

# THE MASSACHUSETTS COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT SYSTEM: HOW IT HAS IMPACTED TEACHERS



By: Tim Dunn

# Background About the MCAS

- ◎ Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS)
  - High-stakes form of examination, which is administered to all tenth grade students in the Massachusetts Public School System.
  - A score of “proficient” or higher is required of each student in the subject areas of English, mathematics, and science order to attain a high school diploma.

- ◎ The MCAS was a response to the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001.
  - NCLB called for a model of accountability in schools and the MCAS was the state of Massachusetts' way of evaluating this accountability.
  - This accountability model has caused the need for blame to be placed closer to the classroom.

# Research Question

- ⊙ How does the high stakes culture surrounding the MCAS test impact teachers and their practices in Massachusetts public high schools?
- ⊙ Reasons for taking up this investigation
  - I went through the MCAS process in high school myself.
  - I saw the effects that the MCAS had on teachers first-hand.

# Thesis

- ◎ The MCAS has negatively affected teachers in the four following ways:
  1. The MCAS has been the cause in a change in classroom practices.
  2. The accountability model that underlies the MCAS has caused heightened stress and frustration levels among teachers.
  3. It has caused an increased concern for student achievement because it solely determines whether a student receives his/her diploma and adds possible incentive for students to drop out of school.
  4. Imparting knowledge necessary for proficient performance on the MCAS is often hindered by negative influences that arise from teaching in an urban environment.

# Methods

## ◎ Qualitative Research

- Interviews were conducted with five teachers (at least one from each of the 4 major subject areas) and one assistant principal.
- All interviews were conducted at the same urban, public high school in western Massachusetts.
- The interviews allow for insight into how teachers of different disciplines view the MCAS, how it affects their practices, and their general concerns about what the test means for the education of their students.

- ◎ Pseudonyms have been used in place of any names of participants.
  - The school will be referred to as City High School.
    - For comparison purposes the school referred to as Suburbia High School is located in a wealthy suburb outside of the city.
  - William is an English teacher and head coach of the boys' basketball and girls' tennis teams
  - Robert is an English teacher and head coach of the football team.
  - Lorenda is a biology teacher.
  - Dorothy is an algebra teacher.
  - James is a history teacher.
  - Steven is an assistant principal.

# Limitations

- ⦿ Relatively short amount of time to conduct original primary research.
- ⦿ Small sample size of participants
  - Given that research was to be done in only one semester the sample is small, however it does allow for more in-depth interviews.

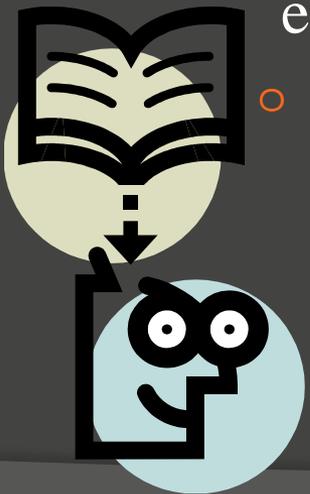
# Relevant Literature

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# Data & Analysis

## 1. The Effect of the MCAS on Classroom Practices

- Valuable class time is often spent honing test taking skills instead of on relevant class material.
  - **“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.” (Lorenda)**
- There has been a noticeable shift from group work and exploratory learning to memorization and drilling.
  - **“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 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.” (Dorothy)**



## 2. Accountability and the Stress It Causes

- The MCAS is often used as a measuring stick to assess teacher quality. This causes a great deal of frustration among teachers.
- **“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.” (William)**
- “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.” (Luna and Turner p. 82)

- The accountability model has often led to invasive administrative policies of classroom observations and “cracking down.”
  - **“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?”  
(William)**

- Another source of teacher frustration includes the cutting of classes or downsizing of classes in order to place a sharper focus on the MCAS.
  - **“The A.P. (advanced placement) history course has been cut from a two year course to a one year course. 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.” (James)**

### 3. Increased Concern for Student Achievement and High School Completion

- Teachers are worried that students who have trouble passing the exam will disengage and drop out of school.
  - “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.” (Menken p. 97)
  - **“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.” (Dorothy)**

- Teachers also expressed great concern for ESL students in particular.
  - **“We always have students coming here who have just moved from Puerto Rico, some of which 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.” (Robert)**

## 4. Difficulties of Teaching MCAS in an Urban Environment

- Teachers frequently referred to a comparison that is often made between MCAS achievement in City High School and the neighboring suburban high school (Suburbia High School).
  - **“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.”**  
(James)

- Poverty and crime that often plague inner-city life provide complications that are nonexistent in suburban schools.
  - **“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.” (Lorenda)**

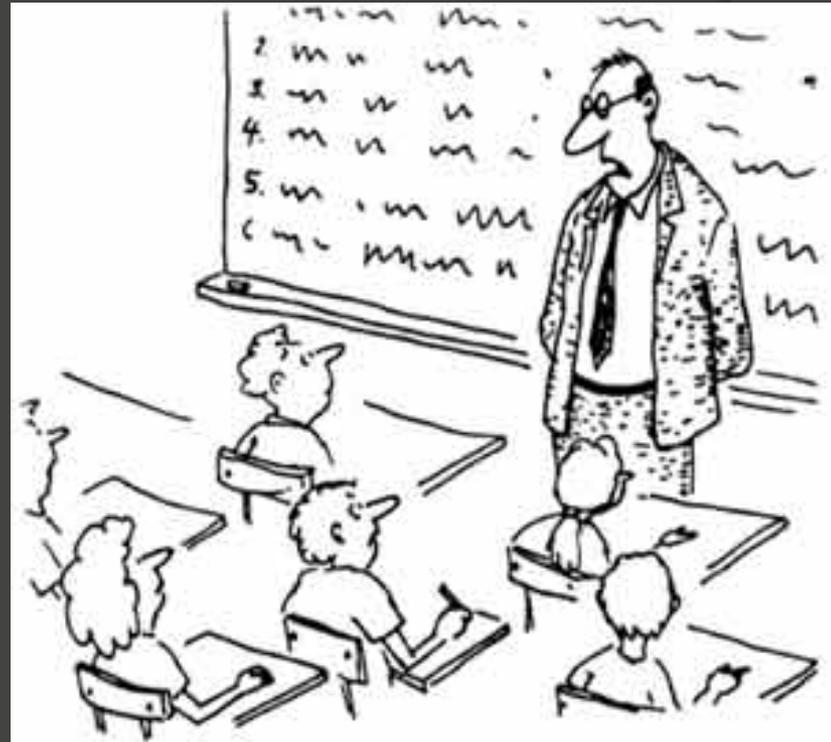
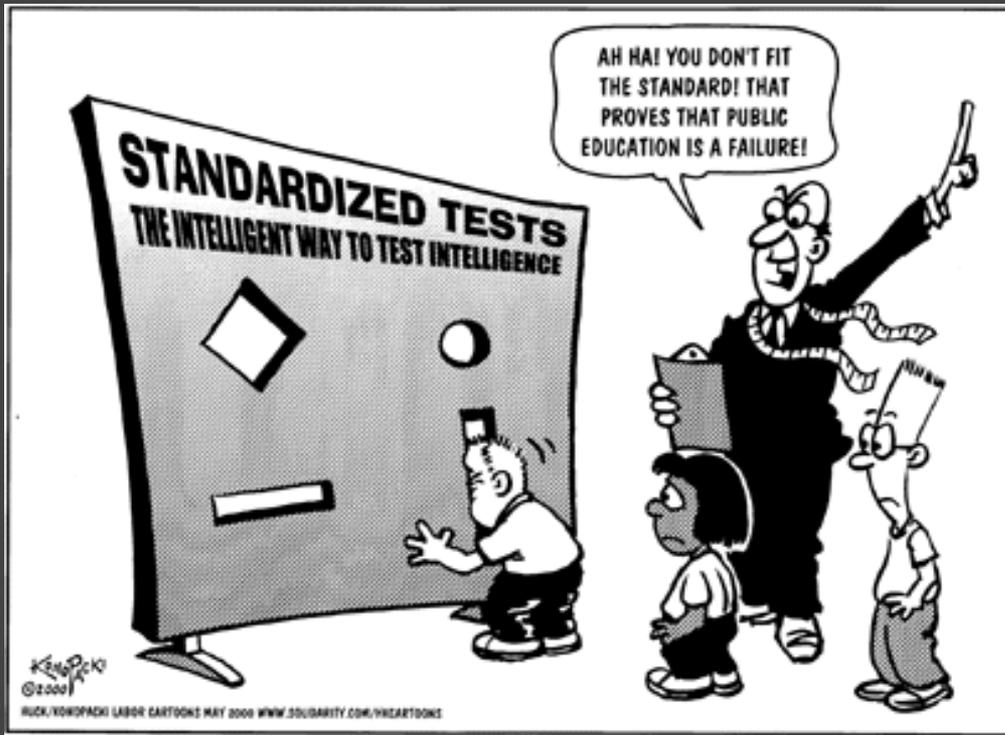
# Conclusion

The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System is one of the most hotly contested issues that the educational system of Massachusetts has to deal with today. Based on these findings we can see that the MCAS has had these effects on teachers:

1. The MCAS has caused teachers to divert their lessons from exploratory learning and group work to teaching to a test.
2. The flawed accountability model that is the MCAS has caused a great deal of stress and frustration among teachers at City High School.
3. The MCAS has caused a greater concern among teachers at City High for the achievement of their students.
4. Complications such as poverty and crime that are often characteristic of urban life have made teaching the MCAS effectively very difficult.

# Message For Future Research

The MCAS is a flawed policy in need of reformation. It is also a policy that has gained a lot of publicity within the commonwealth of Massachusetts. This is why the importance of this study rests on the willingness of scholars, politicians, and educators to take up these findings and delve deeper into them so that solutions to problems or issues that have arisen can be resolved.



*"I expect you all to be independent, innovative, critical thinkers who will do exactly as I say!"*

# Works Cited

- Dunn, T. (2011) [Interview with Dorothy a mathematics teacher at City High School]
- Dunn, T. (2011) [Interview with James a history teacher at City High School]
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