

## **What Everyone Should Know About the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) and High School Exit Exams (HSEEs)**

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1. One of the primary purposes of using a passing score on the MCAS as a requirement for a high school diploma is to close the racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps. However, recent research indicates that high school exit exams (HSEEs), such as the MCAS, have no effect on closing the racial achievement gap (Grotsky, Warren, & Kalogrides, 2008; Lee, 2008). Massachusetts has one of the largest socioeconomic achievement gaps in the nation. For example, Massachusetts' 8<sup>th</sup> grade students, whose families' income qualify them for the federal school lunch program, scored 31 points lower than other Massachusetts students on the math section on National Assessment of Educational Progress (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007). This is the second largest score differential in the nation.
2. The best and most recent nation-wide research studies on HSEEs indicate that these tests have no statistically significant relationship to high school students' academic achievement (Grotsky, Warren, & Kalogrides, 2008; Lee, 2008). Although these tests may have a small effect on academic achievement at the elementary level, the same effect on achievement can be obtained by implementing policies that hold the school accountable for test results without also withholding diplomas from students (Lee, 2008).
3. Another purported purpose of using the MCAS as a requirement for a high school diploma is to better prepare traditionally low-achieving students for the labor force and post-secondary education. Despite the MCAS requirement, approximately 2/3 of community college students need to take remedial college courses (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2008a). Also, a recent nation-wide longitudinal study found no evidence that HSEEs have a positive impact on employment status, wage earnings, or enrollment in postsecondary education (Warren, Grotsky, & Lee, 2008).
4. HSEEs disproportionately deny diplomas to the groups that they are intended to help. In the 2009 cohort group alone, almost 2,000 students with disabilities failed to pass at least one of the high school MCAS exams, and didn't graduate on time (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2009). Students with limited English proficiency fail the high school MCAS at a higher rate than any other group. Twenty-two percent of high school seniors with limited English proficiency failed to pass the MCAS (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2009).
5. The denial of a high school diploma has serious financial consequences for both the individual and society. The average yearly income for an individual without a high school diplomas is \$11,000 per year (Center for Labor Market Studies, 2009). Individuals without diplomas are denied entrance into the military and many trade unions and post-secondary programs, such as barber, hairstyling and plumbing schools. The net cost to society of someone without a high school diploma is estimated to be more than \$250,000. This estimate includes the loss of taxes, as well as the considerable costs of social and correctional services (Center for Labor Market Studies, 2009).
6. The high school completion rate is about 2% lower in the states that have HSEEs (Warren, Jenkins, & Kulick, 2006). High school students who fail the MCAS are 13 times more likely to drop out of school (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2009). Only 50% of 10<sup>th</sup> grade students who fail the MCAS graduate on time (Papay, Murnane, & Willett, 2008). Four years after the MCAS became a requirement for a high school diploma, the annual dropout rate for students with limited English Proficiency had increased 70% (from 6.1% to 10.4%) (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2005; Massachusetts Department of Education, 2008b).
7. HSEEs divert resources and time away from valuable school activities. They reduce instructional time and dominate a significant part of the high school schedule. In Massachusetts, mandated testing occurs on 28 of 180 school days at public high schools (Croes & Morgenstern, 2008; Massachusetts Department of Education, 2008c). In addition, the intense pressure to pass HSEEs in academically weak high schools limits the time and resources devoted to college preparation activities, such as college advising (Perna & Thomas, 2009).

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