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New report finds MCAS test does not indicate college and career readiness

First comparative analysis of MCAS and PARCC shows MCAS proficiency criteria based largely on middle school content

(BOSTON) February 12, 2015 — The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) does not indicate a student’s preparedness for post-high school success according to a report released today by the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE). The lack of alignment with college and career expectations has resulted in high remediation rates at state colleges and universities and a widening “skills gap.” The report, “Educating Students for Success: A Comparison of the MCAS and PARCC Assessments as Indicators of College- and Career-Readiness,” is the first study to compare MCAS and PARCC (which stands for the Partnership of Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers) as indicators of readiness for credit-bearing college courses and the workforce.

Among its key findings:

- The proficiency bar on the MCAS high school test is too low based on high remediation rates and when compared to other indicators of college and career readiness such as the SAT and National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Results from those two tests suggest less than half of Massachusetts twelfth grade students graduate from high school ready for college in reading and mathematics;
- Even raising the proficiency bar would not compensate for the content of the MCAS high school tests not being targeted to college and career readiness. The tests were not designed to measure higher order thinking and are largely based on lower level material. On the 2014 test, a 10th grade student earning all of the points possible on the middle school items on the test needed only 4 additional points (out of 60) on items aligned to the high school standards for his or her performance to be classified at the Proficient level;
- The various MCAS grade-level tests were developed at different times which has led to inconsistency in the structure of the MCAS tests across grade levels.

The researchers conclude that these shortcomings in the MCAS have allowed nearly 36 percent of Massachusetts’s public high school graduates who passed MCAS to enroll at one of the state’s public colleges or universities — including 65 percent of all community college students — to be placed into one or more noncredit-bearing, remedial courses. These statistics are particularly disturbing in a state where 72% of all jobs are expected to require a secondary degree by 2020.

“The inability of the MCAS to adequately assess college and career readiness in a state that has the most knowledge-dependent economy in the country is a dramatic indication that we need to rethink our
assessment system,” said Linda Noonan, MBAE Executive Director, who noted that 69% of MA employers reported having difficulty hiring employees with the right skills to fill open positions.

“Massachusetts is not realizing its economic potential when we can’t fill the number and type of jobs our economy demands to remain a global leader,” said Rick Lord, president and CEO of Associated Industries of Massachusetts (AIM), the state’s largest business association. “We need to graduate students at higher standards and create an academic environment that enables students to meet those standards.”

MBAE, which represents the business community’s interests in ensuring every student graduate prepared for college, career and citizenship, commissioned the study to understand the differences between the 17-year old MCAS and PARCC. A greater focus on success after high school and the adoption of college- and career-readiness standards within the English Language Arts and Mathematics Curriculum Frameworks have led to a call for new assessments aligned to those standards. The Board of Elementary and Secondary Education will decide next fall which of the assessments to use in Massachusetts schools.

**Background:**

Researchers used three criteria to understand the tests’ ability to assess how well a student is prepared for college and/or careers:

1) Does the test identify students who are college and career ready? (e.g., is the bar for graduation high enough to indicate that the student can manage entry level college work?);
2) Does the test contain the right content to measure college and career readiness?;
3) Does the test allow for tracking student progress over time?

To answer the first question, authors compared results on the MCAS high school tests with other tests of college readiness. They found the college readiness results from the SAT and the NAEP suggest a much smaller percentage of Massachusetts students are college ready than the percentage of students scoring Proficient on MCAS would indicate. Remediation rates at the state’s colleges and universities substantiate the conclusion.

Regarding NAEP, which is administered to a representative sample of students statewide in both reading and mathematics, the Massachusetts average scores were close to but below the college preparedness benchmark. This suggests that less than half of Massachusetts twelfth grade students are graduating from high school ready for college in reading and mathematics. While performance of Massachusetts students on the SAT is among the highest in the nation, this tells us nothing about the overall percentage of students prepared for college. When including the 30% of Massachusetts students who do not participate in the SAT, results again suggest less than half of our students are prepared for success in college.

On whether or not the content provides an adequate gauge of preparedness, again the answer was no. Analysis of current MCAS tests reveals that a large proportion of the items on the tenth grade test measure middle school standards.

The authors compared the paper-based MCAS test to PARCC, an online test with a paper and pencil option, and concluded:
PARCC's proficiency standard will likely be considered higher. PARCC establishes a “college and career readiness bar” that may be considered high enough to allow students to bypass public college entrance exams.

PARCC’s content is considered to be of higher order. PARCC prompts students to problem-solve and draw conclusions. It includes an 11th grade test which gives students, colleges and universities a more realistic signal of entry level performance;

PARCC will provide a gauge of performance over time. The PARCC tests have a coherent design from grade three through eleven, creating a complete student-centered system of assessments.

“What Massachusetts chooses to assess inevitably influences what is taught in schools and how it is taught,” said Noonan. “This comparison tells us that we need a new test – one that can raise the level of learning as well as provide a far more accurate signal of post-high school preparedness.”

About MBAE

The Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE) was established in 1988 by employers concerned about the educational attainment and skills of graduates entering the workforce. Our core work – improving public schools by influencing state policy – is driven by the business community’s commitment that all students graduate prepared for success in college, career and citizenship.

About The Center for Assessment

The National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment, Inc. (The Center for Assessment) is a Dover, NH based not-for-profit (501(c)(3)) corporation that seeks to improve the educational achievement of students by promoting improved practices in educational assessment and accountability. The Center for Assessment does this by providing services directly to states in conjunction with the states’ large-scale assessment and accountability programs. The Center also works with organizations that work directly with states, or whose work impacts states, including the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), WestEd, The National Center for Educational Outcomes (NCEO), the U.S. Department of Education. The Center also seeks to develop and disseminate broadly policies and practices that will improve educational assessment and accountability.

About the Study

To address the questions described in this report, The Center for Assessment relied on existing information about the MCAS and PARCC tests. For MCAS, a wealth of information has been accumulated since the first MCAS tests were administered in 1998. For PARCC, much less information is available at this time. As this report was being developed in early 2015, PARCC was in the final stages of developing its first operational tests which will be administered in spring 2015. Performance (achievement) level descriptors, test blueprints, other design documents, and sample test items from both MCAS and PARCC were used to inform the analyses and conclusions presented in the report. Determinations of college and career readiness were based on research-based benchmarks that have been established by the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB) on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), by the College Board for the SAT, and by ACT for the ACT exams. In addition to using these predictive benchmarks, actual remediation information from Massachusetts two and four year institutions of higher education was used to evaluate the degree to which passing MCAS results in being “ready” for college.