

MASSACHUSETTS
HIGHTECHNOLOGYCOUNCIL
Dedicated to Growth... Committed to Action

June 2, 2022

Re: Proposed Amendments to 603 CMR 30.00, Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System and Standards for Competency Determination Regulations

Dear Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education,

The Massachusetts High Technology Council has long supported the MCAS exam as an assessment to ensure accountability and measure outcomes in education. This perspective was shared by Council President, Christopher Anderson, during his tenure as a member and Chair of the Massachusetts Board of Education.

We support raising the passing score for English Language Arts (ELA), math, and science on the MCAS required for graduation because doing so would: (1) better prepare our students for rigorous post-secondary curriculum and position them for success after graduating; and (2) improve educational achievement to sustain our national leadership as a locus of talent for employers. While we support the effort to increase standards, we encourage Commissioner Riley and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education to go further than the proposed new passing score of 486 and to set the standard at the minimum score for “Meeting Expectations”, 500, to take effect starting in 2030.

The Commonwealth’s gains in education achievement over the last three decades would not have been possible without the MCAS and the commitment to rigorous standards that the test helps uphold. Within a decade of implementing the MCAS, Massachusetts climbed to the number one spot on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in fourth- and eighth-grade math and ELA. The MCAS has helped Massachusetts students maintain that performance as they have held the number 1 rank on NAEP scores nationwide in all but one assessment year since 2005.

That overall state success, however, belies the reality that our struggling education districts leave many who graduate from high school in Massachusetts today without the requisite skills for university-level courses and numerous career paths. This is especially true of technical occupations for which a strong foundation in math and science is essential.

Many employers struggle to find workers with the skills that employers seek in new hires. According to the [High Tech Council’s job market analytics](#), on average there are more than 29,000 tech job postings in Massachusetts but just 6,200 hires. The problem will only get worse in Massachusetts given the growing workforce needs to sustain the state’s expanding innovation industries, such as computing and life sciences. Raising standards in math and science, as well as in ELA, are an important effort to close this gap and to do so in a way that benefits all students, regardless of where they live.

For the benefit of our students, we also need to calibrate standards to align with the reality of an increasingly competitive higher education environment and borderless labor market. Preparing Massachusetts students for the academic rigor of post-secondary programs, and equipping them with skills for demanding careers, requires a commitment to gradually raising standards.

Raising the passing score is setting the bar at an appropriate level so that what students are taught aligns with increasingly demanding workforce requirements. Aligning standards with labor market expectations

will help ensure that more students gain a deeper foundation of knowledge critical to build the competencies they will need to succeed. The [recent research](#) from the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, which has prompted consideration of raising the passing score, shows that 10th grade MCAS scores are effective predictors for long-term educational attainment and achievement in the workforce relative to other indicators of student advantage. Importantly, Annenberg’s research also found that students who score near the current passing score standard are not equipped with adequate college- or career-readiness.

In short, the current standards don’t set up students for success or to meet the expectations of higher education and employment. Raising the passing score can help address that. Further, setting the minimum passing score at 500—the lowest for “Meeting Expectations”—is a reasonable standard to aim for, starting in 2030, to ensure students meet grade-level expectations. A score of 486 is not setting the bar at a level that will ensure Massachusetts’ students are on track for success.

Over the last two years, a disturbing number of our students did not have adequate access to quality instruction. Too often those who did not have access to schooling were disproportionately pupils in underserved communities where long-standing inequalities have persisted. There is no question that the failure to meet many of our students’ needs since spring 2020 have set us back in our effort to close learning gaps across socio-economic and racial boundaries. That very shortcoming emphasizes how, now more than ever, we should not enable mediocrity—and eventual stagnation—in our standards but ensure that the rigor of our standards rises consistent with what students will need to be successful.

Sincerely,

Matthew Blackburn
Director of Policy and Research