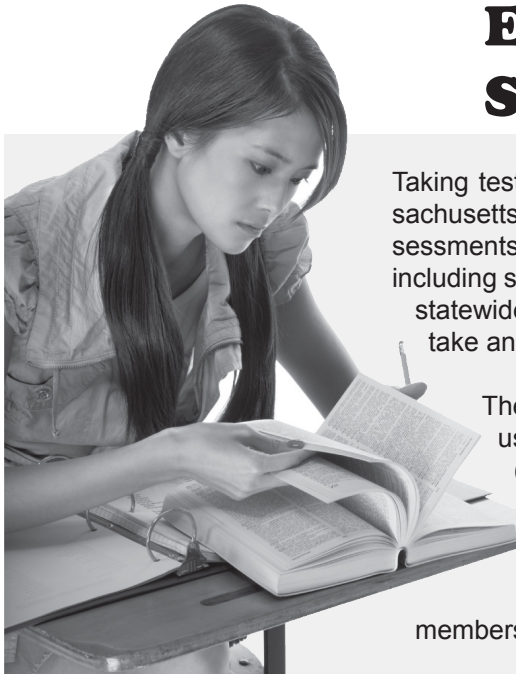


English Language Learners and Statewide Assessments



Taking tests is an important part of school life for students in the United States. All Massachusetts public school students are required to take annual tests as part of statewide assessments. This requirement applies to all public school and public charter school students, including students who are English language learners. This issue of *Pointers* describes the statewide assessments that students who are English language learners are required to take and the guidelines for their participation.

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) uses both “English Language Learners” (ELL) and “Limited English Proficient” (LEP) to describe students “...whose first language is a language other than English and who [are] unable to perform ordinary classroom work in English.” Massachusetts PIRC prefers the term “English Language Learners” because it gives a positive focus on what students are accomplishing — learning a new language and culture while learning all school subjects and becoming active members of their school communities.

Why are assessments important?

Massachusetts began a major effort to reform education in 1993. One reason for reform was to eliminate the large achievement gap between different groups of students. This same commitment also led to the passage of a national law called the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB). Both the *Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993* and NCLB require that “standards” and “assessments” be used to help parents and schools support the academic progress of students who are learning English as a new language.

What are standards and why are they important?

“Standards” define what students should know and be able to do in academic subjects (such as reading and mathematics) by the time they complete a specific grade span. Massachusetts learning standards in nine academic areas are in the *Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks*. Standards give families and schools a clear picture of what students should be learning and what teachers should be teaching. These standards guide teachers’ instruction. High standards set the same high expectations for all students. Research has shown that students achieve more when more is expected of them.

How are standards linked to statewide assessments?

“Statewide assessments” are tests that measure how well students have learned the “standards.” Assessments based on the standards described in the *Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks* give parents and schools a tool for improving instruction for individual students and for planning overall school improvement.

What assessments must English language learners take?

English language learners must participate in two assessments:

- MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System) assesses students’ academic performance based on the *Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks*.

And

- MEPA (Massachusetts English Proficiency Assessment) assesses students’ English-language proficiency based on the *English Language Proficiency Benchmarks and Outcomes*.

What Is MCAS?

The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) is a series of academic tests given to public school students in Massachusetts. MCAS tests are aligned with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. All public school students must take MCAS tests in English Language Arts and Mathematics each year in grades three through eight and once in high school. Students must also take a Science and Engineering/Technology MCAS test once in elementary, middle, and high school. A History and Social Science MCAS exam is expected to become a graduation requirement in the future.

Must English language learners take MCAS tests?

English language learners must participate in the MCAS tests that are scheduled for their grades. The only exception applies to English language learners who are in their first year of enrollment in a U.S. school. First-year English language learners are students who first enrolled in school in the U.S. after March 1 of the previous year. Schools can decide whether or not to test first-year English language Learners in the English Language Arts MCAS test. All English language learners, including first-year students, must participate in the Mathematics and Science & Technology/Engineering MCAS tests.

What language is used for MCAS tests?

MCAS tests are in English. English language learners in grade 10 who speak Spanish and have been enrolled in a continental U.S. school for fewer than three years may choose to take the English/Spanish version of the grade 10 Mathematics MCAS test (and the retest in grades 11 and 12) if they can read and write in Spanish at or near grade-level.

How do English language learners with disabilities participate in MCAS?

English language learners who are disabled and/or receiving special education services must participate in MCAS. They can participate by taking either the MCAS tests, with or without accommodations, or the MCAS Alternate Assessment (MCAS-Alt). The year before scheduled statewide assessments, an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 Team meets to determine how an individual student with a disability will participate in MCAS testing. This information is

documented in the student's IEP or 504 Plan. Parents are key members of Teams, and Team decisions are subject to parental approval.

How does MCAS affect a student's graduation from high school?

Students must meet two requirements to graduate with a diploma from a Massachusetts public high school:

- (1) Students must meet all local graduation requirements.
- (2) Students must earn a Competency Determination (CD).

Students earn a CD by scoring a minimum of 240 in the grade 10 MCAS tests in English Language Arts and Mathematics or by scoring a minimum of 220 in these tests and completing an Educational Proficiency Plan (EPP). Students must also score a minimum of 220 in a high school Science & Technology/Engineering MCAS test.

What happens if my child fails a grade 10 MCAS test?

Students who score below 220 on a grade 10 MCAS test required for graduation will have more opportunities to take retests before the end of grade 12. For each student who fails a grade 10 English Language Arts or Mathematics MCAS test, the school will develop an Educational Proficiency Plan designed to help them make progress toward proficiency in the subject/s they failed. After grade 12, students who still need to pass an MCAS test in order to graduate can take retests at the school in which they were last enrolled. There is no limit to the number of times a student, or former student, may take MCAS tests. Students may also ask school staff if they are eligible for an MCAS performance appeal.

Can dictionaries be used on state assessments?

- Any student who is currently classified by the school as "Limited English Proficient (LEP)" or who has ever been identified as LEP in the past may use an approved bilingual word-to-word dictionary for all MCAS tests. These dictionaries may not include definitions or other information. A list of Massachusetts-approved bilingual dictionaries for over 70 languages is online at www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/participation. Printed copies of bilingual dictionaries not on the list may be approved. To discuss the approval of other word-to-word dictionaries, the school must call ESE at 1 (781) 338-3625. Schools provide students with the dictionaries.
- Students may NOT use bilingual or any other type of dictionary on the MEPA tests.

What Is MEPA?

The Massachusetts English Proficiency Assessment (MEPA) is a series of tests that measure the progress that students who are English language learners make each year toward English proficiency. MEPA is aligned with the learning standards in the English Language Proficiency Benchmarks and Outcomes for English Language Learners. These “benchmarks” describe the specific skills, knowledge, and concepts that lead to students becoming proficient in English. English proficiency “outcomes” are in four language areas: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

What are MEPA tests and who must take them?

- **MELA-O — Massachusetts English Language Assessment - Oral:** All English language learners in grades K - 12 must take the MELA-O. This test measures proficiency in both listening and speaking. The student is observed in the classroom by a qualified MELA-O assessor during actual classroom activities. The student receives a score based on his or her ability to understand and speak English.
- **MEPA-R/W — Massachusetts English Proficiency Assessment - Reading and Writing:** All English language learners in grades K - 12 must take the MEPA-R/W. This test measures English proficiency in reading and writing. It consists of a reading component and a writing component.

When are the MELA-O and MEPA-R/W tests given?

MEPA tests are given in the fall and spring of each school year. Most English language learners take the tests in the spring. Newly-enrolled English language learners who did not take MEPA tests the previous spring take them for the first time in the fall. The only exception is for Kindergarten ELL students who take the MEPA R/W for the first time in the spring. English language learners take MEPA tests each spring until they become proficient in English and are reclassified as “Former Limited English Proficient (FLEP).” Students who become reclassified during the school year must take the MEPA in spring of that school year.

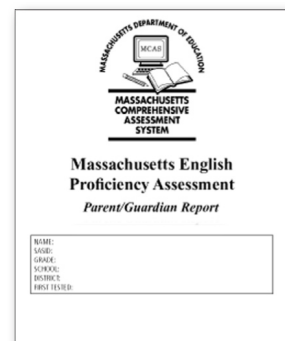
Must English language learners with disabilities take the MEPA tests?

English language learners with disabilities must participate in MEPA tests using the accommodations, if any, listed in their IEPs or 504 Plans. If a student needs an accommodation, such as Braille, that is not available for the MEPA test, the IEP or 504 Team should consider whether a different accommodation, such as reading the test aloud, would be appropriate. Some students with disabilities, such as those who are deaf or hard of hearing, may not be required to participate in MEPA. Students who take alternate MCAS assessments do not take the MEPA-R/W but must take the MELA-O.

How will I know how my child did on the MCAS and MEPA tests?

MCAS Reports: Early in the school year, families will receive an *MCAS Parent/Guardian Report* from the school. This Report describes in detail how your student did on the previous spring’s MCAS tests or MCAS-Alt.

MEPA Reports: Families will receive detailed information about their child’s performance on the MEPA tests in the *MEPA Parent/Guardian Report* sent to the student’s home each spring (or late fall, if the student participated in fall MEPA testing). This Report gives a brief overview of the MEPA and describes your child’s performance.



Along with the *MCAS*, *MCAS-Alt* and *MEPA* Parent Guardian Reports, families receive directions on how to read them. Additional guides are available online at www.doe.mass.edu in eleven languages: English, Arabic, Cape Verdean, Chinese (Traditional), Haitian Creole, Khmer, Korean, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, and Vietnamese.

MCAS and MEPA are important tools to help ensure that Massachusetts students who are English language learners successfully meet the challenges of learning English while at the same time learning school subjects. It is our hope at Massachusetts PIRC that this issue of Pointers will assist families in their efforts to support their children’s successful participation in Massachusetts schools.



RESOURCES ON STATEWIDE ASSESSMENTS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Massachusetts PIRC Free Resources

Massachusetts PIRC provides parents, schools, and organizations with training, information, and technical assistance to support their efforts to help children succeed in school. Our goal is to help parents and families understand how to support their children's academic achievement, and to help families and schools build strong partnerships aimed at improving education. Here are publications that supplement the information in this issue of *Pointers*:

Parents' PLACE Pointers

- Rights of English Language Learners

Parents' PLACE Bulletins

- Support for Students through Educational Proficiency Plans (EPP)
- MCAS Parent/Guardian Report: A Roadmap

All publications are available online at www.masspirc.org in English, Spanish, and Portuguese. Print versions are also available upon request.

To request print copies of these publications or for telephone assistance in English, Spanish, or Portuguese, please call Mass PIRC's toll-free help line at 1-877-471-0980 or e-mail us at masspirc@fcsn.org.

Mass. Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) Online Resources

ESE's Web site is www.doe.mass.edu. Web site documents are updated on occasion and exact locations and titles may change. Entering a title into a search engine may be the easiest way to access a document.

- **Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks:** State standards for academic subject areas, including *English Language Proficiency Benchmarks and Outcomes for English Language Learners*, at www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/current.html
- **MCAS Overview: Frequently Asked Questions:** www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/overview_faq.html
- **Participation Requirements for Students:** Instructions for all students, including students with disabilities, students who participate in the MCAS Alt, and students who are English language learners ("Students with Limited English Proficiency"), at: www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/participation.
- **Statewide MCAS Testing Schedule:** Annually updated, at www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/cal.html
- **Test Questions:** Actual MCAS test items from previous years, with answers, at www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/testitems.html

Additional Phone Help

- The Federation for Children with Special Needs, Parent Training and Information Center, provides assistance in English, Spanish, and Portuguese to families of children with disabilities through workshops, written materials (online at www.fcsn.org/pti) and via telephone, toll free, at 1-800-331-0688.
- Call the Mass. ESE Parent Information Hotline at 781-338-6970 or toll free at 866-622-7220. Send an e-mail to mcas@doe.mass.edu for answers to MCAS and MEPA questions. Copies of written ESE materials may also be requested.
- For MCAS and MEPA policy questions, contact ESE by phone at 1-781-338-3625 or by email at dwiener@doe.mass.edu.
- For questions about the identification, evaluation, and placement of English learners, contact the Office of English Language Acquisition and Academic Achievement (OELAAA) at 1-781-338-3518, or by e-mail at ell@doe.mass.edu.



Pointers

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This issue of *Pointers* was written by Janet Vohs, Mass PIRC staff, with assistance from Debbie Zacarian, Ed.D., Director, Center for English Language Education (CELE), a program of the Hampshire Education Collaborative, Northampton, MA.