



*News from Commissioner Mitchell Chester & the  
MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education*

## On the Desktop - March 6, 2017

Dear Superintendents, Charter School Leaders, and Principals,

Please feel free to share the following information with parents, teachers, and your school community.

This spring marks the start of the next-generation MCAS assessments in English language arts and math in grades 3-8. After considering for several years how to best update our already strong statewide assessment, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education voted in November 2015 to maintain a test unique to our Commonwealth that would draw some of its questions from the existing MCAS, some of its questions from the PARCC assessment developed by a consortium of states, and some questions created specifically for the next-generation MCAS. This spring is the debut of that new test.

The Board also voted to transition to computer-based testing. For the next-generation MCAS tests this spring, most students will take the computer-based version in grades 4 and 8. Many schools have also chosen computer-based testing in grades 3, 5, 6, and 7; the remainder will be taking the paper version.

Many people ask us why we conduct statewide testing. These tests are required by both state and federal law, but more importantly:

- Test results help parents gauge whether their children are making academic progress.
- Test results help educators identify strengths and weaknesses in their curricula and instructional methods.
- A student's participation in statewide testing helps provide context to other students in the same school, students in other schools within the district, and students in other districts. Failure to participate denies this perspective not only to the student who refuses to participate, but to other students and parents in the school, district, and statewide.
- Test results help the state target additional resources to underperforming schools.
- Test results help document our progress to the Governor and the Legislature as we seek to ensure adequate funding for all our schools.

MCAS was first instituted as part of the 1993 Education Reform Law. The programs and funding in that law have led to nearly a quarter-century of steady improvement in our K-12 schools. Today Massachusetts is number one in the nation in elementary and secondary education.

### **Refusal to Participate in State Tests**

Every year, some families ask whether students are allowed to opt-out of taking a statewide test. In brief, the answer is no. Testing is a mandatory part of the curriculum, the same as a spelling test or math test, and statewide assessments are most useful when all students take them. Neither the Commonwealth nor Congress provides an opt-out provision. Tenth graders who refuse to take MCAS jeopardize their high school diploma. In addition, refusals to test can impact a school's accountability

rating. The accountability system is set up to encourage high participation rates (if it weren't, results would not be reflective of school-wide achievement). The federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires a 95 percent participation rate. Schools with a lower participation rate run the risk of having their accountability rating lowered.

Under draft regulations that the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education sent out for public comment on February 28, 2017, schools and districts that fall below a 90 percent participation rate will have their accountability status set to Level 3 (out of 5). Further, the 2016-17 and 2017-18 participation rates will be combined to determine participation rates for the 2017-18 accountability levels. In other words, refusals to test in spring 2017 could impact a school's accountability rating for two years.

Students who refuse to take the MCAS test may remain in the testing room as long as they are sitting quietly and are not interfering with other students. If a student becomes disruptive, they should be removed from the testing room and placed in a safe location until testing is completed and regular classroom instruction resumes. Given that statewide standardized tests are a legal requirement, it is my department's expectation that all students will participate.

More information about the next-generation MCAS, including information for parents, is available online at our MCAS page at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/>. Questions relating to testing refusals can be directed to Deputy Commissioner Jeff Wulfson at [jwulfson@doe.mass.edu](mailto:jwulfson@doe.mass.edu).

Sincerely,

Mitchell D. Chester  
Commissioner