

An Introduction to PARCC – Frequently Asked Questions

January 2014

1. Which state tests do Massachusetts students currently take?

Massachusetts students currently participate in MCAS, which stands for the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System. MCAS is the state's standards-based student testing program developed in response to the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993. MCAS is a custom-designed testing program owned by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and managed by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education with assistance and support from a testing contractor.

2. Why did Massachusetts recently adopt new learning standards?

We know that Massachusetts students are performing at high levels – second-to-none among the other 49 U.S. states and commensurate with some of the highest performing countries – and continuously improving. But we also know that huge challenges remain, and that not every child is enjoying the same level of success. For instance, nearly 40 percent of public high school graduates in Massachusetts who enroll in one of our public higher education campuses are placed in one or more non-credit bearing, remedial courses. Tackling gaps like this one and other inconsistencies in educational attainment requires adjustments to our current educational system.

In 2007-08, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education convened teams of educators and other content experts to revise our existing curriculum frameworks in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics. In 2009, these efforts were merged with a concurrent, state-led effort to develop a common, multi-state set of learning standards. These new common standards call on students to have solid content knowledge and the skills to apply their knowledge in ways demanded by colleges, careers, and citizenship in the 21st century.

In December 2010, the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education voted to adopt a new set of college and career ready standards in ELA/literacy and mathematics, which incorporate the Common Core State Standards. Adoption of these new standards was a major advancement for Massachusetts. The new standards capitalize on feedback from employers and higher education about where our graduates are often lacking in terms of their literacy and mathematical skills. The new standards are more rigorous, coherent, and focused than previous standards and set appropriate targets for what students should know and be able to do.

3. Why does Massachusetts need a new student testing program?

With the new curriculum frameworks in place, we are developing a next-generation student testing program that is aligned to our new college and career ready standards and well-positioned to build on the strengths of MCAS. Over the next two years,

Massachusetts will have a chance to pilot the new tests and compare them to MCAS. We believe that the new test holds the promise to build on the strengths of our current testing program and deliver features that are currently not possible under MCAS to ensure that all students are well prepared for success after high school.

4. What is PARCC?

The [Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers](#), or PARCC, is a state-led effort to develop a next-generation, computer-based student testing program aligned to a newly adopted, common set of college and career ready learning standards in English language arts and Mathematics. PARCC is a key component of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts's commitment to ensure that all public school students are well prepared for success after high school.

5. Which states are collaborating on the development of PARCC?

As of this printing, a total of 18 states are working together to build PARCC. Those states include Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Tennessee. The District of Columbia and the U.S. Virgin Islands are also partners in this work.

6. Who paid for the development of PARCC?

The PARCC consortium received a four-year, \$186 million federal grant to develop a next-generation student testing program.

7. Who is developing the PARCC test items?

The PARCC consortium has contracted with Pearson and Educational Testing Service (ETS), which is working extensively with our state's MCAS office as well as various subcontractors, to develop the assessments and test items. Hundreds of K-12 and postsecondary educators, content specialists, and assessment experts from across the PARCC member states are participating in thorough reviews of all test items. Their priority is to evaluate whether the items are closely aligned to the new college and career ready standards; are of high quality; and are rigorous, fair, and unbiased.

8. What are the design components of PARCC?

The PARCC testing program has several components, each of which will be computer-based and use technology to incorporate innovations. The components include:

- **Summative Assessments:** A *performance-based assessment* (PBA) administered after three-quarters of the school year has been completed and a computer-scored *end-of-year* assessment (EOY) for both ELA and mathematics in grades 3-11 designed to:
 - Make college-and career-readiness (CCR) and on-track-to-achieve-CCR determinations;
 - Measure the full range of standards and the full continuum of student performance; and
 - Provide data for accountability uses, including measures of growth.

- Non-Summative Assessments: Three non-summative assessment components designed to generate timely information for informing instruction, interventions, and professional development during the school year, including:
 - A *required* assessment of students' speaking and listening skills;
 - An *optional* diagnostic assessment; and
 - An *optional* mid-year performance-based assessment.

9. How can PARCC improve on MCAS?

Students have taken the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, or MCAS, since 1998. MCAS is a stellar testing program. But MCAS is entering its seventeenth year of administration and, most importantly, was never designed to measure the college and career readiness of students.

PARCC is designed to build on the strengths of MCAS and add additional features such as innovative technology-based items and more open-ended, performance-based tasks that will better measure students' ability to think critically and to apply what they know. At the high school level, PARCC intends to assess a broader range of the skills that employers and colleges report as essential for success after high school. PARCC promises to provide clearer signals to educators and students about the readiness of students for the next grade level and, in high school, for college and career. PARCC also will produce more timely results for districts and schools to assist educators in planning and tailoring instruction for students in the coming year.

10. How will PARCC differ from MCAS?

Here are some of the key ways in which PARCC will differ from MCAS:

- PARCC will test students in grades 3-11; MCAS currently tests students in grades 3-8 and 10;
- PARCC will be a computer-based test, though a paper-and-pencil version will be available at the outset; MCAS is only a paper-and-pencil test;
- As a computer-based test, PARCC will deliver innovative technology-based items and performance-based tasks that will better measure a broader range of the skills that we value and employers report are necessary for students to acquire;
- PARCC will assess writing at all grades levels; MCAS currently only assesses writing in grades 4, 7, and 10;
- PARCC will report five levels of students performance, including a level that coincides with college and career readiness; MCAS currently reports four levels of student performance (Advanced, Proficient, Needs Improvement, Warning/Failing);
- PARCC will allow us to compare student performance in Massachusetts to student performance in other states that also take PARCC; MCAS is a custom test that only Massachusetts students take.
- PARCC will produce more timely results for school districts and educators to help in planning and tailoring instruction for students in the coming year;

- PARCC has the real potential to reduce the costs for our testing program by taking advantage of the collaborative work across states.

11. Will PARCC replace MCAS?

In future years, PARCC could replace MCAS. The state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education will vote on whether to fully implement PARCC as the Commonwealth's student testing program in fall 2015 following a two-year pilot of PARCC in Massachusetts.

12. Why is Massachusetts piloting the PARCC tests before making a decision on whether or not to adopt them?

A two-year transition provides for a robust comparison of MCAS and PARCC, so that we can decide in the fall of 2015 whether to sunset the MCAS English language arts (ELA) and mathematics assessments for grades 3-8 and employ PARCC as our state testing program for these subjects beginning in spring 2016. This “test drive” provides two years to compare and contrast MCAS and PARCC, including the content, format, quality, and standards of performance for the two assessments. It also permits us to transition our accountability uses of the assessment results while maintaining trend lines that link back to pre-PARCC performance.

The two-year transition provides teachers and administrators with additional time to refine their implementation of the 2011 Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks in [ELA](#) and [mathematics](#), which incorporate the [Common Core State Standards](#), that the State Board adopted in December 2010, as well as to become familiar with new online test administration procedures before any final decision on full-scale implementation of PARCC. We know that not all districts and schools are ready to administer computer-based assessments. The transition period allows us to secure additional funding to ensure that all schools are able to incorporate 21st century learning technologies, including the ability to administer online assessments.

13. Who will participate in the spring 2014 field test of PARCC?

In spring 2014, the PARCC consortium will administer a field test in ELA and mathematics to more than 1.35 million students in grades 3-11 across 14 participating member states, including Massachusetts. The purpose of the field test is to understand how test items perform, to see how well those items measure student performance based on the new Common Core State Standards, and to inform test development in preparation for the planned operational launch of PARCC in the 2014–15 school year.

In Massachusetts, the field test of PARCC will include nearly 1,100 schools and 76,000 students. Students selected for the PARCC this spring will take a field test in either English language arts or Mathematics—not both subjects.

No district or school selected by the Department to participate in the field test will take the entire PARCC test in both ELA and Mathematics, although several districts

volunteered to take both. Most students who are selected will take either the performance-based or end-of-year assessment in one subject. A smaller number of students will take both the performance-based and end-of-year assessments in one subject. The non-summative assessments (the speaking and listening, diagnostic, and mid-year assessments) will not be part of the field test.

14. Will students selected to take the PARCC field test in spring 2014 also have to take the MCAS tests?

That depends. All grade 10 students, at least through the class of 2018, will continue to take the MCAS tests for the purpose of meeting the state graduation requirement. That requirement stipulates that all public high school students in Massachusetts must take and pass the grade 10 MCAS tests in ELA and mathematics and a high school STE test in order to meet the state's Competency Determination requirement and earn a high school diploma. If a grade 10 student is selected to take the PARCC field test, she/he will only participate in the end-of-year PARCC test, which will occur after MCAS testing has concluded.

School districts may exempt students in grades 3-8 selected for the PARCC field test from having to take the MCAS test in that same subject.

15. Will students with disabilities, or English language learners in their first year in the United States participate in the PARCC field test?

The PARCC consortium is committed to ensuring that all students – including students with disabilities and English language learners – are able to participate in a meaningful and appropriate manner so it can report valid results for all students. Through a combination of universal design principles and computer-embedded features, PARCC is designing a testing program that is inclusive of all students.

Many accessibility features that we consider to be accommodations on MCAS will be built into the computer-based PARCC test and available to all students (e.g., screen magnification). Other accommodations will only be available to students with disabilities (e.g., scribing responses) and English language learners (e.g., word-to-word bilingual dictionaries). IEP teams should continue to identify accommodations needed by students with disabilities and list them in IEP/504 plans.

Students taking the MCAS Alternate Assessment, and those requiring Braille or American Sign Language will not participate in the PARCC field test.

ELL students in their first year in the U.S. may take the PARCC ELA test at the principal's discretion. As in the past, they must take a mathematics test (either MCAS, or if they were selected, PARCC).

16. If selected to take a PARCC field test this spring, will my child receive a score or grade based on her/his performance?

No. PARCC will not generate any student, school, district, or state-level assessment or accountability results from the field test. The field test is an opportunity for states

and the testing contractor to enhance the development of the operational test. It is also a chance for schools to experience the new test—through the field test or a practice test that all schools may access—a year before the operational launch.

17. Are sample PARCC test items available for review?

Yes. Sample test items and tasks for ELA and mathematics, along with supplemental materials and additional resources, are available online at <http://www.parcconline.org/samples/item-task-prototypes>. In addition, test blueprints that show how the assessments reflect and measure the Common Core at every grade level are available at <http://www.parcconline.org/assessment-blueprints-test-specs>. Educators can use the blueprints and other tools and resources to support quality implementation of the standards.

18. Will students have the opportunity to practice the new PARCC tests before the administration of the field test?

Yes. The PARCC consortium will make a formal practice test available in spring 2014. PARCC will also continue to release sample test items to help teachers familiarize students with the format of the assessments and technology.

19. What other considerations will the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education factor into its decision in fall 2015 about whether to fully implement PARCC?

Among the major factors the Board will need to consider are the following matters:

- **Technology:** The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education is advocating for funding to ensure that, first and foremost, the Commonwealth's classrooms reflect 21st century learning technologies and, as a result, that our schools and districts have the capacity to administer computer-based assessments in the coming years.
- **Accountability:** The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education is developing strategies for maintaining a valid and reliable system of district, school, and educator accountability during the transition period, as well as the ability to establish trends tied to legacy MCAS as we transition to the next generation assessments in ELA and mathematics. Our goal is to maintain trends as we move from MCAS to PARCC while minimizing chances that schools are disadvantaged by field test participation.
- **Competency Determination (CD):** In Massachusetts, all public high school students must take and pass the grade 10 MCAS tests in English language arts and mathematics and a high school Science and Technology/Engineering test in order to meet the Competency Determination (CD) requirement and earn a high school diploma. The Board will need to determine the combination of PARCC assessments that high school students will take to earn their CD for the classes of 2019 and beyond. The current plans calls for students at least through the class of 2018 to continue to take and pass MCAS to earn their CD.