

Beacon Hill Byline by Rep. Mary Rogeness

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The MCAS Unveiling

Standardized tests have always been a mixed bag for schoolchildren. On one hand, they don't count on your grade average. On the other hand, by the time you are in high school, your results on the SAT or advanced placement tests can be a deciding factor in selecting a college. But times are changing in Massachusetts. In the next few weeks, a new category of reactions will come with the release of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) results.

In today's Byline, I want to spend some time discussing these new tests - why they were given and what they mean to Longmeadow and Massachusetts.

First, the purpose. MCAS developed to determine whether the statewide curriculum that is mandated by our education reform law is being taught in the classroom. They are given in 4th, 8th and 10th grades. The biggest difference between this test and other standardized tests is this: high school seniors in the year 2003 will have to pass the test in order to graduate.

The test is a pioneer in expanding beyond standardized multiple choice answers. The state's entire student population of more than 200,000 pupils was evaluated on tests developed for a single use. All answers are now available to the public, so they cannot be given again. In addition to multiple choice questions, students had essay questions, short answer and math computation problems. They had to know facts and demonstrate the ability to think, and the time intensive construction meant it took months to score tests.

If you think this is a difficult test, you are right. Its purpose is to hold schools accountable for a newly defined statewide curriculum and prepare all students for the work force of the 21st century.

At a recent legislative briefing, a colleague asked if the students in inner city schools would be held to the same standard as districts like Longmeadow. The answer is a resounding Yes. We are educating all of our children to a high level of competency. The state has channeled more than \$1 billion of new spending into our schools, and the bulk of that new spending has been directed to needier school districts. It would not make sense to allow such schools to educate children to a lower standard.

The statewide results are known as I write, and the town scores may be public by the time you read the column. Those results for most subject areas show that half of the tested students rank as "needs improvement" or "failing," although that figure drops significantly when special needs and limited English students are removed from the group.

The first year's tests provide a baseline or benchmark. They tell us how children respond to new tests of a new curriculum. Another benchmark of sorts will come from our reaction as parents, teachers and a larger public. Our town will do better than the state average, but we are likely to need more progress if we are to graduate an entire class in the year 2003.

The governor, the Department of Education and the legislature are all committed to making the MCAS program work. The state will provide supplemental help for teacher training and summer or after school support for students. Students, teachers and administrators will work harder to prepare for the next test. Will you give your support to them as they work to meet the challenge?