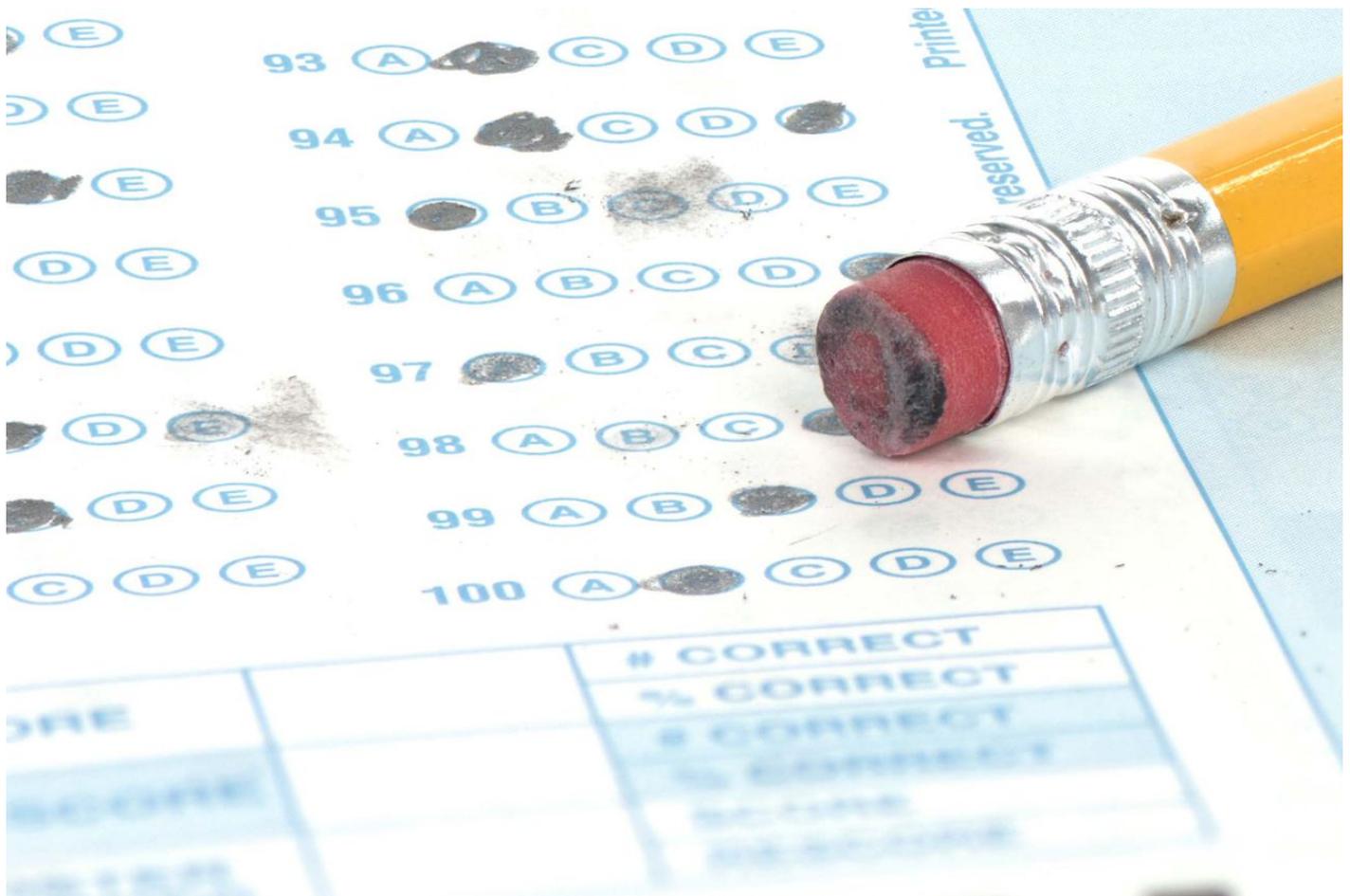


Mass. education leaders propose raising MCAS graduation requirements

By [Naomi Martin](#) and [Adria Watson](#) Globe Staff, Updated April 26, 2022, 3:01 p.m.



Many education advocates are concerned that raising the standards could lower graduation rates, particularly among students from disadvantaged backgrounds. ADOBESTOCK/CLSDESIGN - STOCK.ADOBE.COM

Massachusetts education leaders on Tuesday approved seeking public input on a proposal to raise state standardized test scores needed for students to graduate high school, starting with this year's eighth graders.

The vote by the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education started a public comment period on changes proposed by education Commissioner Jeff Riley

before members take a final vote in June. In raising the standards on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, or MCAS, board members said they aim to ensure students who receive a diploma meet the state's expectations on a new version of the MCAS test and are prepared for college and career success. They also want to push schools to better support students who struggle to pass the MCAS, who are disproportionately from low-income households, students of color, students with disabilities, and English language learners.

“It strikes the right balance between aligning or realigning our standards to the new assessment and also ensuring the districts are providing a level of transparency and support for students,” said education Secretary James Peyser.

The MCAS began in 1998. Since 2003, all graduating seniors have been required to attain certain MCAS scores. Students first take the tests — which now include math, science, and English language arts — in 10th grade and if they don't pass, are given opportunities to attempt again in later grades.

Under the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's proposed changes, students would have to attain a scaled score of 486 on each the English and math MCAS tests; currently, the thresholds are 472 for English and 486 for math. Students who complete an “educational proficiency plan,” which includes students' coursework, grades, and teacher input, would be allowed to graduate with a lower score, of at least 470 on both English and math, up from the current 455 and 469, respectively. The state considers scores from 440 to 469 as “not meeting expectations,” while scores from 470 to 499 are “partially meeting expectations.”

Many education advocates are concerned that raising the standards could lower graduation rates, particularly among students from disadvantaged backgrounds. To address that concern, the state's proposed changes would include changes to the educational proficiency plan process, including requiring schools to tutor students, share the plans with parents, and encourage schools to include these students in early-college,

early-career, and vocational programs.

Board member Martin West said he hopes the changes to the proficiency plans will improve the current system, which is “not a powerful vehicle for addressing students who need to make continued improvement — it’s much closer to an exercise in paperwork compliance.”

The rationale behind the changes were based in large part on research by John Papay, an associate professor of education at Brown University, who presented his findings to the board Tuesday. Papay concluded high school MCAS scores predict students’ long-term success and appear to reflect students’ academic skills, not simply reflect their socioeconomic status or school characteristics. But he also found most students who scored near the current passing cutoff didn’t fare well and didn’t appear to be college- or career-ready.

But he also acknowledged lower MCAS scores are found disproportionately among students from disadvantaged backgrounds involving poverty, race, disability status, or language. For example, he said, 30 percent of test-takers in 2018 were from low-income households, but 70 percent of students who failed that year’s English language arts test were from low-income families.

“This reflects those realities and substantial inequalities in society and in our school system,” Papay said.

Board member Amanda Fernandez said “you can’t un-see that 70 percent,” and urged the state’s education department to create a “much more comprehensive [plan for] what types of supports low-income students will receive.”

Department officials agreed to bring concrete support plans in June.

Earlier Tuesday, Gerry Mroz, treasurer of the Massachusetts Association for Gifted Education, urged the board to raise the standards to incentivize adults working with

underprivileged students to help them reach their potential.

Having a “low bar . . . exacerbates inequity,” Mroz said. “Districts with more privilege will naturally do more, as they’ve always done. Districts with less privilege will do less and the students are harmed.”

But other education advocates argued that raising the MCAS passing score threshold would only further harm students disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, including English learners, who have fallen behind in meeting the current requirements for a diploma.

“The data clearly show that graduation tests do not improve educational quality or equity and do not close achievement gaps,” said Lisa Guisbond, executive director of Citizens for Public Schools. “Massachusetts education officials claim to be data driven. So when will they start following the data, instead of letting their faith in testing get in the way?”

Meanwhile, the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education supports the proposal — and even called for standards to ultimately increase to 500, which is considered “meeting expectations.”

The alliance’s executive director, Ed Lambert, said he also supports the state’s proposal to improve the education proficiency plan process, but having one-third of students falling under that category is too many.

“We don’t want to have a couple of different pathways and say ‘Ok, it’s good enough’ for some kids, particularly when the majority of them are from low-income backgrounds or are students of color,” Lambert said.

Merrie Najimy, president of the Massachusetts Teachers Association, said the proposal doubles down on “the system of forced compliance” and adds a new layer of bureaucratic tasks that takes educators away from supporting students.

standardized testing “measures more factors of racism, socioeconomic status, housing, and food insecurity,” Najimy said, adding that the state needs to shift away from a punitive policy of rating students and schools, and turn toward a model that invests resources into schools.

“Give students the emotional, social support that they need, especially now during the pandemic, and deal with the broader public policy issues to address racism and poverty that our students are dealing with,” she said. “Those are the students whose scores are always the lowest.”

Naomi Martin can be reached at naomi.martin@globe.com. Adria Watson can be reached at adria.watson@globe.com. Follow her on Twitter [@adriarwatson](https://twitter.com/adriarwatson).

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