

Mass. Coalition for Authentic Reform in Education (CARE)

A Call for an Authentic State-wide Assessment System

Education Reform in Massachusetts began with high hopes. As educators, parents, and citizens, we believe those hopes have been eroded by the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) tests. These tests have disrupted our classrooms and schools and diverted valuable resources away from efforts that put decision making more appropriately in the hands of local communities, schools, and teachers. High stakes testing, in which students and schools are judged by the results of a single test, is a quick-fix strategy that does not lead to sustained improvement in learning, teaching, and assessment. Despite probable test score increases due primarily to students and teachers becoming familiar with the test, MCAS will only serve to narrow curriculum and instruction to focus on raising test scores, create less interesting and challenging educational opportunities for students, increase grade retention and dropout rates, particularly for low-income students and students of color, and lower levels of trust among teachers, administrators, students and parents. The use of test scores to make decisions that will affect students' future opportunities violates both principles of fairness and professional standards.

The original intent of the Education Reform Act was to foster both excellence and equity. The Act's accountability system was intended to assist schools to create high quality learning opportunities for all students, to hold schools responsible for implementing high quality schooling, and to assess students' mastery of an essential set of core knowledge, skills, and habits of mind. In doing so, an accountability system needs to ensure that all students – including low-income students, students of color, limited English proficient students, and students with special needs - have access to high quality teaching and are well prepared to participate as informed citizens in a democratic society.

However, the MCAS is being misused for high stakes decisions – no one test should be the sole determinant to decide whether a student graduates from high school. Rather than raising achievement for all students, this narrow approach to accountability will increase the gap in opportunity and performance between low-income and more affluent students, between regular education and special education students, and between white students and Black, Hispanic, and Limited English Proficient (LEP) students. The creation of multiple levels of diplomas would only exacerbate the problem

While agreeing that many schools need to improve, the high stakes nature of the MCAS and emphasis on a single paper and pencil test has diminished the exercise of democracy and local innovation by excluding parents, teachers, students, and administrators from participation and decision making in the assessment process, and by undercutting intellectual freedom. We are on dangerous ground, with MCAS threatening to undermine the benefits brought on by the first years of Education Reform.

The Education Reform Act specifically called for the state to create a multi-layered assessment system that included local as well as state assessments, and work samples, portfolios, and exhibitions as well as paper and pencil tests. The state should return to these original mandates for shared accountability.

CARE proposes a comprehensive state-wide accountability plan that would preserve a focus on high standards for all students and public accountability for all schools, promote authentic reform in teaching and learning in all schools and classrooms, and require schools to account for their practice and results. In contrast to current efforts, this plan would unite teachers, students, and parents around education practice that develops students' intellectual skills. We propose to return to the original tenets of Education Reform, that of a participatory and democratic process that focuses on ensuring that all students are successful.

CARE's proposed system of accountability consists of four integrated components:

- Local authentic assessments that are gateways to graduation, approved by regional boards and based on the Common Core of Learning
- A school quality review model to assess the effectiveness of school practices, based on the models in Britain, Boston Pilot Schools, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts' own process for reviewing charter schools
- Standardized testing solely in literacy and numeracy, to provide one method for tracking progress of schools from year to year
- Required annual local reporting by schools to their communities, using a defined set of indicators, that also focuses on equal opportunity and access to knowledge for all students

We believe this set of accountability components, together, will go much farther than the current MCAS in furthering the original aims and goals of Education Reform, and will lead to steady improvement in our schools. This model preserves the twin Education Reform goals of excellence and equity, and leads to even greater accountability for schools in assisting all students to learn at high levels.

CARE's Proposed System of Accountability

1) Local authentic assessments that are gateways to graduation, approved by regional boards and based on the Common Core of Learning. CARE supports an assessment system in which schools, rather than the state, would determine graduation. CARE supports having the state define an essential, but limited, body of knowledge, skills, and habits of mind that all students should acquire. However, this system should be built on a set of focused, but broad state-defined competencies, while allowing local schools and districts the freedom to create assessment systems that meet the needs of their unique student populations. In this model, only one form of high school diploma would be awarded, rather than multiple levels as currently proposed.

The state's Common Core of Learning provides a good base from which to build a statewide set of competencies for grades four, eight, and twelve. While broad, they

provide an understanding of what it means for students to be well educated, and also allow for the diversity of interests and talents found among students. In this case, the Curriculum Frameworks become a guide, rather than a required body of knowledge to master.

Using the Common Core, each school in the Commonwealth would develop its own accountability and assessment plan. The plan, developed by teachers, administrators, and parents, and approved by the school council, would outline how the school will ensure that students demonstrate that they meet the Common Core, rather than only counting courses, leading to graduation. This plan would specify the curriculum, instructional approaches, assessments, and accountability measures, including any additional competencies in addition to those identified in the Common Core. Plans would be encouraged to include authentic assessments, including portfolios, exhibitions, performance tasks, student products, and external reviews, as well as how it will use this information to improve itself. Such a process will assist teachers to focus on high quality instruction and curriculum, rather than merely teaching to the test.

Each school would submit its accountability plan to a regional board, established by the Massachusetts Department of Education, which would include teachers, administrators, teachers, parents, higher education representatives, business representatives, community people, students, and state education agency staff. The purpose of the body would be to ensure that the school has developed a coherent plan that would lead to reliable and genuine assessment to determine whether students have met the Common Core learning goals and competencies. In reviewing and approving the plans, the Regional Board might offer recommendations, and the Department of Education could assign resource assistance, including people in other schools who might be useful. In particular, significant assistance would be directed to schools serving the highest percentage of low-income students and students of color.

2) A school quality review model to assess the effectiveness of school practices, based on the successful models in Britain, Boston Pilot Schools, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts' own model for charter schools. In addition to assessing what students know and are able to do, a genuine accountability system also assesses the quality of opportunities, resources, instruction, and curriculum that are offered to students. School quality reviews, implemented in Britain, Rhode Island, and with the Boston Pilot Schools and Commonwealth charter schools, similar to the school accreditation process, is one way of providing schools with comprehensive feedback on their practices, while also putting in place a state-wide system of quality control and accountability. A key goal of school quality reviews is to ensure equitable and quality resources and learning opportunities are being provided to all students, and that the school can demonstrate it is working to improve achievement of all students while also closing the achievement gap between low-income and affluent students, and between white students and students of color.

In a school quality review process, all schools would be placed on a three- to five-year cycle for review and evaluation. The state would develop a set of benchmarks for successful schools. For example, with the Boston Pilot Schools benchmarks, the categories include vision; governance, leadership, and budget; teaching, learning, and assessment; professional development and support; and family and community partnerships. Using a similar set of benchmarks, a school selected for review would engage in a period of self-study to assess where it stood in reaching the benchmarks, and collect evidence in the form of a school portfolio to demonstrate its progress in meeting them. Teachers play a key role in conducting the self study. To assist in the self study period, schools will be encouraged to form small consortia to collaborate and assist one another in this process.

The state would then send in a team, made up of school practitioners from other districts and other qualified people, to spend an intensive 3-4 days to observe students and teachers, interview parents, review the portfolio, and collect evidence to determine whether progress toward meeting the benchmarks was being made. In particular, the team would also review a random sampling of assessments of students who have graduated or been promoted, to determine whether the school's assessments and the students' performances meet the demands of the Common Core and state benchmarks.

At the end of the review, the school would receive written feedback from the review team, including recommendations for improvement, as well as a presentation by the review team. Schools failing to reach the benchmarks would be placed on a one-year follow-up review cycle, with further intervention required if the school still did not make progress. CARE agrees that schools which fail to serve their students well and which are unable to improve despite help should not be allowed to continue without significant intervention.

3) Standardized testing solely in literacy and numeracy, to provide one method for tracking progress of schools from year to year. The state may still feel the need to have data that can be compared to other states, and across districts. In this case, while recognizing their limitations, inherent biases, and potential danger to instruction and curriculum, CARE supports the limited use of standardized testing as an additional source of information. Such tests should not have high stakes attached to them, should take only a few hours to administer, and should assess only literacy and numeracy. A commercial test may be more cost-efficient than creating, administering, and scoring a home-grown standardized test such as the MCAS, saved costs which could be much more usefully applied to building a more comprehensive and shared accountability system. CARE also believes parents should have the right to opt their children out of standardized testing.

4) Required annual local reporting by schools to their communities, using a defined set of indicators, which also focus on equal opportunity and access to knowledge for all students. Genuine accountability also requires public reporting to the community. However, this reporting has much more meaning when it is locally tailored to the needs

of the community. In this case, CARE advocates that the state develop a list of indicators that every school and district must annually report to their respective communities. This list of indicators should include reporting on outcomes of students by race, gender, low-income status, special needs, and limited English proficiency. However, how the report is crafted should be left up to each individual locality. Schools and districts would be required to disseminate their reports to parents and the community, while also sending them to the Massachusetts Department of Education. The state may play a role of reviewing and providing feedback on the reports to help make them useful. As well, the state would be responsible for taking the data submitted and preparing an annual document on the state of public education in Massachusetts.

In this public, decentralized system of genuine accountability, the state education agency assumes a resource and monitoring role. It provides technical assistance with portfolio development, appropriate uses of tests, the development of performance tasks, examples of organizing public exhibitions, uses of rubrics, and protocols for public reporting. The state annual report would include local examples of authentic assessments, as well as aggregate data on student performance. The state's role, then, also becomes one of disseminating and promoting best instructional, curriculum, and assessment practices. While preserving a focus on high standards for all students and public accountability for all schools, this system of genuine accountability also encourages and promotes local innovation, creativity, and freedom. Finally, such a multi-layered assessment system actually promotes greater public accountability than the single, paper and pencil MCAS, as it builds in multiple means of assessing a school's performance through a system of local assessments, school quality reviews, and limited standardized testing.