Parents' PLACE.

Remember—*you* are very important to your child's success in school and in life. Your interest and support let your child know you believe in him or her and that you value education. We hope these suggestions help you help your child be successful in school and in life.

Sources

Guide to the 2005 MCAS for Parents/Guardians, Massachusetts Department of Education, assists parents in reviewing their children's MCAS results and in understanding how MCAS scores are reported. The *Guide* supplements the information provided in the *Parent/Guardian Report*. It is available online in English and other languages at www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/pgguide.html.

"**Help Your Child Improve in Test-Taking.**" U.S. Department of Education, available online at www.ed.gov/pubs/parents/TestTaking, provides research-based techniques developed through the Office of Educational Research and Improvement.



To Reduce Test Anxiety

"Test anxiety" is worrying too much about doing well on a test. It can keep students from doing their best. Some ways to help reduce anxiety are:

- Talk about the test in a positive way.
- Encourage best efforts, yet have realistic expectations.
- Encourage your child to focus on his or her strengths, such as a good memory or strong analytical skills.
- Assure your child that the test is only one measure of academic performance.
- Emphasize that test scores do not determine a person's worth.
- Find out whether or not your child's school offers test-taking practice or preparation.

Resources: Helping Your Child Prepare for MCAS

The Mass. Department of Education's Web site at www.doe.mass.edu/mcas has many useful resources. 2006 updates of some items listed below will be available in late January and some in the Spring. Parents' PLACE will be happy to print copies of these documents for parents who are unable to access them:

- **Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks** describe what students should know and be able to do in core academic subjects at each grade. The MCAS tests are designed to test how well students have mastered the information in these Frameworks. Online at www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/current.html.
- **MCAS Overview: Frequently Asked Questions** gives an overview of the entire MCAS test. A new edition should be ready in Spring 2006. Online at www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/overview_faq.html.

- **MCAS Schedule**, online at www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/cal.html.
- **Released Test Items**, online at www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/testitems.html.
- **Requirements for the Participation of Students with Limited English Proficiency in MCAS, MEPA-R/W, and MELA-O (Spring 2005 Update)** outlines the participation requirements for students who speak a language other than English as a first language, and are not able to do ordinary class work in English. Online at www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/2005/news/lep_partreq.doc.
- **Requirements for the Participation of Students with Disabilities in MCAS (Spring 2005 Update)** outlines the participation requirements and allowable accommodations for students with disabilities. The 2006 update is scheduled for publication for late January. Online at www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/part_req.html.

- **May 5, 2005 Memo from the Commissioner: New Requirements for MCAS Alternate Assessments in 2006.** Online at www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/alt/html.

PHONE NUMBERS

In addition to calling Parents' PLACE at 1-877-471-0980, parents may find the following useful:

MCAS Parent Information Hotline: 1-866-MCAS220.
A service of the Mass. Department of Education, a person is available to answer individual calls and send written materials on request.

For policy questions regarding the assessment of students with disabilities and those with limited English proficiency, parents may call 781-338-3625.



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