

State mulls end-of-course tests as possible MCAS replacement

A year after Massachusetts voters overturned using the 10th grade MCAS exam as a graduation requirement, state leaders are considering end-of-course state-administered tests for high schoolers.

Some members of an advisory council on graduation requirements, including MASC President Jason Fraser, indicated they fear such exams would just create another high-stakes test and overturn the will of the voters. Other members of the council worry the proposed recommendation would not go far enough toward establishing a baseline high school diploma. The advisory council, established by Governor Healey in January, has dozens of members, including students, superintendents, top legislators' appointees, and representatives of higher education.

DESE Commissioner Pedro Martinez and Education Secretary Patrick Tutwiler, the council's co-chairs, presented the recommendation to council members a few weeks ago, calling for end-of-course assessments "designed, administered, and scored by the state, promoting a uniform standard across Massachusetts." That aspect is one of several in the draft, including requiring all students to complete MassCore, a suite of high school courses that align with state university admissions requirements; instruction in financial literacy; and having students complete locally graded portfolios and projects in some courses.

The council is due to deliver its initial recommendations on how to replace the graduation requirement

to Governor Maura Healey and the Legislature by Dec. 1.

One advantage of the proposed tests, Tutwiler said, is they could replace the Grade 10 MCAS exam. Despite last year's ballot measure, the state is still required under federal law to test students in math and reading at least once in high school.

"No single assessment would prevent a kid from graduating. If a student isn't successful on it, it won't mean that a student is not going to graduate," Tutwiler said.

He and Martinez said they still have to work out the details, including which subjects the tests would be in and how much, if at all, they would contribute to grades.

Jason Fraser, MASC President, said he was initially so concerned by the

continued on page 2

Education Committee moves forward literacy bill

At a meeting on Friday, October 17, Education Committee moved forward a proposal that would require all MA public schools to use "evidence-based" methods to teach children how to read.

The bill (H4642) cleared the committee with bipartisan support, with 10 members voting in favor and no opposition.

Supporters of the bill hope it will improve literacy instruction and outcomes while opponents worry it is overly prescriptive and will limit the methods teachers have available to teach students.

The legislation would require districts to adopt literacy curricula backed by scientific research, focusing on kindergarten through third grade. It estab-

continued on page 3

Governor appoints new member of Board of Elementary and Secondary Education

Kristen Smidy, a former teacher, principal, and superintendent with nearly 20 years of experience as an educator in MA, has been appointed by Governor Healey to the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Smidy currently serves as the Associate Director for Accreditation on the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) Commission on Public Schools. Prior to joining NEASC earlier this fall, Smidy served for five years as Superintendent for the Gateway Regional School District in Huntington, MA. She previously served as Principal of Hampshire Regional High School, and began her career as a 6th and 7th grade social studies teacher at Dugan Middle School in Springfield. She has served on the Legislative Committee for MASS, the Connecticut Valley Superintendent Roundtable Executive Board, and the MA Inclusive Higher Education Task Force. She is a graduate of UMass-Amherst and Boston University.



DESE DECLINES TO MOVE FORWARD TWO CHARTER AND VIRTUAL SCHOOL APPLICATIONS

Two proposals submitted to DESE to establish a new virtual school and a new charter school were reviewed earlier this fall by the Department. Based on the review of the initial applications against their respective application criteria, Commissioner Martinez announced earlier this month that he would not be extending an invitation to submit a final application this fall to the Charter School of Entertainment Technology and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Virtual School's initial virtual school. The applicants may submit an application in a future applicant cycle.

TRUMP FREEZES \$575M IN MA FUNDING

The Trump administration has frozen or cancelled nearly \$28 billion in approved funding for Democratic-led congressional districts, including \$575 million in MA grants, as part of an effort to pressure an end to the government shut-down, according to a recent analysis by The New York Times. About \$738.7 million in funding was also paused in 14 Republican-led congressional districts.

In MA, three Congressional districts accounted for about \$400 million of the halted funding, including \$207.6 million in Ayanna Pressley's 7th district, which includes Boston; \$180.3 million in Democratic Whip Katherine Clark's 5th districts; and \$114.6 million in James McGovern's 2nd district, which includes Worcester. Seth Moulton's 6th district had \$17.5 million trimmed, and Lori Trahan's 3rd district lost \$39.5 million.

The President has threatened further cuts if the stalemate continues, describing it as an opportunity to lay off more federal workers and further cut funding.

DESE RESPONSE TO FEDERAL FUNDING CUTS DURING SHUT-DOWN

In a statement released following notification of the administration's funding freeze, DESE reported that they are monitoring ongoing budget developments for Federal Fiscal Year 2026 (October 1, 2025-September 30, 2026) and note that there is no immediate impact on current MA awards for the 2025-2026 school year. Current grant awards were funded in the FFY25 budget. DESE advises districts to continue to apply for their federal funding awards, administer their programs, and submit reimbursement claims as usual. The US Department of Agriculture has indicated that funding is available to continue to reimburse schools, as well as child and adult care providers, for meals served in September and October 2025. DESE will continue to update districts.

DRAFT ANTISEMITISM AND BIAS PREVENTION CURRICULUM AND PD RUBRIC OPEN FOR PUBLIC COMMENT

The draft Antisemitism and Societal Bias Prevention Curriculum and Professional Development (PD) Rubric is open for public comment. The rubric is designed to help educators evaluate instructional materials and PD workshops on preventing antisemitism and societal bias, per M.G.L c. 71, s. 98A. Public comment will be open through Monday, December 1. Individuals or organizations may submit public comment via this online survey. The draft language is posted on the DESE website at: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/safety/draft-rubric.pdf>

MCAS Replacement

continued from page 1

recommendation that he published it on the organization's website to gather member feedback.

"The members of my organization on many occasions stood up against high stakes testing," Fraser said in an interview ahead of the meeting. "The feedback has been overwhelmingly, don't let them do this."

Fraser said he preferred something "much more holistic than putting you in a room to take a test." As an example, he pointed to the state's eighth grade civics project, where students research and take real-world actions on issues in their communities.

On the side favoring the end-of-course tests are council members such as Cambridge parent Manikka Bowman and business lobby leader Ed Lambert.

Bowman argued that without a common assessment there is no real standard across the state.

Lambert, executive director of the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education, said he strongly endorses uniform, common assessments in the form of end-of-course tests. "That is the safeguard that ensures equity from one district to the next."

At a meeting of the council on Friday, October 17, state leaders tried to keep the focus on the responsibility of schools to support students who don't pass the assessment. If there's an end-of-course test in Algebra I, for example, students will have to master the class whether that's a graduation requirement or not – because completing MassCore requires them to take Algebra II.

Martinez tried to reassure the council that even if passing a test isn't required to graduate, it doesn't mean that students will just be waved through.

"This is not us saying we're not going to have any accountability for anybody," he said. "This is more the opposite. We're going to use this to make sure we push in."



INDOOR AIR QUALITY IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVE

Following years of recurring mold and odor concerns at Wales Elementary School, part of the Tantasqua Regional School District, the district explored new options to improve indoor air quality across its facilities. Earlier remediation efforts

had limited success, prompting the school committee to evaluate alternative, long-term solutions.

Tantasqua Regional School Committee chair Michael Valanzola reports that the district opted to install CASPR disinfection technology at Wales Elementary as a pilot. According to Valanzola, the units provided consistent coverage and required no ongoing labor; staff reported a clear improvement in both odor and air quality follow-

ing the installation. Encouraged by the results, the district chose to expand the use of CASPR to additional high use spaces, specifically the junior high and high school kitchens as part of a broader commitment to proactive facility management and student and staff wellness.

To learn more about CASPR and how their clean air technologies can benefit your district: <https://casprtech.com>

Literacy Bill

continued from page 1

lished reporting requirements, professional development for teachers and new standards for educator preparation programs.

Under the legislation, the Commissioner of Education would regularly evaluate teacher preparation programs based on program quality, candidate outcomes and evidence-based reading instruction.

The legislation further mandates that all K-3 students be screened at

least twice a year using approved literacy tools, with parental notification and intervention for individual students below benchmarks tied to “age-typical development in specific literary skills.” It also creates a two-year paid teacher apprenticeship pilot in high-needs districts and orders a statewide study on incentives to recruit and retain diverse and effective educators in those schools.

The initiative is the result of what state officials have called a literacy crisis.

The most recent MCAS exam data

show that only about 42% of third-graders are meeting foundational reading expectations, with lower scores among students of color and those from low-income families. A 2024 MassINC poll found that 84% of MA parents support requiring schools to use research-backed reading curricula.

Supporters of creating statewide literacy standards say it would bring instruction in line with decades of cognitive research pointing to systematic phonics, explicit decoding and structured literacy as key to early reading success.

Critics are concerned that statewide curriculum mandates could undercut local control, impose costly transitions on already strained districts, and narrow teacher flexibility to respond to individual student needs. Others have raised concerns about ensuring cultural responsiveness while standardizing instructional methods.

Over the past year, the state has invested tens of millions of dollars in reading materials and teacher training through an initiative called “Literacy Launch.” If passed, MA would join a growing number of states reshaping early reading instruction through legislation aligned with the “science of reading.”

The bill has been sent to the House Ways and Means Committee which will evaluate the financial impact of the legislation on state and local budgets and the Committee will subsequently vote on whether to move the bill forward in the legislative process.

FOLLOWING THE MEETING, FRASER SENT HIS THOUGHTS TO THE MASC MEMBERSHIP, REPRINTED BELOW:

We spent over two hours on Friday, October 17, discussing End of Course (EOC) assessments at the Statewide Graduation Council. I still have deep concerns about where this work is headed, though I did find much of the Commissioner’s philosophical rationale compelling. He spoke about wanting to use EOC data to support students in graduating by implementing assessments earlier in high school and providing targeted supports based on the results.

However, the Secretary reminded the Council of the familiar adage, if it doesn’t count, it doesn’t matter. He pointed to the recent drop in MCAS scores at high schools across the state as evidence. This led to a thoughtful debate about terms like high stakes, medium stakes, and low stakes.

Both the Commissioner and Secretary reiterated several times that these EOCs would not be the sole determining factor in deciding whether a student graduates. Still, it was clear that we have a lot more work to do to define their role, especially since both leaders emphasized that EOCs will remain part of the draft report to the Governor, due December 1.

It was a healthy, thought provoking discussion and it left me with two fundamental questions. Could an EOC provide insights in educational gaps to help ensure more at risk students graduate? I’m interested in hearing more! Could an EOC be used to deny even a single student a diploma? Not on my watch!

MASC Lifetime Achievement and All-State School Committee Winners Announced

The following members have been nominated by their colleagues and the MASC Board of Directors in recognition of their contributions to the Association and to their students and school communities. The awards will be presented at the Friday, November 14 Life Member/Leadership Awards dinner during the upcoming conference in Hyannis.

2025 AWARD RECIPIENTS **LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT:** Michelle Badger, Plymouth • Paul Bregoli, Quincy • Robert Campbell, Montachusett Reg. Voc. Tech. • William Collamore, Holyoke • Joan Galla Frank, Northborough • Lisa Fiske Heger, Braintree • Eric Olson, Montachusett Reg. Voc. Tech. • James Sorenson, Plymouth • Nerissa Wallen, Triton Reg.

ALL-STATE: Division I: Valery Young, Westford • Division II: Stacey Rizzo, Revere • Division III: Jean Coleman, Silver Lake Reg./Plympton • Division IV: Donna McCance, Leicester • Division V: Jessica Corwin, Sunderland • Division VI: Bruce Weiner, Hancock • Division VII: Cathy Lewis, Mashpee • Division VIII: Alice DeLuca, Minute-man Reg. Voc. Tech. • Division IX: Holyoke School Committee • Division X: Christina Horner, Wellesley

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Remember: Conference sessions start at 10:30am on Wednesday, 11/12. Registration opens at 9:00am.

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