

Beacon Hill Byline – By Rep. Mary Rogeness

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Adopting (or Adapting) MCAS

Last week was a busy news week for the state's MCAS testing system. The Lieutenant Governor's task force announced proposals to address concerns about the high school sophomores who may not pass MCAS by the end of their senior year. At the same time, schools were judged for the first time by their improvement over the first three years of testing. Here are my reactions to some of the news stories.

To briefly state the purpose of MCAS, it is the accountability factor in the state's education reform law of 1993. Each year through the '90s, \$200 million new state dollars were pumped into local school budgets. In return for the new money, school systems were expected to teach a new state curriculum and prove their effectiveness by student performance on a test specifically designed for that Massachusetts curriculum. Achieving at least a "needs improvement" score on the math and English portions of the test will be a graduation requirement in 2003.

A check of all schools in the state shows reason for concern about the high school sophomores who will be faced with MCAS graduation requirement in two years. Longmeadow schools, in contrast, performed at the highest levels in the newly announced rankings, limited only by the fact that schools are required to demonstrate annual improvement. Success in prior years therefore sets an ever heightened bar.

As the deadline for MCAS as a graduation requirement approaches and many students have not succeeded on the test, the state is looking for alternative measures to test the knowledge of those students. Here are some of the proposals announced last week.

As an aid for all students, test scoring will be accelerated. Test results are presently unavailable until six months after testing. Any student who fails MCAS on the first try will be offered summertime or school year tutoring and four succeeding opportunities to try the test.

A new option for students is a stripped down version of the test to satisfy the basic graduation requirement. The alternative test questions would not qualify for "proficient" or "advanced" levels.

Although science and social studies test passage is not presently part of graduation requirement, both subjects are included in school rankings, and changes are also suggested in those areas. As an alternative to a single exam for all science knowledge, end-of-course tests will be offered. The social studies test is directed to focus on American, rather than world history.

Graduation of special education students is a concern for many families, one that is difficult for the state to address. By law, special education students cannot have different requirements from other students, so these are the proposed accommodations. Special education students can appeal the accommodations that were made for their test session. They can seek an alternative certificate in lieu of a diploma by demonstrating diligence in pursuing their education.

When the Massachusetts education reform law was enacted, the 2003 year of accountability was a distant threat. Now it is a reality that faces our schools and every high school sophomore. Although some educators and some lawmakers have responded to the deadline by advocating its suspension, I support MCAS and the newly recommended adaptations and other ongoing adjustments. Quality education of our children is a high priority for every family and for our society, and we must continue to strive for that goal.