



Jeffrey C. Riley  
Commissioner

# Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

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## MEMORANDUM

**To:** Superintendents, Charter School Leaders, Collaborative Directors, and Leaders of Approved Special Education Schools  
**From:** Jeffrey C. Riley, Commissioner  
**Date:** January 5, 2021  
**Subject:** 2021 Assessment and Accountability Update

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As students return to classes this week, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (Department) remains committed to supporting school and district leaders who are managing the challenges of teaching and learning during the pandemic. The return from winter break marks the start of testing windows for federal and state-mandated student assessments. Administering these assessments, including the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) and the ACCESS language proficiency test for English learners, can be logistically complex even in ordinary times. Administering these assessments this year is understandably a concern for local communities.

The sudden shift to remote learning last spring, and the continuation of hybrid/remote learning this school year has likely led to significant learning loss for students around the country. The extent of the learning loss in the Commonwealth is not yet known.

The Department continues to believe the MCAS test is a crucial diagnostic tool to promote student success and educational equity and we remain committed to administering the assessment this spring, while recognizing the need for adjustments and flexibility.

A national study released last month by [McKinsey & Co.](#) estimates the shift to remote learning in spring 2020 set back all students' academic progress by months. The study predicts learning losses will escalate as students remain in remote/hybrid models this academic year. The magnitude of this potential impact demands that we accurately and fairly assess the level of student learning this school year.

The MCAS tests will give Massachusetts educators and families critical insight into academic losses that need to be addressed this spring and summer, and data on which students and districts have been most impacted by the disruptions in schooling. Administering the MCAS will make it possible to reliably assess students' progress in relation to curriculum standards.

Besides serving this essential diagnostic purpose, the high school MCAS also affirms that students are prepared for college and careers, in addition to providing access to college

scholarships.

The Department will take the following steps to modify testing this spring:

- **Modify the Competency Determination for the Class of 2021:** The make-up MCAS administration window for 12<sup>th</sup> graders scheduled to open on January 14<sup>th</sup> will be postponed. I will recommend to the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (Board) that the competency determination (CD) requirement be modified in English language arts and mathematics for students in the Class of 2021 who have not yet earned their CD.<sup>1</sup> The recommended modification would allow students to receive their CD by passing an approved course and demonstrating competency in that subject in lieu of a qualifying MCAS score. Seniors who still want to take the tests may take them later this school year. Members of the class of 2021 will have opportunities to receive additional academic support this spring and summer.
- **Shortened MCAS testing time for Grades 3-8:** The Department will significantly reduce testing time for students in grades 3-8 through a session sampling approach, in which each student will take only a portion of each MCAS assessment in each subject. This modified MCAS administration will preserve the validity and reliability of the test at the school, district, and state levels. When combined with other data points, this approach will provide meaningful diagnostic data at the individual student level.
- **Accountability relief:** I will not name or recommend to the Board any new underperforming or chronically underperforming districts or schools in the upcoming school year. The Department will also consider any available flexibilities provided by the U.S. Department of Education.
- **Extending ACCESS testing window:** ACCESS testing for English language proficiency is key to strengthening education programs for English learners. As previously announced, the Department is extending the testing window for ACCESS, which normally concludes in February, until May 20, 2021.
- **MCAS Biology test:** The Department has provided school districts flexibility on scheduling the high school biology MCAS test. Schools may offer the biology MCAS to first-time 9<sup>th</sup> graders in June, instead of or in addition to offering it in February.

These testing flexibilities announced today are one part of the Department's broader goals to support districts and schools in the second half of the current school year, during the summer, and into next school year. In the coming weeks, the Department will release additional information, including preliminary plans and resources to support districts and schools in addressing student learning loss.

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<sup>1</sup> In spring 2020, the Board modified the science CD requirement for the classes of 2020-2023.