Recent Independent PARCC Studies

HumRRO – Human Resources Research Council: Evaluation of the Content and Quality of the 2014 High School MCAS and PARCC Relative to the CCSSO Criteria for High Quality Assessments -- 2015
In its review of high school assessments, the HumRRO study found the PARCC ELA/literacy test to have high quality texts, an appropriate mix of text types, and rigorous items that “required close reading and analysis”. Research and writing items “require analysis, synthesis, and/or organization of information.” The mathematics test focused on the most important mathematics needed for careers and a wide range of postsecondary studies, and all content was “reflective of student success at the high school level.” In mathematics, the cognitive demand of the test matched that of the standards, although reviewers thought a great number of higher level items could be valuable. However, in ELA/literacy the test had a heavier emphasis on higher order thinking skills than the standards.

HumRRO found that the MCAS high school ELA/literacy assessment “did not represent” the demands of the standards. “Although the items centered on important central concepts and ideas, they did not sufficiently require students to provide direct textual evidence.” Moreover, the test did not include sufficient attention to informational text or expository or argumentative writing types and did not represent “a wide range of text structures and purposes.” The MCAS high school mathematics test assesses the prerequisites for careers and a wide range of postsecondary studies. However, the balance of attention to concepts, procedures, and applications was not met, and the items measuring conceptual understanding were low-level and the application items failed “to require the student to use context to determine meaning or to answer the item, as recommended by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) Criteria.” For both ELA/literacy and mathematics, reviewers found “too much coverage of the lower levels of cognitive demand.”

Thomas B. Fordham Institute: Evaluation of the Content and Quality of the 2014 MCAS and PARCC Relative to the CCSSO Criteria for High Quality Assessments – 2015
In its review of grades 5 and 8, the Fordham study finds “the PARCC tests to be high quality assessments of college- and career-readiness, as judged against the Council of Chief State School Officer (CCSSO) Criteria.” PARCC tests pay close attention to the more complex skills called for in the standards, “including close reading, writing to sources, and the critical mathematics work of each grade. One area that is a strength but also a possible weakness for PARCC is the heavy emphasis on higher order skills.... This attention to higher-demand items allows students to demonstrate (or not) strong understanding of more complex skills. At the same time, attention to these more complex skills but could result in inadequate measurement of lower level foundational skills”

The Fordham review of MCAS for grades 5 and 8 finds that while MCAS is a” highly respected and long-standing assessment program with items of high editorial and technical quality, it fell short of several of the criteria for high quality assessments of college- and career-readiness.” “In ELA/literacy, this paper-and-pencil assessment infrequently assesses writing and does not assess writing to sources or research skills. Also, it’s emphasis on higher order skills, such as analysis and synthesis, is inadequate. The quality of the texts and the assessment of close reading, however, are strengths. In mathematics, the MCAS tests accurately reflect the distribution of cognitive demand in the CCSS, but the grade five tests show inadequate focus on the major work of the grade, and too few items address conceptual understanding.”


This study’s purpose was to examine the extent to which PARCC assessments succeed in one of their major goals: identifying students who are ready for college. It compared how high school PARCC exams and the existing Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) predict college grades and placement in remedial courses. Mathematica’s study was commissioned by the state to inform its decision about whether to continue using MCAS exams or to switch to the PARCC’s set of tests.

It concluded that both the MCAS and the PARCC predict college readiness: The validity of scores on PARCC assessments in predicting college grades is similar to the validity of scores on the MCAS. Scores on both the MCAS and PARCC provide similarly strong predictions about which students need remedial coursework in college. In math, meeting the PARCC standard for college readiness predicts a higher level of college performance than meeting the MCAS standard for proficiency, while in English language arts the two standards are similar. In math, students who achieve the college-ready standard on PARCC are also less likely to need remediation than students who achieve the proficient standard on MCAS, while in English language arts the two standards are not statistically distinguishable.


Dana Ansell: A Comparison of the MCAS and PARCC Assessment Systems – 2015

This report summarizes existing information, primarily from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Executive Office of Education. A council of expert advisors helped review this information and advise the author. In its Executive Summary, the report states, “There is not a simple answer to the question of “MCAS or PARCC?” Rather, the answer requires a balancing of priorities and judgment by the Board regarding the trade-offs, including weighing the significant uncertainties and potential risks. This report aims to frame some of the key considerations for the Board based on the best research publicly available and information provided by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, informed by the Advisory Group to the Secretary of Education.”

The report is organized in sections that cover the context for the PARCC “test drive” (Section II); the purposes and quality of assessments in a standards-based education system (Section III); and a descriptive overview and comparison of various attributes of the MCAS and PARCC systems (Sections IV and V). The final section, “Other Policy Considerations,” underscores the importance of considering issues related to PARCC governance and cost. The report is intended to inform the Board’s decision rather than to recommend one.


MBAE: Educating Students for Success – February 2015

This February 2015 report compares MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System) and PARCC (Partnership of Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers) as indicators of readiness for credit-bearing college courses and the work force. Conducted by the Center for Assessment, the analysis was designed to
inform the Commonwealth’s decision about which test is a better gauge of students’ college and career readiness by answering the following three questions about each program:

- Does the test identify students who are college- and career-ready?
- Does the test contain the right content to measure college- and career-readiness?
- Do the elementary and middle school tests provide good information about student progress toward college- and career-readiness?

The report concludes that for MCAS the answer to each question is a clear “No”. For PARCC the answer is a “cautious and conditional ‘Yes’”.