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Humanities

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The Failure that is MCAS

Everyone dreams of graduating high school one day. The picturesque image of tossing one's cap into the air while wearing the well-earned robe they worked over twelve years for is the goal for almost any high school senior. Imagine spending those twelve years in school only not to graduate. Why? You failed a single test. This is the case for over 700 students every year in the state of Massachusetts (State House News Service). The cause of this distressing statistic is the MCAS - the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System - an exam designed to, "identify schools and districts that need additional support" (Mass.gov). However, the MCAS does not work. For every one of its goals, the MCAS fails at each of them, with students being the most impacted demographic. Instead of helping students succeed, the MCAS negatively affects students' growth with the graduation requirement. The MCAS should be ended. It is not a fair representation of students' knowledge and ironically negatively impacts the quality of education students receive instead of improving it.

The MCAS does not serve students with lower access to resources. Throughout the state of Massachusetts, funding across school districts can vary wildly. School districts such as Lawrence, MA have annual expenditures per student of \$18,907. Other districts, like Cambridge, have a student expenditure of \$31,653 (McCann). This biased disparity can impact the resources available to students, such as access to educational programs, a comfortable learning environment, and extracurriculars. This number also reflects how much support teachers have to teach effectively. If the district is able to provide for students, it makes it easier for teachers to impart the knowledge the state expects students to retain. Proponents of the MCAS would argue that some districts that are considered underfunded still score better than

schools with more access to resources (State House News Service). However, this is simply circumstantial evidence rather than a true trend that is present in the data. Across the board, school districts that are less funded do not perform as well as those that are (Citizens for Public Schools). This misrepresentation of information further shows how the MCAS is an unnecessary tool when identifying schools in need.

Teachers are the best resource when it comes to communicating what they and their students need. Larry Ferlazzo, a high school educator, suggests that a more accurate form of student assessment would be focusing on individual growth, and making educational adjustments based on that (Ferlazzo, "Let's Dump the Obsession with Standardized Testing"). Using this reasoning to evaluate students is what will help them grow. Personalized feedback that is curated in a holistic manner will allow students to know their strengths, and how they can improve their weaknesses. Eliminating the MCAS in favor of statewide teacher and faculty opinion would result in support that is uniquely tailored for each community. Binary identifiers of what makes a good or poorly performing school district (high versus low MCAS scores) are flawed due to the lack of other factors accounted for. Bullying, a student's home situation, or health are elements of life that the MCAS does not consider but are conditions that teachers are aware of. According to the experience of one anonymous teacher, "My school panicked about MCAS, and my 10th-grade English class became 100% MCAS prep...I don't see the benefit in this, and students aren't learning from it. They are miserable and I am miserable" (lesstestingmorelearning). Teachers interact with their students every day and know what does or does not work in the classroom. Asking for teacher input would provide more insight into the assistance schools may need, compared to a test that converts a community's experience into a one-dimensional number.

The MCAS works to harm students who are already disadvantaged by the graduation requirement. When a student fails the MCAS, they are no longer eligible for a diploma. Instead, they receive a certificate of attainment - a fairly useless document (State House News Service).

Only, this certificate is not accepted for college or job applications. The same demographic of people who fail the MCAS, low-income and people of color, are likely to be trapped in a cycle of being unable to advance socially or economically due to not having access to jobs or higher education. Only 80% of economically disadvantaged students pass the MCAS on the first try (State House News Service). This further creates a prejudiced discrepancy between those who have and the have-nots.

Although a Spanish version of the MCAS has been curated in order to cater to Hispanic-English language learners, this “solution” manages to neglect the several other languages English learners speak. This flaw blatantly exposes how the MCAS disregards the struggles of students adjusting to the United States, and rather adds to the stress of learning a new language, culture, and world. Although students are provided dictionaries in their native language into English (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, *Bilingual Dictionaries and Glossaries Authorized for Use by English Learners on the 2023 MCAS Tests*), it is unfeasible to expect someone to interpret the exam with the same proficiency as a native speaker. The Massachusetts government proposes that since there are adaptive forms of the MCAS, they should be reasonable enough for people unable to take the regular version. However, the requirements for the alternate test include year-long data from individual students. Teachers are expected to collect a portfolio including a student’s “work samples, instructional data, videotapes, and other supporting information (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education). Considering that students can move to a new country regardless of what part of the school year it is, it would be virtually impossible for a teacher to collect that amount of data from a new English learner student. The MCAS is an educational barrier that is insensitive to immigrants and those who are eligible for alternate testing methods.

The MCAS drains the education system of its economic resources. For a 5-year contract, the Massachusetts government hired Measured Progress to administer the testing for

150.8 million dollars (Reis). For this much money, there are countless possibilities this budget could have been spent on. 150 million dollars could have gone towards the wages of teachers protesting for better pay, improving after-school programs, or improving the infrastructure of schools that desperately need it. Instead, 150.8 million dollars was spent on a test that detracts from the resources students depend on, and limits their future opportunities if they fail.

The MCAS was created in 1993 as part of the Education Reform Act (Drysdale). During this time period, standardized testing was held at an unreasonably high pedestal, praised as the end-all-be-all for student assessment. It is time for the status quo to end, and for all of us to realize that a student's, school's, and district's worth goes beyond an MCAS score. The MCAS takes more than it gives. Students would be better off with an education system that caters to their educational needs, rather than an exam that impedes on their right to grow.

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