



QUESTION 2: ELIMINATING THE MCAS GRADUATION REQUIREMENT

September 2024

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To graduate from a public high school in Massachusetts, students need to meet the requirements of their *local school district* and also receive a “competency determination” *from the state*. By far the most common way to get this state sign-off is to pass the 10th grade MCAS exams.

Ballot Question 2 would greatly diminish the state’s role as a gatekeeper to high school graduation.

If Question 2 passes, students would still need to take the 10th grade MCAS exams, but they would no longer need to earn a passing score or other state approval. Instead, districts would set their own criteria for graduation, informed by state educational standards but not beholden to any particular state assessment.

This shift would empower local school districts, classroom teachers, town officials, and individual communities, allowing for more tailored measures of student achievement.

But Question 2 would also make Massachusetts one of the few states without a common graduation standard, allowing separate educational expectations in over 300 school districts across our state.

In the sections that follow, we discuss these and other issues in detail, including a summary of the ballot question, background on our current rules for graduation, and the potential impact of a yes vote on Question 2.

As part of our commitment to help voters understand state ballot questions, we have analyzed relevant research and spoken with experts and advocates on both sides of the issue. We found that:

- The MCAS requirement rarely prevents students from getting a diploma; virtually all students who meet district standards also pass the MCAS or otherwise earn a state competency determination. In any given year, there are several hundred exceptions, amounting to less than 1 percent of high school seniors.
- Question 2 would dramatically lower the stakes of the 10th grade MCAS, potentially freeing teachers to focus less on test prep and more on knowledge and skills that fall outside of test parameters.
- Letting districts set graduation requirements could make it hard to maintain educational standards across the state. Districts with poor or falling graduation rates would be tempted to compensate by lowering expectations.
- Students with cognitive disabilities and English language learners sometimes struggle with the MCAS and could benefit most from more flexible measures of graduation readiness.

WHAT QUESTION 2 WOULD DO

Question 2 makes several focused but far-reaching changes to current law:

- 1) It would remove the requirement that graduating students prove their readiness to the state via the MCAS exams or other clearly articulated alternatives.
- 2) Instead, graduation readiness would be demonstrated through coursework that meets the local district's expectations — provided those local expectations are informed by the frameworks and standards established by the state board of education and embodied by the current MCAS test.

BACKGROUND

In almost all states, students have to meet both local and statewide standards for high school graduation. Sometimes those statewide rules involve a test, more often it's a set of core classes.

In Massachusetts, the 10th grade MCAS has long been the central, state-based requirement. It's a multiday, multipart test covering English, math, and science, with questions drawn from the state curricular framework and [shaped by](#) experienced test designers, state workers, and a panel that includes public school teachers.

Generally speaking, the MCAS is considered a high-quality instrument strongly correlated with [future educational and economic success](#).

Yet, like any standardized test, the MCAS is also an imperfect measure of student learning. Among other things: it takes students away from classrooms; it fails to reflect the various ways students can demonstrate what they know; and it does not cover the [full spectrum of topics and competencies](#) that Massachusetts sets for high school graduates.

MCAS STATS

The MCAS test isn't a particularly high bar for graduation. Nearly 90 percent of students pass on the first try, and 96 percent manage to eventually pass or otherwise prove their competency via one of [the state's alternate paths](#).

Even for the remaining 4 percent who struggle to get state sign-off for graduation, there are often other complications. Most kids who don't pass the MCAS also don't meet district requirements for graduation.

This leaves about 700 students per year whose graduation is being held up by state standards. Some are still learning English; some have significant disabilities; some struggle to prioritize school attendance in the face of personal issues; and some need more support from their districts, to help them pursue alternative state certifications.

And while these figures don't include kids who drop out, that doesn't seem to be a driving issue, as the majority of 11th and 12th grade dropouts have actually met the state standard.

SUMMING UP THE STAKES

In a narrow sense, Question 2 is about a few hundred students each year — out of a statewide class of roughly 70,000 — who lose the opportunity to graduate because they haven't passed the 10th grade MCAS or otherwise earned a competency determination from the state.

At the same time, it's also about how removing the state graduation requirements could shift power to the districts and transform accountability across high school education in Massachusetts.

ARGUMENTS FOR A YES VOTE

No single test is [accurate or revealing enough](#) to be the linchpin for high school graduation, which is why most states base their graduation standards on course requirements rather than test scores.

Dropping the MCAS as a graduation requirement could give classroom teachers and local education leaders more curricular freedom. That means less teaching to the test and more attention to subjects that are hard to fit in a standardized assessment.

The best, most motivated teachers could pursue a student-first pedagogy tuned to diverse learning styles and guided by the needs, strengths, and potential of their students.

And with new authority over graduation standards, some districts might embrace the task of bringing teachers, parents, principals, superintendents, and other local leaders together to set meaningful course requirements, GPA standards, and other criteria for graduation readiness.

As part of this process, districts could also tailor requirements for English language learners and students with cognitive disabilities.

Any fears about a fragmentation of standards across over 300 districts should be limited by the requirement that district rules will need to reflect state-set standards for student skills and knowledge. Exactly how this will be policed is unclear, but the ballot language seems to imply some kind of acceptable enforcement, potentially via reviews or audits of individual districts.

And it's important to remember that students would still take the 10th grade MCAS if Question 2 passes, just as they take the 3rd through 8th grade versions. This should allow the state to continue tracking educational progress, identifying racial and economic achievement gaps, and supporting areas of high need.

ARGUMENTS FOR A NO VOTE

The idea that Question 2 would inspire local districts to set rich, student-focused standards for graduation begs the question: Why don't they just do that now?

Already, districts have the power to introduce new curricular requirements and provide tailored support for students with learning challenges. But that's not always what we see.

Instead, Massachusetts is a place of striking educational inequities, where some districts have robust local standards and others prefer bare requirements.

Similarly, while an alternative world of curricular flexibility and student-centered classrooms might work brilliantly for the best teachers, it's not clear this applies to the typical teacher — or those who are struggling.

If Question 2 passes, it's even possible we'd see a race to the bottom among districts. That's because the main measure people use to judge high schools is the graduation rate. And the surest way to boost graduation rates is to ease graduation requirements.

True, the state may be able to push back against weakened graduation requirements with reviews and audits, but there is no established process or dedicated funding for this.

And while even staunch opponents of Question 2 concede that more needs to be done for English language learners and students with cognitive disabilities, Massachusetts could build on existing accommodations without abandoning the state's role in assessing graduation readiness.

For instance, the state could help more struggling test-takers get a competency determination via portfolio review.

In the end, the rigors of teaching to a carefully-designed test like the MCAS can provide a vital baseline for effective classroom learning. And right now the state competency determination provides the only common floor to ensure all students meet basic educational expectations.

POTENTIAL LEGISLATIVE ACTION

Most ballot questions in Massachusetts are just like regular laws, subject to alteration or amendment by the Legislature — without having to go back to voters.

This gives lawmakers a vital role, allowing them to tweak ballot proposals in order to maximize impact and minimize risks.

If Question 2 passes, the Legislature might consider changes to smooth implementation. Voters should not assume that these adjustments will necessarily be made.

- Massachusetts could follow other states by specifying a list of subjects and courses students must complete in order to graduate. Note that this approach would take time to establish and would need to be phased in to avoid upending current high school students.
- Additional clarification may be needed to ensure that the state can oversee and audit district-level graduation standards.

A rejection of Question 2 would give lawmakers and state agencies the chance to address issues with our current graduation standards. This could include:

- Renewed attention to those who struggle most with the MCAS, including English language learners and students with cognitive disabilities. For instance, some students could be routed away from repeat MCAS testing in favor of portfolio reviews or a cohort appeal.
- A more challenging MCAS, which would likely reduce graduation rates in the short term but create higher expectations that ultimately filter through to classroom innovation and richer learning opportunities.

CONCLUSION

A yes vote on Question 2 would reduce the state's role in vetting high school graduates. No longer would students need to pass the 10th grade MCAS or otherwise receive a state competency determination. Instead, local districts would set graduation requirements, provided those requirements align with the learning standards and expectations established by the state.

A no vote would maintain the status quo, where high school graduates need to meet both local and state criteria, and where the MCAS is the state's chief mechanism for determining graduation readiness.

We at the Center for State Policy Analysis do not take a position on Question 2 — or any ballot initiative — but we hope this brief gives voters the information they need to make a sound decision on this important issue.



Contributors

In assembling this report, the Center for State Policy Analysis consulted a number of parties on both sides of Question 2. The final contents reflect our best judgment.

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