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Teacher Attitudes of MCAS Testing of Special Education Students

Introduction

Standardized testing is playing an increasingly larger part in the public educational system because of the perceived need to improve our school systems. A rise has occurred in the use of these tests in the public schools. In Massachusetts, MCAS testing is the latest addition in the public education system and this topic is the area covered by this research.

Research Question & Significance

This project focuses on the relationship between special education and mainstream, and their views of the MCAS testing of special education students. The specific research question is: Do the opinions and practices of traditional teachers regarding MCAS testing of special education students differ from those of special education teachers?

Both these groups of teachers have a significant effect on special education students. If teachers in both groups have significantly different opinions on the validity of the MCAS tests as they pertain to special education students, that raises questions about overall consistency in their teaching of these students and about the attitudes and potential success of individual students on the MCAS tests themselves. It can be detrimental to the school and the individual student because if these two groups are working counterproductively the MCAS scores can possibly fall, hurting the schools successful statistics and ultimately the individual's success on the test.

MCAS

In 1993, Massachusetts passed the Education Reform Law that created a new set of standards for the public schools. This law created new learning standards for the public schools in their core curriculums and each school was given money to integrate these provisions into their current curriculum. With this integration came MCAS testing.

“The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) is the Commonwealth's statewide assessment program for public schools. MCAS measures the

performance of the students, schools, and districts on the academic learning standards contained in the *Massachusetts Curriculum Framework*, fulfilling requirements of the Education Reform Law of 1993,”¹. These tests are not only a way of standardizing the curriculum in public schools but are also a graduation requirement of the students. “The Education Reform Law requires that, in addition to fulfilling local graduation requirements, students will have to earn a competency determination by passing the state’s tenth grade test as a condition for high school graduation,”².

The MCAS are given to the students in May over a seven-day period during their 4th, 8th and 10th grade. The 10th grade is the crucial year because this is the time that the graduation requirement must be met. In order to receive their diploma, students must satisfy the competency requirement by scoring a Needs Improvement level (a score of 220) or higher in English and in math.

The MCAS itself is set up into sections for English Language Arts, Mathematics, and Science & Technology. (At the time of the interviews, the social science section was being added to the MCAS but there were complications due to a conflict between the current curriculum and the intended testing material.) The test consists of four types of questions: multiple-choice, short answer, open-response and writing prompts. The multiple-choice questions are found in all areas of testing and requires the student to choose from four pre-selected answers. The short answer questions are only found on the mathematics section and the students form a short response by either explaining the methods of solving a math problem or showing the steps to reaching a numeric answer. The open response questions are also used in all subjects of testing. Here the student writes a few paragraphs or develop a chart in order to express understanding of material. The writing prompt is used in the English Language Arts area only and the student is required to write a composition based on a reading passage that she/he is given.

The MCAS tests are then scored by either professional scorers or by Massachusetts teachers who have been given training in this procedure. The multiple-choice questions are graded with either a 1 or 0 and the short answer questions are also graded with a 1 for a correct answer and 0 for an incorrect answer. The open response

¹ Massachusetts Department of Education. Report of 2000 Massachusetts and Local School District MCAS results. Boston: Massachusetts, 2000. 7.

² Massachusetts Department of Education. 7.

questions are scored on a scale of 1-4 score points based on the knowledge and skills that student has shown. The compositions are graded on two different criteria of topic development and Standard English convention. The topic development criterion is scored on a scale of 1-6 points and the Standard English convention is scored with a 1-4 point scale. These scores are then added up and the student's total score is designated into a performance level of Advanced (260-280), Proficient (240-259), Needs Improvement (220-239), or Failing (200-219). Students that fail the MCAS are allowed to retest the following December to fulfill their graduation requirement.³

Special education students are required by federal and state law to participate in this testing program. These students are ones who are designated with disabilities and who have an IEP (individualized education plan) under Section 504 of the federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973. In the case of MCAS testing, the student's IEP team meets and determines whether or not the student will participate in the MCAS under regular conditions or will take the MCAS with accommodations. Accommodations are allowed in four areas: changes in test timing, changes in the setting, changes in test presentation, and changes in how the student is allowed to answer the questions. A list of 24 other approved accommodations is given to the school by the Department of Education.⁴

In order to determine if the test is indeed a fair measure of the students and school's ability, educators are now examining this particular test, along with standardized testing in general, more closely. For special education students this scrutiny is especially important because of the difficulty students with learning disabilities have with testing in general and standardized testing in particular. Even with the provided accommodations, special education students find the MCAS a difficult obstacle to overcome in order to graduate from high school.

Existing Literature

In years extensive research has been done on the topic of standardized testing in schools. The research has focused mainly on three different issues. These topics: a focus on standardized testing for all students (the SAT's and the ACT's for example), a focus

³ Massachusetts Department of Education. 11-12.

⁴ Massachusetts Department of Education. 10.

on inequality among school systems that can affect the students' scores, and finally there is a focus on the student and parent reaction to the mandate of the MCAS testing.

Standardized testing itself has come under fire as being a questionable method of assessing students and school systems. An example of the former is the use of the SAT tests. Traditionally, one of the ways colleges have tried to maintain a certain level of academic quality in their applicants is by looking at their SAT scores and weeding out those who do not fall into their required SAT bracket. In other instances standardized testing is used to assess the success of an implemented program.

Although use of standardized tests have been criticized, Schwartz et al help to clarify some of the confusion over the use of these tests in their distinction between high stakes standardized testing vs. high standards. "Children, parents, communities, and the public at large, including policymakers, have every right to raise the difficult question of whether schools achieve appropriate goals... There can be no argument about the necessity for high standards. Therefore, there should be no confusion when high-stakes testing is criticized. Confusion makes some interpret the criticism of high-stakes standardized testing as opposition to high standards. Nothing could be further from the truth... High standards may not be connected to high-stakes standardized testing at all. In fact, an argument can be made that the content of some standardized high-stakes testing reflects low standards, (Schwartz, 1977a; Zacharias, 1977)".⁵

The question arises, also, of inequality in these standardized tests. There has always been the idea that standardized testing does not account for the inequalities that can occur within schools such as an inequality in resources, for example. How can students be expected to do well on standardized tests if the school itself does not have enough resources to keep the curriculum up to date. A parent, Larry Ward, whose children attend a Cambridge public school says, " ' We do not have a level playing field in this society,' ... 'Urban schools systems such as Boston's continue to have many overcrowded classes with more than 30 kids, courses with no textbooks or other vital materials. Labs with no running water, deteriorating buildings and overstretched and

⁵ Asa G. Hillard III, "Excellence in Education verse High Stakes Standardized Testing" Journal of Teacher Education 5 (2000) : 293.

sometimes under trained teachers. Let's put the resources directly into the schools instead of into a test that punished the kids,".⁶

Research has also been done on their reactions of students and parents to the MCAS mandate. The importance of this research is that it focuses on problems with MCAS according to the test takers themselves and the parents of these students. In the case of the students, there have been huge cries of protest by those who feel that the MCAS is unfair. Eleanor Martin is an extreme example in this case along with eleven of her classmates, refused to take the MCAS test in 1999. Eleanor and her classmates feel that the MCAS tests do not accurately assess their four years of growing and learning during high school, and she is not alone in these feelings. She says, "We are not saying nothing should be done to improve public education in Massachusetts. We are simply saying that taking a paper and pencil test is not the way to amend education...this is our last chance to raise awareness about getting an education that is not standardized, but meaningful, deep, and personalized. We believe an education like that is worth working for,".⁷ For Eleanor and her classmates, the MCAS testing is too standardized and impersonal to be "meaningful".

A great deal of research has been done on standardized testing and on the MCAS specifically. Much of the research has dealt with the students' and parents' perspective. However, with MCAS testing, little of the research that has been focused on a comparison of teachers' attitudes toward the validity of these tests for special education students. Articles have been written from the point of view of either special education and mainstream teachers but when looking for research on a direct comparative study, I found myself struggling with the lack of resources. My focus in the paper is to compare and contrast the opinions of these two different groups of teachers within one school and to try to figure out what might be some of the causes for these differences of opinion.

Thesis

In examining school policy, accommodations, graduation requirements, appropriateness of standardized testing and changes to the MCAS, it is shown that special education teachers and mainstream teachers hold in some cases markedly different

⁶ Jackie Dee King. "'MCAS Test Draws Fire' Failing Our Kids :Why the Testing Craze Won't Fix Our Schools. (2000) : 24.

⁷ Eleanor King. "'No' Is The Right Answer". Failing Our Kids: Why the Testing Craze Won't Fix Our Schools. (2000) : 26.

opinions about MCAS testing of special education students which could be due to the differences in how they perceive these students, in their attitudes about accountability, and in their understanding of special education laws.

Background

This paper is a case study of a Massachusetts suburban high school that houses a learning-center based special education program. The school is located in a suburb of Boston, a relatively small town with a population of about 13,000,. This small, relatively affluent community is largely white, with a racial breakdown of 91% white, 5.4% Asian, 1.8% Latino, and 1.7 7 black. The town has one public high school that most students attend. There is a local vocational high school that only about 1% of the resident students attend. In 1998, the high school had about 89% of the graduating class going on to some form of college education, and with a \$6,800 per pupil expenditure, it has the means to keep or increase that percentage.⁸

The Special Education program within this high school is based on the idea that inclusion is an important part of the learning process. The students who qualify for services of the special educational classroom report to this classroom a certain number of times a week for help with their homework and class work. The learning center is used for help in organizational skills, study skills, test preparation and class work help. These students are integrated into the mainstream classrooms as well and are expected to learn in the same environment as the rest of the student body. Since the school is part of the Massachusetts public school system, special education students are required to take the MCAS each May during their sophomore year along with the rest of the student body.

Methodology

The primary sources that I used in this study were teacher interviews. I received permission from the Institutional Review Board at Trinity College to conduct my research insuring that the interviews were conducted with complete confidentiality for the teachers and the school. The teachers in this study are not referred to by name, and the school name is not used in this research. Teachers' behavior during the MCAS testing was not observed due to time constraints since the general testing is not done until the springtime.

⁸ Massachusetts Municipal profiles (2000)

Since the research was done as a case study of one particular school all the teachers are necessarily from the same school and have similar backgrounds that mirror the community at large. Nine teachers were about their feelings toward the MCAS in general and the issue of special education students and the requirements of this test. The nine teachers are comprised of four special education teachers and five mainstream teachers in the fields of English, math, and science. The foreign language department and social sciences along with the other specialty teachers are not in the sample selection of teachers because the MCAS tests currently focus on math, English, and science & technology. The teachers were selected based on the availability of their schedule.

The interviews focused on their teaching background, their thoughts about standardized testing (MCAS), especially as it relates to their special education students. The first part of each interview, which dealt with the background of the teachers, was more factual than opinion-based. This part also dealt with such questions as the general makeup of their classroom will be included, the number special education students that are in their classes, the types of accommodations provided for those students, etc. The second part of the interviews focused on the MCAS testing. Included here were such questions as, how they prepare their students for the test? Do they feel that the curriculum is changed due to the importance of these tests? Do they feel that the MCAS testing is a good assessment of their students' abilities? Is the graduation requirement part of the MCAS a fair component of the test? The third part of the interview focused on the teacher's feelings toward the issue of special education and the MCAS. Are the MCAS a fair assessment of their abilities? Do you think that SPED students should be exempt from MCAS, be allowed more accommodations or are the accommodations appropriate for them? What changes would you recommend for the MCAS testing?

After the interviews were completed, they were then transcribed in order to provide a better picture of what could be found in the answers of these educators. The questions were then into grouped themes and the answers of the mainstream teachers and those of the special education teachers were compared.

Interpretation and Analysis of Primary Resources

In analyzing these primary sources, the interview questions were broken down into five main ideas. These are: whether or not the teacher was aware of the testing policy

regarding accommodations for special education students, whether or not they believed that the MCAS material was appropriate and a good assessment of the students' abilities, whether they felt the graduation requirement is a fair component of the MCAS test, whether or not the teachers felt that the special education students should be exempt or given extra accommodations, and finally what were their suggestions for improving the MCAS test. In each of these categories, the opinions of the mainstream teachers were compared to those of the special education teachers.

School Policy on Accommodations

The school policy on MCAS accommodations for special education students is that the students, if deemed appropriate by the IEP, team can have the option of taking the MCAS in a separate classroom with other special education students. They are allowed untimed testing (although this is largely irrelevant in the fact since ALL students are allowed as much time as they need to finish). The special education students may have directions repeated but not clarified or rephrased. They are also allowed to use calculators and dictionaries to aid in their test taking.

The variation in responses to the question of whether or not the teachers are aware of the school policies regarding the accommodations allowed by MCAS for the special education students was quite interesting. The specific question asked was, what are the school policies of MCAS testing of SPED students in regards to the accommodations? Out of the five mainstream teachers who were interviewed, only one could specifically identify what accommodations were allowed for the special education students. One math teacher stated, "I understand that they have extended time, unlimited time. I'm not sure if they are allowed to take the test in an outside room with a special Ed teacher there".⁹ Although he could name one accommodation, he still was unclear as to the precise nature and extent of the modifications allowed to SPED (special education) students

The four special education teachers were familiar with all the accommodations that were allowed and were quite vocal in their opinions about what they perceived to be the limited modifications. One SPED teacher replied, "Last year, when the kids took the MCAS, there was no modifications whatsoever for these kids other than they could take it in a separate setting with a learning specialist and have extra time. That is so far from

⁹ Personal Interview Transcript, 10.

what they should provide for the special Ed kids I can't even tell you..."¹⁰ She feels that the accommodations that the students have received in their education all along should be the ones that are provided during the MCAS, not the abbreviated version the students are currently allowed. Another SPED teacher replied, "If they chose to they can go in a separate setting and are given as much time as they want but any kids is. They really can't get much. If it says on their IEP that they can use their calculator then I think they can use a calculator on the test. They can have some areas of the questions read to them but no clarity at all. It has to be read word for word which is against what most of them have written on their IEP's. That they can have clarification on the oral component on testing [in a regular school setting] but they can't have that on the MCAS,".¹¹

The difference in understanding school policy is important because while these teachers may not be proctoring each test, understanding the school policy as it relates to the students whether they be special education or mainstream students brings the test to an individual level. The way teachers view individual students and their learning style seems to have a direct effect on their views of MCAS.

Appropriateness

In respect to the MCAS being appropriate and a good assessment of the special education students' abilities, it was found that, overall, the mainstream teachers did not feel that this test is an inappropriate or an unfair assessment. The mainstream teachers varied in their views from one teacher who said, "I would say 'yes'. I know that MCAS is an untimed exam so that with anyone who needs extended time they can [take that time]. So I would say that there's no disadvantage to them [SPED students] with the questions that are asked,"¹² to a teacher with a slightly less positive perspective about the MCAS who said, "Well I don't know if any standardized test is a great assessment of anyone's abilities. Not just special ed students. Some kids are going to excel at standardized tests and there are some who are going to struggle. But I don't think it assess their potential or abilities necessarily. It's just assessing one area of their learning."¹³

The special education teachers, however, were much more adamant in their views that this test does not assess their students' true abilities and that the materials are

¹⁰ Interview, 2.

¹¹ Interview, 5.

¹² Interview, 7.

inappropriate in the way that they are presented. A special education teacher says, “I think that some of the material on the test would be appropriate if they were given the modifications that they have had their whole entire life to take tests...I have kids who are extremely bright that I know didn’t do well on the MCAS that I know definitely know the material but because maybe they didn’t understand the question or didn’t read it properly or whatever, they didn’t answer it correctly.”¹⁴ Another Special Education tells of two students whom she monitored last spring:

When I did the long composition test last spring I had one young man who worked from 8:40 in the morning when the whole school started till 4:45 at night because he really wanted to make sure that his essay was done well. That his draft was done and he kept rewriting it and going back to the dictionary to check spelling and really put a lot of energy into that. Another student worked from 8:40 until 2:45, So when you see the energy and how serious these kids are taking it, you just want to nicely say, well we’ll do as much as we can today and if things don’t work out for you, we’ll do this again. Even though this is really upsetting for me to have to put any student through this test.¹⁵

The poignancy of the responses of these Special Education teachers regarding the policies on accommodations that MCAS provides underscores the unjustness they perceive for the SPED students.

Graduation Requirement

In the next section, I focused on the graduation requirement aspect of the MCAS testing. The question that was asked of the teachers was, do you think that the graduation requirement of the MCAS testing is fair? What I found here was more of a split between the mainstream teachers than that of the special education teachers. Out of the four mainstream teachers that were asked this question, two of them felt that that the graduation requirement was unfair. One of the teachers responses was, “No its not. This would be a fair test if there were three or four other components.”¹⁶(In this response he is referring to the idea that the MCAS should be expanded in testing other skills such as music and art).

¹³ Interview, 4.

¹⁴ Interview, 6.

¹⁵ Interview, 14.

The other two mainstream teachers however felt that the accountability of the graduation requirement was important and needed. As one math teacher remarked, “I personally enjoy the accountability of it. I think that for all students, special Ed and regular, it is a goal to obtain. Its something to work towards, there are repercussions for not meeting it and that is a real world application. When they leave here there are goals they have to meet and if they don’t then other measures are taken. So I personally think that having that accountability is good.”¹⁷

The special education teachers however did not feel that the graduation requirement was a fair aspect of the MCAS test. One of the special education teachers said, “No, Cause it doesn’t show all the hard work that they put in throughout the school year to get the grade that they had to work to get.”¹⁸ In her opinion, the special education students work so hard just to achieve the grades to graduate that the MCAS test over looks this and has the ability to immediately decide whether they graduate or not regardless of their efforts. This is true of all students but for the special education students who may or may not have their appropriate accommodations it becomes particularly unfair. Overall, the four special education teachers felt that the graduation requirement was unfair to the special education students.

Exemption & Accommodation

In the topic of exemption and accommodation the research was to look at the teachers opinions of the special education students in general. The question that was asked was, do you think that SPED students should be exempt from MCAS, be allowed more accommodations or are the accommodations appropriate for them? On this topic what was found was that neither the special education teachers nor the mainstream teachers felt that special education students should be exempt from the MCAS. A special education teacher remarked, “I don’t think they should be exempt because the majority of the special Ed partakes in everything else in high school. They take the same tests as the general Ed kids take.”¹⁹ This is important to note because there is growing concern that special education teachers are just trying to get their students out of taking this test. This

¹⁶ Interview, 19.

¹⁷ Interview, 7.

¹⁸ Interview, 6.

¹⁹ Interview, 6.

is not the case and this is the one point that mainstream and special education teachers seemed to agree on.

However, on the question of accommodations there still was a significant difference of opinion. Four out of the five mainstream teachers felt that the accommodations given to the special education students were adequate. A math teacher states, “I haven’t seen an instance where they [accommodations] are not. I’m not really hands on with the administration process. I occasionally proctor but it’s not even with the math exam. I haven’t really come across anything that has been a disadvantage to them but that doesn’t mean that its’ not out there cause I know that calculators are not an issue on MCAS. They can use them on almost any problem and I know that extended time isn’t an issue because they have extra time and then based on the material I know that isn’t a disadvantage either”²⁰

In the case of the special education teachers, all four of them stated that special education students need more accommodations similar to their IEP plan. One special education teacher said:

If I have a special ed kid that is in the tenth grade and has been in special education services for all of his life, three years of his life, two years of his life or whatever. They are used to getting accommodation during testing such as oral clarification of what the question is asking, not providing answers, interpretation. Rephrasing, cueing, those are modifications that work for the kids who have reading comprehension problems, dyslexia, math problems when they are word problems. Organizational problems, such as step-by-step formatting and so forth. These are modifications that these kids have gotten, know they need, use them wisely, and have been allowed to do that. However on one particular test, that is going to determine whether nor not they graduate they are not given those accommodations. That’s extremely unacceptable to me.²¹

The Individualized Education Plan (IEP) serves the purpose of identifying the student’s disability and then addressing what accommodations should be provided to the student in order for this particular student to achieve academic success. These accommodations however are not necessarily allowed by MCAS testing.

²⁰ Interview, 8.

Changes to the MCAS

This leads to the final theme of the research that is changes that should be made to MCAS testing. The interview was ended by the question, what changes would you recommend for the MCAS testing? But the data for the answer to this question was throughout the entire interview embedded into many different questions. This is important to note because it leads into the discussion of why these differences may exist between these two groups of teachers.

In the Special Education teachers, the main problem they saw with the test was the issue of accommodations for their students. This is a major issue with all of the special education teachers, one, when talking about the students taking the test, says:

And often times kids would say well can't you just rephrase this or can't you just read this to me or whatever. We can't do it and its very disturbing to have to say that to a student, number one who knows that they need to have this done, self-awareness, and number two, to have to say to them I'm sorry we've done this for three years with you but we're not gonna do this for you today when this counts. It's very disturbing but we had to say that last year... my first change would be that all students not be exempt from this but this not be the only real criteria basically only counts maybe 10-15% on whether they graduate or not. We persist in saying, we want the whole student, we want the whole person. Even when you apply to colleges, well yes the SAT's count but we wanna know if you were involved in clubs, we wanna know if you were in leadership roles. Quite honestly those are the people I want to graduate from college, who want to be a part of society. Not some person who can take a test very well but not relate to people or be involved with people.²²

In the case of the mainstream teachers, the changes that they want to see in the MCAS were mainly focused on the test itself. The mainstream teachers focus on the content of the test to correct this problem and also focus on the student population who should be taking the test. An English teacher remarked:

I think that the test has changed over the past few years and I think the fact that students did so well on it the last time around according to the preliminary reports

²¹ Interview, 2.

is not surprising. Cause with time, students are going to get more accustomed to taking that kind of test. It's just a matter of becoming more accustomed and the scores will automatically rise. That's true with any standardized test. On the English section, I know that earlier like three years ago, the reading selections were unfair in terms of a reading level for a sophomore but beyond that it got more fair over time.²³

Some of the mainstream teachers feel that the MCAS test needs changing as far as the material in their particular field of teaching. One of the math teachers felt that the content and the areas that were covered in the math MCAS, she says, "If I were part of that process I would just be changing part of the material. I would have it be more of a reflection of algebra and geometry if it's going to be administered in the sophomore year. Other than that I would just change content. My fear is that the whole thing is going to be eliminated cause it's not going to meet what its supposed to meet."²⁴ Others felt that the test timing should be changed. In regards to the math MCAS again, another teacher remarked;

I would have a two-part test. I would have a part of the test that is based on everyday math skills that most people should have with them when they leave high school, percents, fractions, and decimals maybe keeping track of a checking account, simple consumer type problems that might include math. That would one part of the test. The second part of the test you could integrate such topic as algebra, geometry, statistics, graphing, then you could at least look at the results. It doesn't take away from the kid who is the top achiever so I would separate the test. Number two; I would put an earlier requirement on passing it. I wouldn't wait until 10th grade. I would say maybe 7th grade would be an ideal time to give the test but one they would have to pass and at that time they would know if they didn't pass the 7th grade MCAS test they may have to be retained in 8th grade.²⁵

Overall the changes in the MCAS testing ranged from the special education teachers feeling that the biggest change needing to the accommodations that the special education

²² Interview, 3.

²³ Interview, 5.

²⁴ Interview, 8.

²⁵ Interview, 10-11.

students were receiving to the mainstream teachers who focused on the content of the test.

Discussion

Overall, when looking at these different themes it can be seen that the two groups of teachers have very different views on MCAS testing of special education students. So why are their opinions different? There could be many explanations for why this difference occurs. Individual vs. entire class, accountability, and new special education laws could be some of the reasons that apply in this particular case.

Between the special education teachers and the mainstream teachers there is a clear distinction between the ideas of the individual versus the entire class. The special education teachers are more focused on the idea of an individual because that is whom they work with. Their job is to deal with an individual's needs and learning differences. The special education teachers are there to help a student learn about what his needs are, how to compensate and to excel in spite of those needs and how to advocate for himself. This is what they are trained to do. On the other side of the argument however, the mainstream teachers while do focus on the individual in some respects are more connected to the idea of the entire classroom. These teachers focus on the needs of the entire class and not so much on the actual individual student.

This is seen especially in the final section of the changes in the MCAS testing. It is very clear that the changes that were suggested were based on this idea of individual vs. entire class or individual vs. content. The special education teachers tend to focus on their individual students and what the student has to deal with to pass the MCAS while the mainstream teachers tend to focus on the class as a whole and look at the changes to the MCAS test as more of a content and structural problem.

The special education teachers focused on the individual. Their individual student and their individual needs. Since these teachers work one on one with the students and understand what their student's specific needs are, they are more inclined to view the MCAS test on an individual basis. They see the problems with MCAS as affecting the whole group of special education students but they feel the solution is based on the individual. The solution is to accommodate the individual with the specific accommodations listed on their IEP.

The other group of mainstream teachers looks at the MCAS on an entire class and content level. The problems and solutions they had were based on the test itself. The suggestion of changing the content of test was a number of the mainstream teachers suggestion. A science teacher remarked, “The science area of the test I would get rid of the technology section of the test because when we are teaching content specific courses we use a lot of the technology but we don’t use it in a business sense. If they want us to use it in a business sense we have to change our whole concept of what we are teaching. Yet they want that plus the science concepts.” It is clear here that content is one of the main concerns. It is important to say however that while the mainstream teachers are more concerned about the content of the MCAS rather than the individual needs, this is not the case with all of the mainstream teachers. For instance one of the mainstream teachers said:

What I think we have to do is get to the root of the problem which is make a test that would recognize the individual achievement of individual students. We have to recognize that not everybody is going on to college. These tests are great for those who are going on to college. That’s the big problem I have with it. It’s a great test, and if you want to go to college they are a great way to say that you are ready to do that. Something that would show that you attained some level of education outside of academic area. The idea that the kids at a Vo-Tech school would have to take the same test as those in an academically college-prep school is ridiculous. Those kids are learning something completely different and there should be some way to measure their worth. And to say that they are failing is pretty insulting.²⁶

In this case the mainstream teacher looks to the individual and focuses on the individual talents of one person. But on the whole the mainstream teachers did tend to look at the content of the test rather than the individual needs of the student.

Accountability is another possible reason for the difference in teacher opinions. For the mainstream teachers accountability has become one of the more emphasized parts of the teacher process. With the MCAS in effect, the accountability of the teachers has raised a considerable amount. The mainstream teachers are now under pressure to insure

²⁶ Interview, 19.

that the their students do the best as they possibly can on the MCAS because it does reflect on the student, teacher and school. As the one mainstream math teacher said before, “I personally enjoy the accountability of it. I think that for all students, special Ed and regular, it is a goal to obtain. Its something to work towards, there are repercussions for not meeting it and that is a real world application... So I personally think that having that accountability is good.” The SPED teachers are also up against accountability. Their accountability however does not necessarily come from the State. Their most accountability comes from the students they are servicing and the parents of these students. One special education teacher says, “the strongest issue that I have is that when a parents calls me up and says what are u gonna be doing in your learning center in regards to helping my kid pass the MCAS. My response is this, it is not a special Ed issue it is a regular education issue. It is the regular education teachers who will be providing the support, the focus, and the reinforcement for these kids to pass. In terms of special education, if its part of their homework, or what they need to get done for their regular education, that’s where I come in.”²⁷ For her, this is a hard line to walk because her job and her main focus is to help these students understand and learn “what it is they have to do to be successful and number two that they advocate for that, knowing that this is what they need and knowing that this is their right.”. She is accountable to these students in helping them to reach their potential and successfully graduate from high school.

The new special education laws or the enforcement of them over the last 15 years have also made an impact on the special education and mainstream teacher opinions. The special education teachers are now being given more authority over their students and are now more in control of the demands that they can make for the benefit of their students. This does pose some concern on the part of some of the mainstream teachers. One mainstream teacher remarked, “The problem with many IEP’s are that they are so much the same in what the recommendations are for the student that you could almost erase their names off of some of them, intermingle them and you wouldn’t be able to pick them out.”²⁸ And with the raise in numbers of students who require an IEP, the mainstream teachers in some ways view the special education laws with skepticism.

Conclusion

²⁷ Interview, 2.

In all five of these themes, it has been shown that teachers' opinions of MCAS testing differ greatly between mainstream teachers and special education teachers. In each of the categories of school policy, appropriateness, exemption & accommodation and changes to the MCAS, there is a great difference in opinions of the special education teachers and the mainstream teachers. These differences are sometimes extreme as in the school policies and appropriateness to slightly similar opinions of graduation requirements. The reasons of why these differences occur could possibly be due to the individual vs. the entire class, accountability to the school vs. the student and the enforcement of the special education laws. In any case these issues need to be examined further to see if there is in fact a solution to the problem of differing opinions of the teacher.

As I am writing this, there have been new developments in the MCAS testing procedure. The special education students are now being allowed more accommodations for the testing in the Spring of 2001 and are also being allowed alternative assessment of portfolios in replacement of a retest in the case of a failing score. Hopefully, these new developments will allow for the special education students to have better success at fulfilling their standardized testing graduation requirement.

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²⁸ Interview, 8.