

A PARENTS' GUIDE TO MASSACHUSETTS' NEW STUDENT TESTING PROGRAM

You've probably heard of MCAS, the state's testing program. Since 1998, public schools across Massachusetts have administered MCAS tests to students to assess how well they are learning the content they are taught in their English language arts (ELA), mathematics, and science and technology/engineering classes. This content is based on learning standards contained in the state's Curriculum Frameworks. For more than a decade, MCAS has provided state policymakers, educators, parents, and others with a really good measure of how well students know the learning standards and whether they are reading or doing math on grade level.

We know that our students are leading the nation in ELA and mathematics achievement and continuously improving. But we also know that not all students are enjoying the same level of success. Massachusetts is committed to ensuring that all students are prepared for the opportunities that await them after high school. That's why the state recently adopted new learning standards that set the right targets for what students should know and be able to do in prekindergarten through grade 12. These new learning standards, which are anchored in what students need to be ready for college and careers,

College and Career Readiness Defined:

The level of preparation a student needs to enroll and succeed—without remediation—in a credit-bearing course at a postsecondary institution that offers a baccalaureate degree or in a high-quality certificate program that enables students to enter a career pathway with potential future advancement.

THIS GUIDE INCLUDES:

- Overview of new assessments that measure student proficiency against more rigorous standards
- Sample test questions
- Additional resources for parents

are more rigorous, coherent, and focused than our previous standards.

With new learning standards, we need a new testing program that is aligned with new expectations. Massachusetts is collaborating with other states to build a new testing program called the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC. In future years, PARCC could replace MCAS testing in ELA and mathematics.

This guide is intended to provide you with an overview of PARCC, address how PARCC will build upon the strengths of MCAS, and share some sample test questions. We hope you find this guide informative and a useful resource as you engage in conversations with your children, fellow parents, teachers, and school leaders.

Why Did Massachusetts Adopt New Learning Standards?

Back in 2008, Massachusetts agreed to take part in the development and implementation of a state-led, state-driven initiative that sets the right targets for what students should know and be able to do. That initiative is called the Common Core State Standards, or Common Core. The Common Core capitalizes on feedback from employers, colleges, and universities about the literacy and mathematical skills that students are most often lacking as they graduate from high school. The Common Core provides clear signals to students about their readiness for the next grade level and, in high school, their readiness for college and careers.

The Common Core is not a state-mandated curriculum. In Massachusetts, local school committees and school district leaders make decisions about what to teach, how to teach it, and what textbooks and other instructional materials to purchase and use in the classroom. But teachers use the state's Curriculum Frameworks as a blueprint or starting point to develop their classroom curricula and daily lesson plans focused on the skills and knowledge students should acquire and master. Our new Curriculum Frameworks, which incorporate the Common Core, are built on the academic aspirations of the world's highest performing countries.

So what are some of the new elements of the Common Core that we did not see in our prior standards?

- The Common Core reinforces the importance of reading, writing, speaking, and listening across all subjects, not just ELA.
- Students will continue to study great works of fiction while also reading high-quality non-fiction and informational texts that will strengthen their ability to better meet the expectations of colleges, universities, and employers.
- The new mathematics standards provide greater focus and clarity for teachers and students at each grade level.
- In early grades, teachers will concentrate on developing students' fluency with numbers and operations.
- In middle grades, teachers will focus on proportional reasoning (ratios, proportions, fractions, decimals), which is a critical conceptual underpinning for algebra and higher level math.

In 2010, the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education voted to adopt the Common Core, and later that year approved a new version of the state's Curriculum Frameworks that incorporates the new standards. Educators are excited by the new standards and the resources and tools the state is providing for their use in the classroom. The new standards build knowledge as students move from grade to grade, which allows students to master concepts before moving on to new content. And they emphasize the teaching of essential skills such as conceptual and critical thinking.

What is PARCC?

PARCC is a state-led alliance to create a next-generation testing program in English language arts/literacy and mathematics that is aligned to the Common Core. Massachusetts has participated in the development work from the outset and has been a leader in the governance of the alliance. A \$186 million federal grant has funded the alliance's work over the past four years to develop PARCC.

The PARCC tests will differ from the MCAS tests in a number of ways, including:

- PARCC will test students in grades 3-11; MCAS currently tests students in grades 3-8 and 10
- PARCC will be a computer-based test, though a paper-and-pencil version will be available at the outset; MCAS is only a paper-and-pencil test
- As a computer-based test, PARCC will deliver innovative technology-based items and performance-based tasks that will better measure a broader range of the skills that we value and employers report are necessary for students to acquire
- PARCC will assess writing at all grade levels; MCAS currently only assesses writing in grades 4, 7, and 10
- PARCC will have five levels of students performance, including a level that indicates college and career readiness; MCAS currently reports four performance categories (Advanced, Proficient, Needs Improvement, Warning/Failing)
- PARCC will allow us to compare student performance in Massachusetts to student performance in other states that also take PARCC; MCAS is a custom test that only Massachusetts students take
- PARCC will produce more timely results for school districts and educators to help in planning and tailoring instruction for students in the coming year
- PARCC has the real potential to reduce the costs for our testing program by taking advantage of the collaborative work across states

PARCC in 2013-14

In Spring 2014, some Massachusetts students in grades 3-11 will participate in something called a "field test" for PARCC. The field test won't count – no student that takes PARCC this year will receive a report card or score based on her or his performance. Think of a field test as a test tryout where our goal is to see how students perform on test questions and how well those questions assess the content. The information gained from a field test helps builders develop and ultimately launch the new testing program.

Educators and parents will also have the opportunity this year to see sample PARCC test questions and online practice tests. This will help parents prepare their children for the field test.

Over the next two years, Massachusetts will test PARCC, provide input, and thoughtfully analyze its value and rigor. Assessments are just one piece of the larger puzzle; they give students, parents, and teachers the feedback needed to make sure students are on track. Our assessments do not prevent our students from moving forward, but signal where they need assistance and supports. Our 10th grade students will continue to use MCAS to meet the graduation requirement through 2018.

Our efforts to upgrade curriculum, instruction, and assessment in classrooms across the Commonwealth is a piece of our overall reform work. We are implementing initiatives to improve educator effectiveness, to turn around our lowest performing districts and schools to accelerate student achievement, and to use technology and data to improve teaching and learning in the classroom. Parents' voice is critical to ensure that our efforts are implemented well and with enough resources to ensure success. Massachusetts will include parents and teachers in thoughtful conversations based on trust, collaboration, and success.

National PTA Policies on Assessments

Below is a list of policies and practices that the National PTA supports. Parents can check with the Department of Education on whether Massachusetts' policies and practices are aligned.

- The National PTA believes that valid assessment does not consist of only a single test score, and that at no time should a single test be considered the sole determinant of a student's academic or work future.
- Policy alternatives to social promotion and grade retention must be established.
- The National PTA supports nationally agreed upon voluntary standards if they are derived by consensus at the state and local levels. Parents must be involved in this process.
- The National PTA opposes federal legislation and/or regulations that mandate standardized testing or would lead to such testing, as well as federal policies that mandate comparisons of states, school districts, or individual schools and student retention based on a single test or sole criterion and the practice of social promotion.
- Standardized multiple-choice tests and school readiness tests should never be used with preschool and early elementary children for any purpose.

What can parents do to help their children succeed?

Parents have a pivotal role to play as we implement our new college and career-ready standards and move to a new testing program to measure how well students are learning those standards. Specifically, parents should:

- ✔ Talk to your children's teachers about the Curriculum Frameworks and the state's expectations for what students should know and be able to do in ELA and mathematics.
- ✔ Learn about the tools and resources, such as model curriculum units, that the state is developing with educators for use by schools as they implement the new learning standards. For more information, go to <http://www.doe.mass.edu/candi/commoncore>.
- ✔ Monitor your children's progress against the new learning standards, and if your children need extra help, talk with their teachers to help identify ways they can receive additional support such as tutoring, after-school activities, and other resources.
- ✔ Talk to your children about the new testing program. And if your children will participate in the PARCC field test this year, encourage them to do their best while reminding them that they will not receive a report card or score based on their performance this year.
- ✔ Familiarize yourself with PARCC by reviewing sample test questions and taking practice tests yourself and with your children. See some examples of sample questions below.
- ✔ Remember to form realistic expectations as we move to implementing new learning standards and a new testing program. PARCC will be much different than MCAS because the learning standards on which PARCC are based are more rigorous. It's important that parents and educators understand that it will take time for teachers to make adjustments in their classrooms, for students to learn and master the new standards, and for everyone to understand how to interpret state, district, school, and student-level scores on PARCC.
- ✔ Provide a quiet, comfortable place for your children to study at home, and make sure they get a good night's sleep before the tests.
- ✔ Review test results with your child and take the time to discuss areas of strength and areas where she or he can improve. Bring your child's teacher into the discussion for additional support.
- ✔ Communicate and/or meet with your children's teachers as often as possible to review your children's progress. Ask for activities for them to do at home to help your child prepare for tests and to improve their proficiency in the skills that the Common Core expects students to acquire.

Sample questions by grade level

The following questions are representative of those found on the new assessments. For more examples, visit www.parconline.org/samples/item-task-prototypes.

EXAMPLE OF A 4TH GRADE MATH QUESTION

Three classes at Lakeview School are going on a field trip. The Table shows the number of people in each class, including the teacher.

They can choose to use buses, vans, and cars.



Buses have 20 seats



Vans have 16 seats



Cars have 5 seats

	Total number of people
Mrs. Ruiz's Class	23
Mr. Yangs's Class	25
Mrs. Evan's Class	24

Which three combinations can be used to take all three classes on a field trip?

- 1 bus and 4 vans 1 bus and 8 cars
 3 vans and 11 cars 2 buses and 3 vans and 4 cars
 1 bus and 1 van and 6 cars

Submit Answer

EXAMPLE OF A 6TH GRADE ELA QUESTION

Students are asked to read a passage from the fictional text "Julie of the Wolves" by Jean C. George and answer the following:

SAMPLE ITEM

In the passage, the author developed a strong character named Miyax. Think about Miyax and the details the author used to create the character. The passage ends with Miyax waiting for the black wolf to look at her.

Write an original story to continue where the passage ended. In your story, be sure to use what you have learned about the character Miyax as you tell what happens to her next.

Answer:

EXAMPLE OF A 10TH GRADE ELA QUESTION

SAMPLE ITEM

Use what you have learned from reading "Daedalus and Icarus" by Ovid and "To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Triumph" by Anne Sexton to write an essay that provides an analysis of how Sexton transforms Daedalus and Icarus.

As a starting point, you may want to consider what is emphasized, absent, or different in the two texts, but feel free to develop your own focus for analysis.

Develop your essay by providing textual evidence from both texts. Be sure to follow the conventions of standard English.

Answer:

Additional Resources

- For a more detailed look at what CCSS mean at each grade level:
www.pta.org/parentsguide
- For information on the PARCC consortium, of which Massachusetts is a member:
www.parcconline.org



National PTA
1250 N Pitt Street
Alexandria, VA 22314
Toll-Free: (800) 307-4PTA (4782)
PTA.org • info@pta.org

© Copyright 2013 National PTA. All rights reserved.