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### The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System: How It Has Impacted Teachers

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## **The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System: How It Has Impacted Teachers**

### **Introduction**

The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) is a high-stakes form of examination administered to all tenth grade students in the state of Massachusetts. A score of “proficient” is required in order for a student to attain a high school diploma. Any student who fails can retake the test as many times as s/he needs. The test consists of a mathematics, English, and science components. The MCAS was a reaction to the call for accountability from the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001. Every school must comply with the state standards for education and all high schools must achieve sufficient scores on the exam or they face the threat of state takeover.

I became interested in researching the MCAS because I was a student who had to pass the MCAS in order to graduate from high school. I found it to be a very difficult task and I was one of the higher ranking students in my high school. I only scored proficient in mathematics by two points. I saw a many of my friends fail the test numerous times; some, after several attempts, gave up completely and dropped out of school. It was a test that left a bad taste in my mouth and I could see that the teachers in my high school were disenchanted by it as well. This is why I wanted to look deeper into the MCAS than simply surface level observations and opinions.

Given that I was a student who went through this process and often discussed it with my peers, I felt that I had a thorough understanding of what the consensus about the MCAS was among students. I was curious about teacher's reactions to the same test and this is why I chose to look deeper into what teachers felt about the test and how the MCAS impacted their lives. My research question at the outset of this project was: How does the high stakes culture surrounding the MCAS test impact teachers and their practices in Massachusetts public high schools? What I have found is that the MCAS impacts teachers in four different ways. The MCAS has been the cause in a change in classroom practices, heightened stress and frustration level, and increased concern for student achievement. Lastly, imparting knowledge necessary for proficient performance on the MCAS is often hindered by negative influences that arise from teaching in an urban environment.

### **Methods**

The primary source data for this study was attained by means of qualitative research which entailed interviews with public school teachers and an assistant principal in a Massachusetts high school. Each interview lasted approximately one hour each, and a cross section of subject areas was selected. Two English teachers, one science teacher, one mathematics teacher, one history teacher, and one assistant principal were interviewed. All interviews were conducted at the same urban, public high school in western Massachusetts, which I also attended from 2003 to 2007. For purposes of privacy pseudonyms were given to all people and places mentioned in this study.

The name of the urban school which these interviews were conducted in will be referred to as City High School. One English teacher that was interviewed will be referred to as William. William has been teaching at City High School for over thirty years and coaching the boys'

basketball and girls' tennis team for over twenty years. He has a unique relationship with many of his students because he coaches many of them in sports, therefore he frequently knows them on a more intimate level than is the norm in student faculty relationships. This bond does not only apply for his athletes, after getting to know his athletes so well over many years he enjoys getting to know all of his students on more than a superficial level.

The second English teacher that was interviewed will be referred to as Robert. Robert is very similar to William in that he is the head football coach at City High School and also coached the freshman boys' basketball team for a number of years. He too enjoys getting to know all of his students on a much more intimate level than most teachers. The science teacher that was interviewed for this study is also very invested in her students and their success. She will be referred to as Lorenda. She has taught Biology at City High School for over fifteen years as well.

The mathematics teacher who participated in this study has not spent her whole career at City High School. Dorothy, an Algebra teacher began at City High School, left to teach at a prestigious preparatory school in Connecticut, she later returned to City High School because she enjoyed the students there much more. Dorothy is also very invested in getting to know her students as well as she possibly can. James, a history teacher who was an eager and willing participant in this study has been teaching U.S. history for over fifteen years at City High School. He is an avid supporter of any venture that his students choose to partake in. Finally, Steven is an Assistant Principal at City High School. Steven was chosen to participate in this study to gain more insight into the administrative side of the MCAS. He was able to give some explanations for the policies and practices that teachers often spoke about in the interviews. Steven is a second year Assistant Principal.

There were, inevitably, limitations to this study. Given that there was a relatively short amount of time to conduct this primary research there are certainly more pieces to be considered. The subset of teachers is relatively small, however I felt that the smaller subset allowed for longer and more open ended interviews which gave deeper and more meaningful insight into the impact of the MCAS on their lives. The statistics for dropout students who went on to either attain or not attain their GED would have taken a great deal of time to uncover, much more than would have been possible in a semester. Having those statistics would have strengthened the conclusions of the study by showing whether student who drop out with the intention of attaining a GED actually do or not, however attaining them was unfeasible.

### **Literature Review**

There has been a great deal of research regarding the growth of high-stakes standardized testing in schools across the United States. It has become an institution that dominates the education of a significant number of school children in our public school systems. High-stakes standardized testing is a form of student assessment that places severe consequences on a student if he does not pass such as grade retention or withholding of a student's high school diploma. In the case of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), a student who does not pass can not receive his high school diploma even if he has passing grades in all of his classes. Much of the research conducted on this topic is focused on students and their experiences with high-stakes testing. Proponents for high-stakes testing argue that it is important to have set standards for students at the state level and also a way to assess whether or not these standards are being met.<sup>1</sup> Proponents also argue that curricular control is important in ensuring

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<sup>1</sup> Au p. 259, 2007

that all students receive a proper education.<sup>2</sup> Opponents of high-stakes testing argue that this form of testing creates too rigid a curriculum with very little room for variation or creativity.<sup>3</sup> Others argue that the test forces teachers to teach to the test.<sup>4</sup> The effects of the MCAS on teachers is very evident from their in class practices to their concerns about the security of their job.<sup>5</sup>

The outbreak of such a widespread use of high-stakes testing seems to have begun with the inception of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) because it placed a strong emphasis on accountability in education. The accountability model is one that has become evident in most public school systems in the United States because of NCLB and at first glance it seems like a great idea. Holding educators accountable for student performance in meeting standards is important. However, the model which focuses only the high stakes testing goes too far.

It is difficult to implement this strategy in a way that effectively serves everyone and, quite often, high-stakes testing adversely affects schools and students education.<sup>6</sup> NCLB has emerged in Massachusetts as the MCAS and there are certainly mixed feelings about it. The MCAS has been highly publicized in Massachusetts and the debate over whether it is a reasonable assessment of student achievement has also been highly publicized. One of these debates is whether or not the MCAS is right for every student. Not every student in every school is college bound, to some college is not an option or simply not something that he may want to try.

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<sup>2</sup> Au p. 259, 2007

<sup>3</sup> Sacks p. 203, 1999

<sup>4</sup> Sacks p. 203, 1999

<sup>5</sup> Myatt and Kemp p. 140, 2004; Luna and Turner p. 82, 2001

<sup>6</sup> Linn, Baker and Betenbenner p. 3-16 2002; Orlich p. 6-11, 2002

The MCAS is often described as a “college prep” test meaning that it is meant to assess the capability of students’ ability to succeed in a college level environment.<sup>7</sup> It has also been described as “a test for excellence rather than a test for competence.”<sup>8</sup> The MCAS is controversial because of its high-stakes method. Students have to pass a mathematics, verbal, and science test administered by the state in the sophomore year of high school in order to be eligible to receive their high school diploma. A student may retake the test as many times as is necessary in order to pass.<sup>9</sup> When one test decides so much in a student’s life, it is bound to be controversial. The serious consequences for the individual student is the reason why the majority of studies about the MCAS have focused upon its effect on the students who take the test.

At the same time, the MCAS and its accountability model can have a severe effect on teacher in the state of Massachusetts. The difficulty that comes with a job that entails imparting knowledge to young children or adolescents is not coupled with the stress of having to account for their students passing or failing what is essentially the most important test of their academic careers and possibly their lives. This is exemplified in a study by Luna and Turner in 2001, where when interviewed teachers expressed concern and anger directed toward the fact that the MCAS is used to assess whether they are doing their job effectively or not.<sup>10</sup> This study has also found that many teachers feel that since the inception of the MCAS there has been a “shift from thinking and exploring to drilling and memorization.”<sup>11</sup> This concept relates directly to the idea that standardized testing often leads to teachers having to teach to the test rather than fostering skills of critical thinking in students.. Teachers now must focus on test taking strategies and MCAS vocabulary so that students can learn how to navigate the questions they will face on the

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<sup>7</sup> Luna and Turner p. 81, 2001

<sup>8</sup> Luna and Turner p. 81, 2001

<sup>9</sup> Myatt and Kemp p. 141, 2004

<sup>10</sup> Luna and Turner p. 81, 2001

<sup>11</sup> Luna and Turner p. 83, 2001

exam. The MCAS seems to be a way of rating teachers as well and also a way for focusing far more on the teacher's accountability for student underperformance. Myatt and Kemp argue that, "MCAS is not a system at all. It is instead a series of paper-and-pencil tests intended to shift the locus of accountability closer to the school and classroom level."<sup>12</sup> This seems to suggest that the state is trying to shed some of the negative attention they receive when statistics are unfavorable and cast the negative light on the state and teachers in particular.

From my research of secondary sources I have found that the majority of studies have concluded that high-stakes testing is ultimately detrimental to over-all education and that a standardized curriculum could create "standardized minds".<sup>13</sup> There was one study however that found "in a significant minority of cases, certain types of high-stakes tests have led to curricular content expansion".<sup>14</sup> There has been little research on how teachers are affected by the MCAS test in particular. Teachers are the foundation of all of our educations, they are the people who are supplying us with the tools to be successful. Leaving them out of the equation suggests an ultimately flawed design.

This research will be looking into how teachers deal with the MCAS. There have been some other studies conducted regarding this aspect of the MCAS. In the Luna and Turner study, the authors conducted interviews about the impact of the MCAS with teachers. These interviews raised some debates over state standards, fairness of the test, and rigidity of the curriculum.<sup>15</sup> In this study however it seemed that the researchers were only speaking to teachers from the eastern

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<sup>12</sup> Myatt and Kemp p. 140, 2001

<sup>13</sup> Sacks p. 205, 1999

<sup>14</sup> Au p. 258, 2007

<sup>15</sup> Luna and Turner p. 79-87, 2001

side of Massachusetts and also to teachers from schools who had no trouble getting their students to pass the test with relative ease.<sup>16</sup>

My study will be somewhat different because it will deal primarily with teachers from western Massachusetts who teach in a high school where a high percentage of the enrollment is of Latino/a background and do not speak English as their primary language outside of school. The school at which research has been conducted has had difficulty enabling students to pass the MCAS the first time. This will certainly have an effect on the teachers who are working in the school and this effect is what this study is aiming to better understand. Kate Menken has done extensive work on students who speak English as a second language (ESL) and her studies have shaped this research. “Educators struggle to face the growing challenges posed by these students, particularly those who are limited English proficient (LEP), also known as English language learners or ELL.”<sup>17</sup> Immigration of Latino/a students who do not speak English at grade level can have a severe effect on a teacher’s ability to help the student pass the MCAS.

### **Data and Analysis**

In 2001 the landscape of public education in Massachusetts was changed immensely by the inception of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). The MCAS is a form of high-stakes standardized testing that the state adopted in order to comply with the much debated federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. NCLB calls for more accountability in education and “had immediate implications for states that must put in place new testing and

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<sup>16</sup> Luna and Turner p. 79-87, 2001

<sup>17</sup> Menken and Look p. 20-5, 2000

accountability systems.”<sup>18</sup> It is in this accountability model that the MCAS was formulated. According to Linn, Baker, and Betenbenner, “As of 2001, all tenth grade students (including special education, bilingual, vocational, and college bound) must pass the English language arts and mathematics portions of the MCAS in order to graduate from high school.”<sup>19</sup> Since 2001 this exam has expanded to include a science component that students must also pass in order to graduate. There are also rumors about a new experimental history section being added in the next five years. This exam is administered in earlier grades than tenth as well in order to acclimate students to the exam format. The MCAS is also used to evaluate schools, teachers, and entire public school districts.

This investigation into the MCAS deals with the teachers who will have to prepare students to pass the exam coupled with the many changes that come along with the implementation of the MCAS in an urban school in western Massachusetts. I will examine how teachers view the test, how it shapes their work, and how these teachers see the test impacting student achievement in their classrooms. The school will be referred to as City High School, in order to maintain confidentiality. In order to better understand what teachers have to deal with in regard to the MCAS I have interviewed a sample of teachers including two English teachers, a history teacher, a math teacher, and a science teacher. I have also interviewed an assistant principal so that I could better understand the administrative point of view on these issues. City High School has a student enrollment of 1,268 students. Of this total enrollment 64.7% are Hispanic and 29.7% are listed as white.<sup>20</sup> The district that City High School is part of has also

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<sup>18</sup> Linn, Baker, and Betenbenner p.3, 2002

<sup>19</sup> Luna and Turner p. 80, 2001

<sup>20</sup> From the school website:

<http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/student.aspx?orgcode=01370505&orgtypecode=6&>

been declared “underperforming” by the state of Massachusetts.<sup>21</sup> This categorization comes directly from the MCAS statistics.

I am very familiar with the practices and demographics of City High School because I attended it from September of 2003 to spring of 2007. This has allowed me to be able to learn from my own experiences as a student who had to pass the MCAS in order to graduate from high school. I was someone who had difficulty passing the mathematics section of the MCAS and it was an experience I was very displeased by. This is one of the main reasons that I wanted to examine the MCAS and how it affects teachers. Given that I attended City High School and have maintained a strong relationship with teachers and administrators there it was the perfect place to examine the effects of The MCAS in an urban environment.

I found that teachers were eager to share their experiences with the MCAS, and through my secondary and primary research I have found that there are four key themes that seem to come up quite often. One theme is that the MCAS certainly has an effect on the practices of teachers in the classroom in most subject areas. A second theme is that the MCAS causes high levels of stress and frustration among teachers of all subjects. The third theme is that teachers express great concern for the effect of the MCAS on their students. The final theme is that teachers at City High School will often cite the problems that come along with teaching in an urban environment as a source of difficulty in helping students pass The MCAS. These themes will be the basis for the analytical discussion of the MCAS and how it affects the lives and practices of teachers in City High School.

### *The Effect of the MCAS on Classroom Practices*

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<sup>21</sup> Dunn, T. (2011) [Interview with James a history teacher at City High School]

The classroom practices of teachers in City High School are certainly impacted immensely by the MCAS. Across the spectrum of subjects that students must pass in the MCAS there is a sharp focus on reading and comprehension. William, an English teacher at City High stated, “There is more of a focus on reading comprehension in classes other than English. The MCAS is more of a reading exam than anything else. Even the math problems are primarily word problems in which students have to read and think their way through the problem.”<sup>22</sup> Teachers of science and mathematics must now take time out of their classes in order to teach reading comprehension strategies instead of focusing on teaching their subject material. This takes away valuable class time from students trying to learn science and mathematics which can have a negative impact when each class is only fifty minutes long. To take the first fifteen minutes away from that class in order to teach test taking strategies or to practice MCAS questions is detracting from the student attaining the most from the class that he can. Lorenda, a biology teacher stated, “We cannot ask them MCAS questions which have not been covered in class so in many cases this time is spent in review when new material could be covered.”<sup>23</sup> Students could be learning more material instead of reviewing what they have already learned in the format of an MCAS question. This points to directly to a problem that is a recurring theme. Students are being taught how to take a test rather than being challenged to think critically or be imaginative.

Teaching to the test is an issue that has been researched widely in the field of educational studies<sup>24</sup> and is a highly visible practice in City High School that stems from the MCAS. By teaching to the test I mean that teachers, when faced with a high-stakes standardized test often,

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<sup>22</sup> Dunn, T. (2011) [Interview with William an English teacher at City High School]

<sup>23</sup> Dunn, T. (2011) [Interview with Dorothy a mathematics teacher at City High School]

<sup>24</sup> Sacks p. 203, 1999

“subtract and add specific elements of their curricula and change a lot about *how* they teach in order to give their students a better chance at passing the MCAS.”<sup>25</sup> This is also exemplified in a statement from a Mathematics teacher at City High named Dorothy who stated, “Yes, I suppose my teaching style does change a little. It has become a situation where we are forced to teach what is on the test, so things that may have been taught in the past that are not today have been cut to ensure that we cover all of the terms and vocabulary associated with the MCAS. Also, there is more of a focus on test taking strategies.”<sup>26</sup> Some of these teachers are frustrated by the fact that they are forced to teach to this test. Lorenda, conveyed this sentiment to me, “It is a tough thing to deal with (the MCAS) because I have to teach test taking strategies for a specific amount of time and I also have biology material to cover. I do not think my students are getting as much out of this class as they used to before the MCAS was put in place because I used to be able to cover a significant amount of material that I can not cover now.”<sup>27</sup> This practice is not overlooked because if teachers are covering less course relevant material in class then students are not able to gain the necessary knowledge in the subject to pass the exam. This could also be detrimental to the student’s education in the future due to unpreparedness in the subject.

### *Accountability and the Stress It Causes*

A second theme that has come up repeatedly throughout my interviews and secondary research are the effects of a high stress environment that the MCAS brings along with it. This exam is used as a test for teachers as well. If a teacher’s students do not perform well, then the state and administration use this to evaluate how well a teacher is doing his job. This idea is expressed by teachers throughout the state. In an article by Katherine Luna and Karen Turner,

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<sup>25</sup> Luna and Turner p. 82, 2001

<sup>26</sup> Dunn, T. (2011) [Interview with Dorothy a mathematics teacher at City High School]

<sup>27</sup> Dunn, T. (2011) [Interview with Lorenda a biology teacher at City High School]

they interviewed a group of English teachers. One of these teachers stated, “What bothers me is the sword of Damocles hanging over our heads. Now, it’s all of a sudden as if MCAS is going to make me a better teacher. I’m offended by the very thought of that.”<sup>28</sup> This English teacher felt that the MCAS would determine whether he was able to keep his job or be fired, hence the sword of Damocles reference. This frustration was also expressed by the teachers I spoke with. William echoed this statement in saying, “The MCAS is not a fair assessment of how we are doing our jobs. It angers me when the state comes in here, looks at test scores and assumes that we are not doing our jobs up to their standards.”<sup>29</sup>

Another source of frustration for teachers who have to deal with the MCAS is that “the administrative response to (to the MCAS) is one of cracking down on teachers and invading classrooms”<sup>30</sup> according to Luna and Turner. This is something that I have seen first-hand as a high school student at City High School. The principal and assistant principals would routinely sit in on classrooms that they suspected to be underperforming and this would put teachers on edge and cause a great deal of frustration. Often teachers who knew that their class was going to be observed would put unnecessary pressure on students by telling them in advance and also telling students to be on their best behavior. As a student I felt very uncomfortable because it felt as if someone was watching your every move from behind, therefore you have no room for error in behavior or answering questions posed by the teacher. This stress not only impacts students negatively, but is also a burden for teachers. Not one teacher I spoke with expressed anything but displeasure with classroom invasions by the administration.

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<sup>28</sup> Luna and Turner p. 82, 2001

<sup>29</sup> Dunn, T. (2011) [Interview with William an English teacher at City High School]

<sup>30</sup> Luna and Turner p. 81, 2001

Robert, an English teacher, stressed the frustration that comes along with this classroom invasion Robert said, “I hate when the principal comes in here to watch me do my job, I feel like my every move is being judged. It also makes me feel uneasy about why he is here. It makes me think, could my job be in jeopardy? Or is this just a routine check in?”<sup>31</sup> This frustration is a negative result of the MCAS because when teachers are frustrated and under extreme amounts of pressure and stress they are less likely to react to classroom misbehavior in a productive way. If a student is misbehaving in a class where there is no stress on the teacher then the teacher will likely deal with it in the classroom unless the behavior escalates or is a continuing occurrence. If the teacher is already frustrated it is only human nature to snap at a student which could cause an escalation of the situation or it could result in removal of the student for the rest of the class period. Lorenda stated, “Some teachers will kick their students out of class for not raising their hand to participate. I think that it could be due to frustration over certain pressures we are under from the administration.”<sup>32</sup> This is very disturbing because if the student is removed from class then he or she will miss whatever material is covered for the remainder of the class period. Also, if this continues suspensions will ensue and even more class time and material will be missed by the student.

I have seen this happen on countless occasions. Interestingly, when interviewing teachers I found that they none of the five teachers that I interviewed would admit to doing this, however, would note that they have seen this behavior in a large number of other teachers. One teacher stated, “I do not like to send students out of class for disciplinary issues, I deal with it in-class. I have seen many teachers here who do seem very frustrated sending a “problem” student out of class three to four times in a week because they do not have the patience to deal with the student

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<sup>31</sup> Dunn, T. (2011) [Interview with Robert an English teacher at City High School]

<sup>32</sup> Dunn, T. (2011) [Interview with Lorenda a biology teacher at City High School]

in class.”<sup>33</sup> This makes me wonder about whether the teachers I interviewed actually have the patience to deal with “problem” students or if they are just covering themselves for the purposes of the interview.

The administration has to deal with this stress and frustration, as well, because they have to enforce this model of accountability and this means that they must prove to the state that they are doing their jobs. If the school is underperforming then they must show a plan for improvement and they must implement it effectively while documenting the improvement they are seeking. Otherwise the school will face state takeover. This is something that no one wants. Steven, assistant principal at City High School stated, “We have to make sure our teachers are doing their jobs in accordance to the state standards because if not, we are the ones who get into trouble. I understand that it is stressful and frustrating but it is something that must be done. It is just as stressful for us because we have the state education department watching over us.”<sup>34</sup>

Additional frustration among teachers stems from the cutting of certain classes or the overfunding of a certain department to allow them more resources to improve test scores. Myatt and Kemp state, “In response to the degree to which testing has been emphasized many of the high schools in Massachusetts’ poorer districts have chosen to put the bulk of their resources into the early high school grades, hoping to get as many students as possible to pass the tests.”<sup>35</sup> This description fits into City High School very well because it is a poor district that is considered to be underperforming by the state. City High School has also eliminated a home economics department and drastically cut the art department in response to the state’s call for improvement. Even the history and social studies department has felt a cut in resources because the MCAS, as

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<sup>33</sup> Dunn, T. (2011) [Interview with William an English teacher at City High School]

<sup>34</sup> Dunn, T. (2011) [Interview with Steven an assistant principal at City High School]

<sup>35</sup> Myatt and Kemp p. 141, 142

of right now does not have a history component. One history teacher, James stated, “The A.P. (advanced placement) history course has been cut from a two year course to a one year course.”<sup>36</sup> This is very disturbing because I took this course and there is an immense amount of material to retain and it was difficult to retain all of the information in two years. Now these students have only one year to cover the material. James expressed the same concern when I asked him about the cut. He said, “There is a great deal of material that I cannot cover now in the A.P. course. It is difficult to try to jam two years worth of class into one, ultimately things must be left out.”<sup>37</sup> This shows that the state has tunnel vision when it comes to what is important for their students. The students who are passing the test and likely attending college from City High School are being put at a disadvantage and not being given the appropriate opportunities to achieve their highest potential because of cut backs that ultimately stem from the MCAS. James went on to say, “When I approached the superintendent about this cut in the history department, he just said, “I don’t give a hoot about social studies, I’m trying to raise test scores.”<sup>38</sup> These cuts in resources are unfair and inhibit the education of the students so that test scores can be raised. This is evident in my aforementioned interview with James, a History teacher at City High School. This is a source for frustration among teachers throughout City High School. And as I have previously stated frustration among teachers can ultimately have a negative effect on the students they teach.<sup>39</sup>

### *Teacher Concern for Students*

The third important theme that I encountered in my investigation is that teachers often expressed a serious concern for the effect that the MCAS has on their students. As I mentioned

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<sup>36</sup> Dunn, T. (2011) [Interview with James a history teacher at City High School]

<sup>37</sup> Dunn, T. (2011) [Interview with James a history teacher at City High School]

<sup>38</sup> Dunn, T. (2011) [Interview with James a history teacher at City High School]

<sup>39</sup> Dunn, T. (2011) [Interview with Robert an English teacher at City High School]

before every tenth grade student has to take the exam in order to graduate from high school. This means that special needs students as well as students who speak English as a second language (ESL) have to take the same test as students with no learning disability and no language barrier. These students would then be judged by the same standards which is unfair by all means. These students are at an extreme disadvantage when it comes time to take the MCAS because ESL students do not have the same English language skills that students who are in the traditional English track do. They receive training in English that fluent English speaking students may have learned years earlier. Robert stated, “We always have students coming here who have just moved from Puerto Rico, some of whom do not speak a word of English. This is a huge problem for us English teachers and for the ESL teachers because technically we are supposed to teach them English in enough time so that they can pass the MCAS and this is nearly impossible to do in some cases.”<sup>40</sup> This problem is faced by teachers throughout the country, a problem that is reflected in the work of Kate Menken and Keith Look who have done extensive research on English Language Learners (ELL) in New York. These authors state, “Educators struggle to face the growing challenges posed by these students, particularly those who are limited English proficient (LEP), also known as English language learners or ELL.”<sup>41</sup>

To teach a student who does not know the language and teach him enough to pass a test that some students who have spoken and read English all their lives have difficulty passing is an almost unachievable goal and ultimately these students suffer for it. Also after a student has failed the MCAS once or twice already there can certainly be issues of engagement with that student in class. Many times these students completely disengage with school and may even be disruptive. Steven said, “When students feel like they cannot pass this test or that school is

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<sup>40</sup> Dunn, T. (2011) [Interview with Robert an English teacher at City High School]

<sup>41</sup> Menken and Look p. 20-5

overwhelming them they often become frustrated by school, disciplinary issues are something that is a huge problem when this occurs.”<sup>42</sup> This will be explained further in my discussion of the student dropout problem. This is a cause for concern because in many of these cases the student is held back in school because he is not attaining the knowledge necessary to advance.

In a large percentage of cases students have given up and simply dropped out of school. According to Dorothy, “One thing that you may notice about City High is that if you look at the freshman classes they are extremely larger than the senior classes. This is due to the large amounts of students who are held back or who drop out to get their GED instead of dealing with the MCAS for the third or fourth time.”<sup>43</sup> We can see that student drop outs are a huge problem because the graduation rate at City High School is only 67%.<sup>44</sup> This is nearly 20% lower than the state average. The dropout rate for City High School is 5.5% which is almost double that of the state average.<sup>45</sup> In talking with these teachers they express great concern for their students because they want them to succeed and dropping out of school is something that can be detrimental because not all students try to attain their GED.

These dropout rates have often been misrepresented to the public by the Massachusetts state department. In June 2004 the state department “revealed a 96% MCAS passing rate, including numbers in the high 80% range for Black and Hispanic students.”<sup>46</sup> This proved to be a skewed statistic because “what the folks at the state department neglected to mention is that the 96% passing rate included only those students who were still in school and in their original

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<sup>42</sup> Dunn, T. (2011) [Interview with Steven an assistant principal at City High School]

<sup>43</sup> Dunn, T. (2011) [Interview with Dorothy a mathematics teacher at City High School]

<sup>44</sup> From the school website:

<http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/student.aspx?orgcode=01370505&orgtypecode=6&leftNavId=303&>

<sup>45</sup> From the school website:

<http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/student.aspx?orgcode=01370505&orgtypecode=6&leftNavId=303&>

<sup>46</sup> Myatt and Kemp p. 142

classes.”<sup>47</sup> This means that the state education department was excluding students who dropped out after failing the MCAS and students who were held back in school and were no longer in the graduating class of 2004. With these two things included the passing rates for Black students were around 50% and for Hispanic students around 45%.<sup>48</sup> This deception seems to suggest that the state education department knew that there were problems with the MCAS but simply refused to acknowledge them, or did not want to be proven wrong.

The MCAS can be seen as the root of many dropouts because the test seems not to be for everyone. According to Luna and Turner, “MCAS represents a test of excellence rather than competence. Teachers describe The MCAS as a “college prep” test.”<sup>49</sup> Not every student in an urban high school is college bound, some want to get a job right after high school but this test is not for these students. It seems that the state is attempting to force students into a college track in high school with this exam when not every student wants to go to college. This is a problem because students who may not have dropped out of school before the MCAS could seemingly be dropping out for the simple fact that they cannot pass a test for college bound students. Kate Menken also offers similar explanations for dropout rates in New York City. Menken states, “A serious unintended consequence of high-stakes testing in New York and elsewhere is that it creates an incentive for students to leave school, either to pursue an alternative diploma, or to drop out.”<sup>50</sup>

### *Difficulties of Teaching MCAS in an Urban Environment*

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<sup>47</sup> Myatt and Kemp p. 142

<sup>48</sup> Myatt and Kemp p. 142

<sup>49</sup> Luna and Turner p. 81

<sup>50</sup> Menken p. 97, 2008

The final and somewhat brief theme that I encountered in my investigation is that many of the teachers who I interviewed made claims about the challenges of teaching in an urban environment. James, the History teacher I interviewed, kept referring back to a comparison that City High School teachers face very often. This is a comparison to a very successful suburban high school which I will call Suburbia High School. In my interview with James, he stated, “It is not the instruction that is the problem. If you swap City High and Suburbia High teachers I believe that the test scores would still be very similar to what they are now. It is not the students either, it is the environment.”<sup>51</sup>

Urban schools face vastly different problems than suburban schools do and these problems are manifest in City High School. Poverty and crime are often characteristics of inner city environments and in City High School these two influences are evident. In Suburbia High School they are almost nonexistent and teachers suggest that this is why students tend to have higher achievement levels. Lorenda indicated that, “Many students come from barely any money at all and their parents or parent have to work two jobs in order to support them, therefore the supervision is not always there for these kids. This is why some students almost never do their homework or skip school on a regular basis.”<sup>52</sup> In this case the teacher places blame on the parents for a student’s shortcomings, although she is recognizing that the parents are not there because of economic reasons, not because of a lack of caring. However, there is no easy solution to this persistent problem of poverty. These factors undeniably contribute to lower achievement, which, in turn, contributes to drop out rates or being held back.

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<sup>51</sup> Dunn, T. (2011) [Interview with James a history teacher at City High School]

<sup>52</sup> Dunn, T. (2011) [Interview with Lorenda a biology teacher at City High School]

In an urban environment like the one I am investigating many may turn to the streets. Gangs, drugs, and trouble are readily available to students who drop out of school and feel that they have lost hope for their future. These teachers know that and try to fight against it because quite often they know these students from coaching them or the student may have grown up down the street, but often times the pull of the easy money is too strong. This is a point that came up in my interview with William, an English teacher at City High School. He stated, “I have coached the boys’ basketball team here for over twenty years. I have seen a lot of my players get into trouble either after they drop out or even after they graduate. Some get into drugs or gangs and some are still in jail right now. It is sad.”<sup>53</sup> I have seen it happen to my high school friends far too often.

The MCAS is an exam that has constantly sparked debate over the state of education in Massachusetts and through my investigation I allow for insight into the experiences of teachers with The MCAS. The teachers consulted in this study lead to the conclusion that the MCAS has negative impacts on the practices of teachers in their classrooms. It causes a tremendous amount of frustration in teachers which could turn out to be detrimental to the education of students. Also instead of being able to connect with students and teach them valuable skills such as group work and creativity they find themselves worrying about the negative effects the test may have on students. Teachers also tend to stress over the unique problems that present themselves in a school in an urban environment. The MCAS is a test with a great deal of problems and it seems undeniable to say that it is unfair to subject students to a test that has so many negative circumstances surrounding it.

## **Conclusions**

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<sup>53</sup> Dunn, T. (2011) [Interview with William an English teacher at City High School]

Based on the primary source data and evidence accrued through secondary source research, this study has allowed me to come to four feasible conclusions. One, teachers feel that the MCAS has placed numerous restrictions on them in the classroom and that has changed the day to day practices of their teaching styles. Teaching to the test has become evident in all subject areas that are encompassed by the MCAS. Teachers feel that they are drilling terms and concepts rather than fostering critical thinking and participatory group work, which are valuable skills necessary after high school.

The second finding is that teachers feel a great deal of stress and frustration which stems from the MCAS. The test essentially acts as a measuring stick for how well teachers are doing their job. To the teachers who participated in this study, this is an unfair assessment. Due to this flawed accountability model of the MCAS, these teachers often feared for their jobs and expressed frustration due to administrative policies that make them uncomfortable.

Third, every teacher interviewed in this study expressed great concern for the futures and educations of their students. These teachers were fearful that if students became discouraged by failing the MCAS, they may disengage and eventually drop out of school. Some teachers have stated that they see this phenomenon on a regular basis. This finding is very troubling.

The fourth and final conclusion that this study brought about is that enabling all students to pass the MCAS in an urban environment such as the one City High School is situated in is nearly impossible. Many students that these teachers have spoken of have only had one two, and some even no years of educational instruction in English. To enable a student who has very little knowledge of the English language to pass a test administered in English that encompasses three of the four major subject areas is nearly impossible.

This study is important because it deals with one of the most hotly debated issues in the field of Educational Studies at this time, high-stakes standardized testing. This project allows us to see into what goes through the teacher's minds who have to implement this test that, from what I have found, most of them do not support. The importance of this study also depends on the willingness to further research these findings. Future endeavors to expand on this report may include looking into solutions for teacher frustration due to the MCAS. This study also points to the need for research into how environments of high crime and poverty affect the capacity of all students to learn. Also one could look into different ways the state of Massachusetts could better assess student achievement and accountability than relying solely this high-stakes method of standardized testing. I am left wondering if the state had a plan or was forming a policy to deal with the issue of ESL students and how to better serve them in regard to the MCAS. The resolution of the problems pointed to in this study inherently rests on the willingness of scholars, politicians, and educators to take up these findings and reconsider the value of the MCAS and whether changes can be made or alternative methods developed for establishing competency in public education. I urge everyone in the Educational Studies community to continue investigating and critiquing the MCAS, keeping in mind the dedicated teachers in this limited but sincere attempt to wrestle with the issues raised by reliance on the MCAS as a single measure for attaining a high school diploma.

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School Data:

*Demographics:*

<http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/student.aspx?orgcode=01370505&orgtypecode=6&>

*Graduation Rates:*

<http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/student.aspx?orgcode=01370505&orgtypecode=6&leftNavId=303&>

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## Appendix

### Initial Interview Questions

1. How many years have you been a teacher?
2. What grade levels do you teach?
3. In general what are your opinions about the MCAS test?
4. How much experience do you have in preparing students for the MCAS test?
5. Do you teach you junior and senior (11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade) classes in the same ways that you teach your freshman and sophomore (9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade) classes?
6. Do your teaching methods or practices change after students have passed the MCAS?
7. How do teachers go about preparing their students for the test?
8. In your opinion do you or your fellow teachers feel frustrated or constrained by the fact that they are put under pressure to raise test scores?
9. Does the MCAS test allow for variation of teaching styles?
10. Do teachers feel that the MCAS test could inhibit the overall education of children?
11. In your opinion, is the MCAS test a fair assessment of children's academic achievements or abilities? Please explain your answer
12. If no, could you think of possible alternatives to the MCAS test?
13. Do you think that the pressure that is placed on teachers in this high-stakes testing culture deters potential teachers from pursuing teaching as a career?