

Debate over MCAS graduation requirement spills onto state ballots with Question 2

By Jim Hand For The Sun Chronicle
Oct 7, 2024



State Rep. Jim Hawkins, D-Attleboro, says he is “passionate” in his support for Question 2 on the November ballot, which would keep the test, but eliminate it as a graduation requirement.

MARK STOCKWELL/THE SUN CHRONICLE



Before becoming a politician, state Rep. Jim Hawkins was a math teacher at Attleboro High School for 14 years.

In that time he saw the implementation of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System tests, or MCAS.

Hawkins, D-Attleboro, didn't like what he saw.

He said the tests were too long, disrupted the school schedule and rewarded students who were naturally good at taking standardized tests over those who are not.

Furthermore, he said, school systems in rich towns can put more resources into schools, giving them an upper hand over schools in poor cities.

That is why he said he is "passionate" in his support for Question 2 on the November ballot, which would keep the test, but eliminate it as a graduation requirement.

"It's been one of my priorities since I ran for office," He said. "It's not a good measure of performance."

The tests have questions requiring short-written answers and longer essay answers, but part of it is multiple-choice questions. Hawkins calls multiple choice "the worst possible" way to test students.

Hawkins said one of the many problems he sees with the tests is they are too long, taking up to three hours for one of the days of testing.

Many other educators disagree with eliminating the graduation requirement.

Supporters of MCAS say it has helped make Massachusetts public schools among the best in the nation by holding schools and teachers accountable. They said the test results bring attention to what schools are doing well and point out weaknesses that need addressing.

The graduation requirement assures a student has learned the subject matter before graduating. Students who fail the test can retake it.

The tests are given in grades 3 through 8 and grade 10. Passing the tests for English, math and science in the sophomore year is the graduation requirement.

The Annenberg Institute at Brown University has been studying the MCAS for years and calls its results an indication of student achievement and a good predictor of academic success.

Its study noted that grades given by teachers have been rising due to grade inflation while the MCAS has found that test scores have dropped since the COVID-19 pandemic.

The institute is non-political so it doesn't take a position on the ballot question.

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education says graduation rates have increased and dropout rates have declined since the testing regime was initiated.

The Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents opposes the question because it would do away with passing MCAS as a graduation requirement without establishing a replacement graduation requirement.

“If passed, Question 2 would undermine the high standards that are the cornerstone of Massachusetts’ successful work in education reform over the past thirty years,” Association President Armand Pires said.

Pires, who is also superintendent of the Medway Public Schools, said, “We believe it is critical for the Commonwealth to have a statewide standard for earning a high school diploma.”

Question 2 calls on the state to establish a replacement graduation standard, but does not specify what the replacement would be.

Hawkins has co-sponsored a bill that would replace the test with student projects and group work judged by teachers, but that is not part of the question.

He said projects are a better indication of what students have learned than standardized tests.

In fact, Hawkins would like to go beyond Question 2 and have MCAS completely done away with.

The Massachusetts Teachers Association is the major sponsor of Question 2 and has contributed \$3.2 million in “in kind” donations toward the campaign to pass it, according to The Boston Globe.

A joint statement from MTA President Max Page and Vice President Deb McCarthy said, in part, “MCAS offer a one-time snapshot of student performance, yet the high stakes now attached to that test puts pressure on students to do well on the exams, even if they can better demonstrate their mastery of content in other ways.

A new business group, Mass Opportunity Alliance, said Massachusetts children have the highest test scores in the country and the highest graduation rate, in part due to MCAS. Although it is not taking a formal position on Question 2, it maintains that a strong educational system contributes to the state’s economy.

“We believe a strong education system is the bedrock of a strong economy — and MCAS is a crucial part of that academic foundation,” Christopher Anderson, a founder of the group, said.

“At a time when steep taxes, outmigration, and cost of living are threatening competitiveness in our state, we can’t let the next generation of Massachusetts leaders fall behind.”

Question 2 is one of the most contentious referendums on the ballot and attracted more attention in September when the latest MCAS results showed students have fallen behind since the pandemic.

Critics said the results show the tests don’t work while backers said without the tests educators might not know how far academics have slipped in recent years.