

BACKGROUND AND STUDENT/PARENT CHECKLIST ON OPTING OUT

Background:

The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) provides for annual standardized testing in English and Math in grades 3-8, in science once between grades 3-5 and 6-9; and at least once in high school in English, Math, and Science. A History/Social Studies test is to be implemented in the future.

Massachusetts requires a minimum score of 220 (range: 200-280) on each of the three Grade 10 MCAS tests for students to graduate from high school.

Until 2015, the ELA and Math tests at lower various grades and at high school were based on a state Curriculum Frameworks that evolved over more than 15 years. Over the past few years, the tests have been modified from the traditional frameworks that stressed carefully structured standards, fact-driven studies, and testing on the academic content to accommodate the standards in the Common Core curriculum, a proposed nationally based and modernized set of standards designed to encourage critical thinking, research, and analytic writing and to improve readiness for college and career. Proponents of both Curriculum Frameworks and Common Core have debated the merit of both systems. Some argue that any change from traditional MCAS is detrimental to student achievement. Others have advocated for an alternative that does not encourage “teaching to the test.”

Additional testing may be mandated by the state. For the 2015-16 year, districts will have a choice of traditional MCAS tests and a new Performance Assessment for College and Career (PARCC) while policy makers debated the most appropriate examinations in the future.

State education officials, parents, and teachers, as well as other academic stakeholders and the business community have also debated amongst themselves about the best testing tools. Some debated MCAS vs. PARCC while others questioned the merits of standardized testing for students per se, citing a range of reasons including concern about how test would be used, time spent on test preparation, diagnostic values of testing, costs of testing, and social and emotional well being of students being tested. In response to the heavily politicized rhetoric in the MCAS vs. PARCC debate, the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education has approved a Commissioner’s recommendation to create a hybrid test with some of the best of both tests. It is tentatively and unofficially called MCAS-II and will be implemented over three years.

Because of the complexity of the issue, the nature of the debate, and the intense arguments toughing many elements of the testing debate, some parents and teachers have encouraged students to “opt-out” of standardized testing. Parents may exempt their students from testing by writing to the principal, but the principal may ask the student to take the test even with the letter...

The following arguments explain the rationale for taking the examinations:

- DESE has opined that the local school districts must implement the tests and that students should take them. It is important to comply with regulations and law.
- There is no legal basis of “opting out” even it there is no clear mandate to comply.

- You reserve the right to opt-out in a subsequent year if your concerns continue to grow.
- With ESSA as with NCLB, districts with lower than 95% testing participation may have sanctions imposed on them. Those sanctions now will include:
 - Lowering a school's ranking, including designating a school as high risk, subject to additional sanctions.
 - Declare a student as "not proficient"
 - A district may face some financial sanctions by the federal government via the state including limits on federal funding or restrictions on how funding may be used...
 - State financial aid may be withheld, although the legal basis of this is not clearly established.
- Student test data may be used to help teachers target the best strategies to improve student achievement.
- Testing data may be used to help improve the performance of a teacher or in making an employment decision, including termination of an underperforming educator.
- High school students who do not pass (score of 220 or better) the MCAS English Language, Math and Science tests may not receive a high school diploma unless they qualify for an alternative test.
- Political implications of opting out may influence how local or state officials respond with funding for your district.. Opting out is a form of civil disobedience and this may have positive or negative outcomes depending on who is observing and judging.

The following points are used to explain why parents and students may elect to "opt out:

- Testing has been a source of distress for some students who experience anxieties, sleeplessness, emotional distress and parents wish to address the best interest of their children and/or school.
- Educational professionals have mixed opinions about the value of standardized tests.
- Tests that require use of a computer add to the stress for some children and in other cases, lower scores.
- According to the Commissioner of Education Except for being declared absent or being assigned to an alternative program for the day, there are no penalties for elementary school students who do not participate.
- A child may be stereotyped in some way based on results of a standardized test.
- Parents and students may be concerned that test data will be used to make an unfair assessment of a teacher or principal.
- Some object to the value of the state and federal testing program or to standardized tests in general as bad educational theory and practice and poor public policy.
- Some families wish to make a statement of objection to testing, excessive testing, or student and educator assessment based on standardized testing.

A Criteria Based Check-List

	YES	NO
I have confidence that the test will benefit my child.	___	___
My child will benefit academically from the diagnostic test data.	___	___
My child's teacher will become a better educator.	___	___
My child will benefit socially or emotionally from the test data.	___	___
My child should understand the importance of following the rules.	___	___
I wish to avoid having my child's school be sanctioned for opting out	___	___
My child has been put at social/emotional risk by standardized tests.	___	___
My child has had symptoms of social, emotional or health risk from testing.	___	___
My school is supportive of my decision to opt out.	___	___
My child's teacher is supportive of the decision to opt out.	___	___
I have discussed this decision with a counselor or clinician.	___	___
This counselor or clinician recommends opting out	___	___
I believe my child or school will be adversely affected by opting out	___	___
We are concerned about the amount of time diverted to test and preparation	___	___
I lack confidence in the school to use the test data appropriately	___	___
My child may be unfairly labeled by test data.	___	___
My child's teacher will be unfairly assessed by the test data.	___	___
I am concerned about the privacy and confidentiality rights of my child.	___	___
We wish to make a statement about testing by opting out	___	___
My child will benefit from understanding this principled decision.	___	___
We wish to make a statement about testing through opting out.	___	___

A PARENT'S PROCEDURAL CHECKLIST

I have discussed this decision with my child	___	___
I have discussed this decision with the teacher(s)	___	___
I have discussed the decision with my child's counselor/clinician	___	___
I have discussed this decision with other parents/experts	___	___
I have prepared a letter to my child's teacher or principal to opt out	___	___