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PREPARING MASSACHUSETTS KIDS FOR A BRIGHT FUTURE

*A National Parents Union
Special Report*

FOREWARD



KERI RODRIGUES

Co-Founder & Founding President, The National Parents Union

Community,

As the daughter of a longtime Suffolk University staff member who helped to lead the Math and Computer Science department for more than 20 years, I grew up listening to my mother tell stories of the thousands of students who arrived at her door shocked to find out that although they had successfully graduated high school, they had arrived without the skills needed to take a simple college-level math course. My mother tirelessly supported these panicked students, drying their tears and strategizing over remedial courses to address the gaps in their learning and drafting academic plans that would put them on a path to a college-level course and completing their degree. After her passing, I was moved by the outpouring of gratitude from the students whose lives she had touched — lives that would have been radically different without her guidance and support. These students were shocked to find out that simply receiving a high school diploma did not mean the promise of being prepared for the future had been kept — and the fact is, there were too many students showing up in my mom’s office asking for academic help.

Getting a high school diploma in Massachusetts and walking across the stage at graduation represents a significant milestone in the life of our children and the culmination of years of hard work, dedication, and perseverance. But also symbolizes the attainment of a foundational level of knowledge and skills necessary for success in college, career, and life.

When students receive a diploma, it should mean they are ready and we have kept our promise. It should mark the beginning of a new chapter filled with opportunities, challenges, and possibilities — and their readiness to positively impact the world.

BY SHEDDING LIGHT ON THE ROLE OF UNIFORM/Common, STATEWIDE GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS IN UPHOLDING THE GUARANTEE OF A HIGH QUALITY PUBLIC EDUCATION, THIS PAPER AIMS TO INFORM POLICYMAKERS, EDUCATORS, AND STAKEHOLDERS IN THEIR EFFORTS TO FOSTER A SYSTEM THAT EMPOWERS EVERY STUDENT TO SUCCEED AND THRIVE.

Unfortunately in Massachusetts, some special interest groups have proposed diluting what it means to receive a high school diploma - equating the mere exposure to standards to the same level as meeting them. This short-sighted vision fails to understand how graduation requirements, like the 10th grade assessment, not only serve as a culmination of a student’s academic journey but also confirms that we have made good on our commitment to provide a high-quality public education to all students.

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FOREWARD (CONTINUED)

In the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, where the pursuit of excellence in education is deeply ingrained in our values, we also know that understanding and evaluating graduation requirements are a key part of executing on that vision. This research paper delves into the use of assessments as a graduation requirement with a particular focus on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) in Massachusetts, as voters will make a choice on whether to uphold the requirement in November 2024. In this paper, we also begin to examine methods that states and the federal government use to guarantee quality education - a topic the National Parents Union (NPU) will continue to pursue in our advocacy work. We examine their evolution, impact, and alignment with our fundamental commitment to ensuring equitable access to quality education for all.

By shedding light on the role of uniform/common, statewide graduation requirements in upholding the guarantee of a high quality public education, this paper aims to inform policymakers, educators, and stakeholders in their efforts to foster a system that empowers every student to succeed and thrive.

The 10th grade assessment, part of the MCAS, serves as a common, objective graduation requirement, ensuring that all high school diplomas across the Commonwealth are measuring student progress against the same benchmark. By mandating that students demonstrate competency in key subject areas such as English, math, and science, the assessments ensure that graduates possess the foundational knowledge and skills necessary for success in college, career, and beyond. This requirement not only sets a high standard for academic achievement but also ensures that students receive a rigorous and comprehensive education that prepares them for the challenges and opportunities of the future. By earning a high school diploma through meeting statewide standards, students signal to colleges, employers, and the community at large that they are well-equipped to contribute positively to society and thrive in an increasingly competitive and dynamic world. Thus, MCAS serves as a crucial, objective measurement of excellence in education and a pathway to a brighter and more promising future for all graduates across Massachusetts.

Onward,

Keri Rodrigues

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NPU Co-Founder & Founding President



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BACKGROUND

The modern testing movement began in 1965 with the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson, the law included provisions for testing and accountability intended to raise standards and make education more equitable.¹ In 1983, President Ronald Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education released *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. The report sounded the alarm that America's economic security would be compromised unless public education received a major overhaul and expectations for student achievement were raised.²

In response to *A Nation at Risk*, subsequent administrations tried to implement national school reform. President George H.W. Bush introduced his America 2000 plan – intended to achieve the world's best math and science test scores by the turn of the century – but the legislation stalled in Congress.³

In 2002, Congress passed No Child Left Behind (NCLB), reauthorizing ESEA and mandating annual testing in all 50 states. The bipartisan law – modeled on President George W. Bush's education plan from his time as Governor of Texas – significantly increased the role of the federal government in holding schools responsible for the academic progress of all students. The law focused specifically on ensuring that states and schools boost the performance of English language learners, special education students, students from families facing economic hardship, and minority students, and required annual reading and math tests in grades 3-8, and again in 10th grade. Schools were required to show Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) or they faced sanctions and the risk of state takeover.⁴

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law by President Obama on December 10, 2015. The bipartisan legislation renewed the 50-year-old ESEA. ESSA mandated, for the first time, that all students in the U.S. be taught to rigorous academic standards that equip them for success in college and careers. Additionally, ESSA ensured that crucial information be provided to educators, families, students, and communities through annual statewide assessments that track students' progress toward these high standards. States were required to report out on their student progress and interventions provided.⁵

These standards-based educational reforms led states to improve their academic content and set up stronger systems for supporting struggling districts and schools. States recognized the need for local graduation requirements to ensure students are prepared for life after high school.

As a result of an increased emphasis on measuring student preparedness for their future, many states adopted ways to measure student learning in high school in an attempt to support students as they transition to college and career. This also led states and local communities to create their own graduation requirements, including course and assessment requirements, and diploma types.

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In Massachusetts, the state has adopted some of the strongest guarantees of academic success in the country, making the state one of the top places to receive an education. The Massachusetts Student Opportunity Act requires all districts in Massachusetts to develop three-year plans based on disparities in student learning opportunities and outcomes and requires them to describe how they will utilize evidence based approaches and strategies to address disparities and improve student achievement overall.⁶

The assessment that Massachusetts uses to inform how students, schools and districts receive support is the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). When a student takes the MCAS, it allows their school to see if they are progressing academically – and if a student is not meeting those grade level expectations, they receive additional support.

In Massachusetts, common assessments were introduced as a learning metric in 1845, when Board of Education Secretary, Horace Mann - long considered the father of advancing education-directed members of the Board to prepare and administer a written test to Boston school students. The local schoolmasters had not seen them beforehand, and the results were used to assess teachers and the quality of education children were receiving.⁷ The current iteration - MCAS - was born from the requirements of the Education Reform Act of 1993, and was designed to assess all students, including those with disabilities or limited English proficiency. Initially only given to students in grades 4, 8 and 10, the MCAS is now given to all students in grades three through eight, and to tenth graders. In order to graduate from a public school in the Commonwealth, students must successfully pass the 10th grade mathematics and English exams, along with a science test.⁸

In addition to assessing student preparedness for college and career, common assessment results hold districts, schools, teachers, and students accountable for academic progress. They serve as a point of reference for measuring progress and identifying learning difficulties, and provide incentives for districts and schools to improve.⁹

High quality testing serves as a solid indicator of a student's readiness and preparation for college or the job market. It also is an instrumental tool used to identify gaps in subject matter comprehension and skills. Results provide teachers with insight on which students may be struggling – and with what subjects – allowing them to better individualize their curriculum to the needs of their students. The ability to compare year-by-year trends in student gains is a valuable tool for educators, and can push schools and districts to offer more rigorous instruction in the skills students need to be better prepared for college.¹⁰

An educator's grading is often subjective, as teachers have different criteria for achievement. What one teacher would grade as an A in one class may be graded a C in another. In addition, a teacher may have a bias – conscious or unconscious – for a favorite student or against a rowdy student.¹¹ In that regard, common assessments provide students with a consistent record of their knowledge growth, using an objective instrument containing similar sets of questions, given under nearly identical conditions, and graded by a machine or blind review.¹²

Common assessments provide objective data that help districts and schools measure the effectiveness of the education students are receiving, including students of color, English language learners, and students with learning differences. These tests provide a true measure of how well the system is addressing the needs of these groups, allowing teachers and schools to fill in any instructional gaps that they reveal.¹³ The information obtained from the results is particularly important because it provides the only consistent and objective data source about disparities in educational outcomes. These assessments are used to advocate for greater resource equity in schools, and for more fair treatment for these students.¹⁴



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Generations of high school students have prepared to apply for college by taking either the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or the American College Test (ACT). College students preparing to further their studies in graduate, medical or law school are often required to take other exams, usually the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT), the Law School Admission Test (LSAT), or the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT). These tests have been used to assess students' aptitudes and achievements, provide data for future curriculum and instruction decisions, and predict the future success of students. It has been widely accepted that these tests were crafted with care and concern for validity and reliability.¹⁵

Students across the country have taken common assessments beginning in elementary school. Debates have raged about their efficacy, fairness, and relevance, but, when it comes to using them as a graduation requirement, they serve as valuable tools for assessing student knowledge and readiness for higher education or the workforce.

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) has a recommended program of study known as the Massachusetts High School Program of Studies (MassCore), that is intended to align coursework with college and workforce expectations. Adopted in 2007 and amended in 2018, MassCore is not mandatory, and school districts are free to set their own course requirements.¹⁶ The program recommends: four years of English, four years of mathematics, three years of lab-based science, three years of history, two years of the same foreign language, one year of arts, and five additional courses.¹⁷

BY SHEDDING LIGHT ON THE ROLE OF UNIFORM/COMMON, STATEWIDE GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS IN UPHOLDING THE GUARANTEE OF A HIGH QUALITY PUBLIC EDUCATION, THIS PAPER AIMS TO INFORM POLICYMAKERS, EDUCATORS, AND STAKEHOLDERS IN THEIR EFFORTS TO FOSTER A SYSTEM THAT EMPOWERS EVERY STUDENT TO SUCCEED AND THRIVE.

MassCore also includes additional learning opportunities such as Advanced Placement classes, dual enrollment, a senior project, online courses for high school or college credit, and service or work-based learning. While MassCore is a statewide recommended program, it is not required, resulting in a lack of reliable and accurate data. The 2022-23 MassCore Completion Report shows that on average, 88% of students are recorded as completing MassCore. In half of all districts, close to 100% of students are reported as having met MassCore requirements.¹⁸

However, a recent report by the Voices for Academic Equity coalition revealed that in most cases, such estimates do not appear to be corroborated by the Student Course Schedule (SCS) data that is drawn directly from students' transcripts. The findings also revealed that historically marginalized student groups complete MassCore at lower rates than the population of high school graduates as a whole.¹⁹

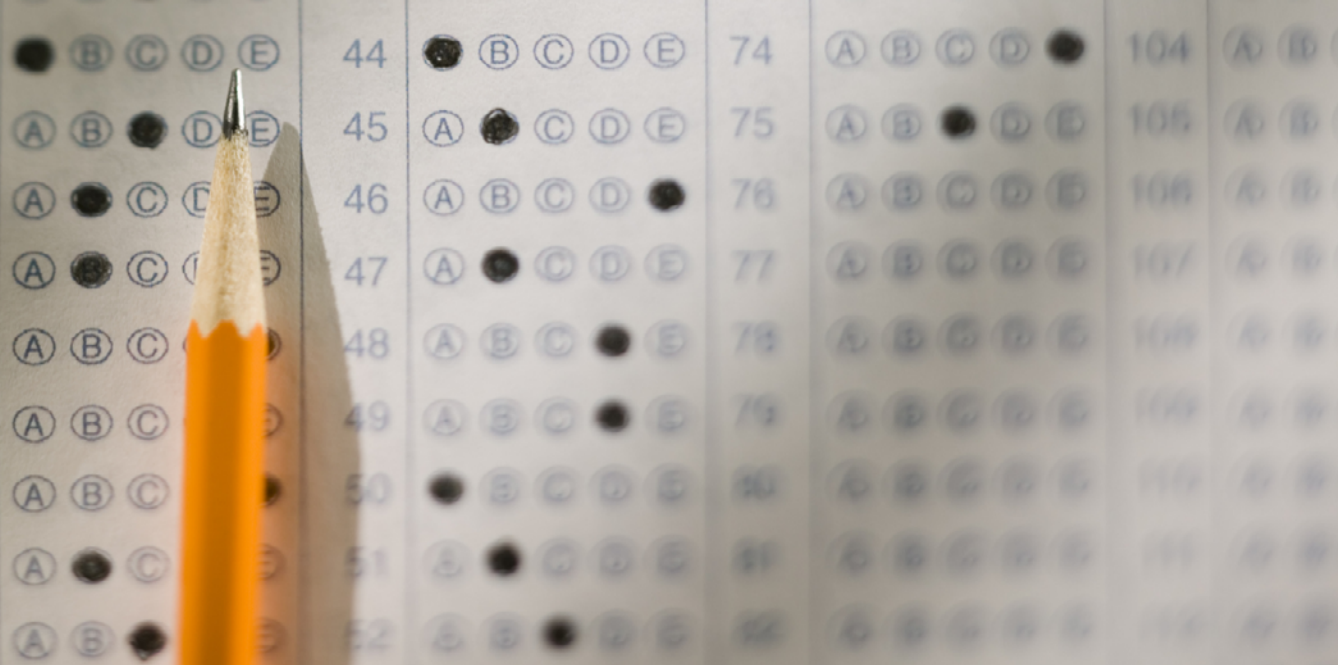
Students across Massachusetts have different local curriculum requirements to reach in order to receive their high school diploma. So, to ensure that students receive the basic level of knowledge and skill to which they are entitled, students are required receive a minimum passing score in English Language Arts, math and science on the 10th grade assessment.²⁰

There is a ballot initiative calling for the removal of this requirement.²¹ Without the 10th grade assessment, and without a required course of study for all students, how will students know they are receiving the education and skills to prepare them for the future?



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THE MCAS

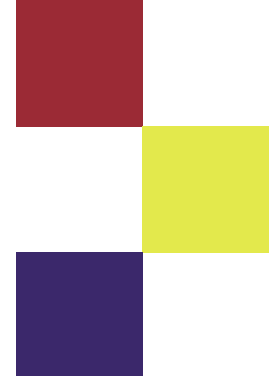
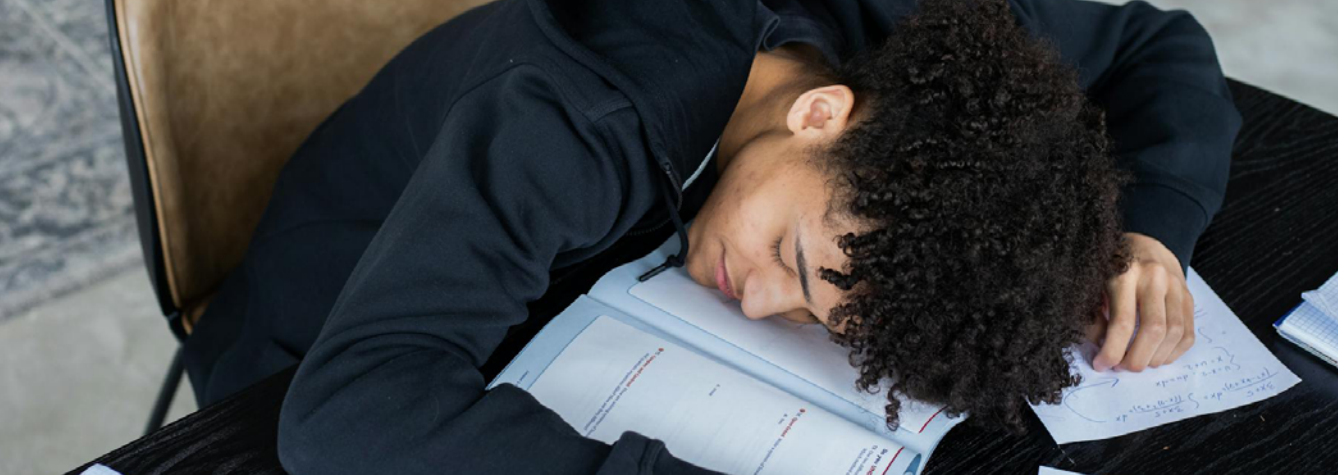
The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) serves as a valuable tool in evaluating students' academic progress and identifying areas where additional support may be needed before graduation. By providing objective and common measures of student performance, MCAS enables educators to pinpoint areas of strengths and weaknesses in students' knowledge and skills. Therefore, the continued use of common assessments is essential for promoting equity and excellence in education across the state of Massachusetts.

The graduation requirement plays a vital role in ensuring that every student across the Commonwealth of Massachusetts receives a free, public education that adequately prepares them for college and career success.

The state establishes academic standards and expectations, local districts determine the curriculum that will allow students to learn the required content, and the MCAS serves as a benchmark for assessing students' readiness to graduate high school and move on to higher education or the workforce. Removing the graduation requirement would jeopardize this critical assurance, potentially leaving students unprepared for the academic rigors they will encounter beyond high school.

Furthermore, the graduation requirement incentivizes schools to provide robust support systems and resources to help students meet proficiency standards. Without the graduation requirement, students may have less access to the support services and academic help they need to earn their diploma, increasing the likelihood of encountering academic challenges in college where they could be forced to pay out of pocket for remedial courses.

Therefore, retaining the 10th grade graduation requirement is essential for ensuring equitable access to quality education and promoting college and career readiness for all students in Massachusetts.



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HAVING TO MAKE IT UP IN COLLEGE: THE COST OF REMEDIAL CLASSES

When a student enters college and is required to take remedial classes, it often indicates that the student may not have fully mastered the foundational knowledge and skills necessary for success in higher education. According to a report from the U.S. Department of Education, more than two-thirds of all community college students and 40 percent of undergraduates in four-year colleges had to start with at least one remedial class.²² Remedial classes, also known as developmental education or basic skills courses, are designed to help students strengthen their academic abilities in subjects such as math, reading, or writing before moving on to credit-bearing coursework. While these courses are intended to provide necessary support for students, they can also present significant challenges and barriers to academic progress. Data also show that low-income students, students of color, and first-generation students are overrepresented in remediation.

While these courses are intended to prepare students for college rigor, taking remedial classes can extend the time it takes for students to complete their degree, potentially increasing the overall cost of their education and delaying entry into the workforce. Research has found that the cost of catching up through remedial classes was around \$1.3 billion a year across all institutions and \$920 million a year at two-year colleges in a 2016 study. Additionally, students may feel discouraged or frustrated by the need to enroll in remedial courses, which can negatively impact their confidence and motivation to succeed in college – if students continue with their pursuit for higher education at all.²³

HIGH SCHOOLS SHOULD PRIORITIZE PROVIDING STUDENTS WITH SUPPORT SERVICES AND ACADEMIC HELP AS PART OF THEIR COMMITMENT TO ENSURING ACADEMIC SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS.

High schools should prioritize providing students with support services and academic help as part of their commitment to ensuring academic success for all students. Monitoring student progress through assessments like the MCAS allows schools to identify areas where students may need additional support or intervention. By offering additional academic support, high schools can ensure that students have access to the resources and support they need to address any academic challenges they may face. This proactive approach not only helps students build the foundational skills necessary for success in college and beyond but also promotes equity and fairness in education by ensuring that all students have access to the same opportunities for academic growth and achievement.

CONCLUSION

The debate over graduation requirements in Massachusetts is about more than just assessments—it's about the fundamental promise of public education. Every student who earns a diploma should be equipped with the knowledge and skills needed for success in college, career, and life. The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) serves as a critical tool in ensuring that students not only meet those benchmarks but also receive the support they need along the way. Removing the 10th grade assessment requirement jeopardizes the quality and equity of education, potentially leaving many students unprepared for the demands of higher education and the workforce.

Graduation requirements such as the MCAS do not exist to create obstacles but to uphold the integrity of the education system and ensure that a high school diploma in the Commonwealth carries weight and meaning. Diluting these standards would not serve our students, particularly those from marginalized communities who rely on the public education system to open doors of opportunity.

DILUTING MASSACHUSETTS' GRADUATION STANDARDS WOULD NOT SERVE OUR STUDENTS, PARTICULARLY THOSE FROM MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES WHO RELY ON THE PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM TO OPEN DOORS OF OPPORTUNITY.

As we look toward the upcoming ballot initiative, it is crucial that we remember the lessons from decades of education reform: rigorous, objective measures are necessary to maintain a high-quality education system. Upholding the MCAS as a graduation requirement is not just about preserving academic standards; it's about making good on the promise that every child in Massachusetts deserves an education that prepares them to thrive in an increasingly competitive world.

The National Parents Union will continue to advocate for policies that support equitable, high-quality education for all students, ensuring that every graduate is prepared for a bright and promising future. By safeguarding these standards, we help secure not just the success of individual students, but the long-term prosperity of our Commonwealth.



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FOOTNOTES

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A background image showing children in a classroom. The top half shows two boys sitting at a desk, looking at a worksheet with diagrams and the word 'BLACKBIRD'. The bottom half shows four children sitting in a row, with three of them raising their hands. The entire image has a purple tint.

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