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No Surprises, No Excuses: Tests Our Kids Can Study For

by Kim Marshall

Many parents and educators may not realize it, but Massachusetts is gearing up to give some scary tests to all 4th, 8th, and 10th graders. Dubbed the MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System), the tests will begin next spring, and pretty soon students will not be awarded a high-school diploma unless they have passed the 10th grade test.

The MCAS tests *could* improve teaching and learning, but they could also be unfair to students and damage the quality of education across the state. It all depends on whether schools get detailed information on what to expect in the tests and students have a fair chance to study for them.

Wait a minute. Why should special information and preparation be necessary? Don't the tests cover the regular curriculum we're teaching? That's what I used to think. In my ten years as a principal, I have consistently told teachers that if they taught well and used good curriculum materials and their students worked hard, standardized test scores would go up. But an experience last spring changed my mind.

Teachers and I sat down and took a close look at the tests our students are required to take. We also got an advance look at the fourth-grade MCAS when we joined other Massachusetts schools in giving "tryout" test items to our students in May. On all the tests, we were chagrined to find a significant number of items that we weren't covering in our classrooms. After one of these meetings, I thwacked my forehead and thought, "It's *alignment*, stupid!" Our students certainly can't do well on tests if they haven't been taught all the material.

How could a school *not* be teaching what's on these important tests? What could be more simple or basic? Actually, this kind of misalignment is common in American schools. Here's why. When the people who make standardized tests sit down to write their test questions, they refer to an informal national curriculum that is "out there" in textbooks and curriculum guidelines around the country. The problem is that because there is no official national curriculum, there are many variations on what is taught from state to state and city to city - even in classrooms at the same grade level within the same school. As a result, when many students open up the standardized tests, their reaction is "Huh?" because they haven't been exposed to the same material.

The people who wrote the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 thought they had this problem figured out. Massachusetts first put out a statewide curriculum "framework" for each subject. This is the same document that is being used to write the MCAS tests. So there should be a perfect alignment between the tests and what's taught in Massachusetts classrooms, right?

Wrong. The state frameworks do not spell out a grade-by-grade curriculum. They cover each subject with a fairly broad brush across several grade levels, leaving a lot of interpretation to the 351 school districts and 1,800 schools across the commonwealth.

At this very moment, assessment experts are writing MCAS tests based on the Massachusetts curriculum frameworks. Many students who are theoretically studying the same curriculum are very likely to open up the tests next spring and be unpleasantly surprised by a lot of the questions. And this will be true not just because their teachers covered different content. The test questions may be asked in a way that students are unprepared to handle. For example, students who are prepared for multiple-choice questions will be thrown for a loop by open-ended questions that ask them to write short paragraphs to explain their thinking.

When large numbers of students are surprised by the content or the type of questions on an important test, that is unfair. A good teacher wouldn't give a spelling test without teaching the words and letting students study them in advance. A Registry of Motor Vehicles official wouldn't give a driving test without advance notice of what competencies are expected (you're going to have to parallel park, so you'd better practice or you'll flunk). The same is true for high-stakes academic tests. At the end of a good year, a student who has been taught well and worked hard should be able to open up the test and say, "Hello, I *know* this stuff!"

That's what should happen. But because of the uneven alignment between what is being taught and what will be tested, the "Huh?" factor on the MCAS tests is likely to be quite high (just as it is when students take national standardized tests). This will produce four quite predictable results:

First, the tests will give an unfair advantage to more economically advantaged children. Higher-income kids have access in their homes and communities to a lot of the common core of knowledge and skills covered by the tests. Poorer kids have less access, so they are more dependent on their schools to teach them this common core. If schools are not teaching what is on the tests, poorer kids can't do well, and MCAS test scores will follow the contours of social class.

Second, if this inequitable pattern of test results plays out, it will undermine our belief in the educability of all students and the value of hard work. It will feed the belief (just under the surface for many Americans) that children are *born smart* and intelligence is unevenly distributed in the population by class and race. On the other hand, if curriculum is aligned with tests, all students with access to good teaching can do well, which affirms that students can *get smart* by working hard.

Third, if there isn't a tight alignment between the on-going curriculum and the tests, there is likely to be a lot of frantic last-minute test preparation every spring. Shrewd publishing companies will sell materials that promise "higher test scores" (not to be confused with better student learning). With the hot breath of accountability on their necks, many educators will spend thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours of instructional time on narrow test preparation. Taxpayers should be outraged at this misuse of resources, but it's an inevitable outcome of a high-stakes, low-alignment situation.

Fourth, any mismatch of curriculum and tests will undermine one of the main purposes of the MCAS, which is getting information on which schools are doing well and

which need to improve. If test scores are artifacts of social class and last-minute test preparation, then it will be difficult to tell which schools are really adding value and which are not doing a good job educating their students. This means that the MCAS would not validate and encourage the work of good teachers and good schools and would be less accurate in identifying schools that really need to improve.

So what is to be done? How about a more detailed and prescriptive curriculum, like those in France or Japan? E.D. Hirsch has made a compelling case in his recent book, *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them,* that we need a much more detailed grade-by-grade core knowledge curriculum to provide a level playing field for all students.

But there is a long-standing tradition in the United States against a centralized curriculum, either at the national or the state level. Most Americans believe in local control of education and are deeply wedded to the notion that every school district, textbook publisher, computer software company, principal, and teacher should be able to put their own spin on the curriculum - not just on *how* it's taught, but also on *what* is taught. Given this tradition, the business of agreeing on anything beyond a fairly general curriculum is arduous - witness the long struggle to get the Massachusetts social studies framework adopted. Agreeing on and implementing a grade-by-grade statewide curriculum is simply not going to happen.

But people *do* pay attention to high-stakes tests. What gets tested gets taught. When teachers and principals have a clear idea of what is on the tests, they make sure their students learn it. Consider the Advanced Placement (AP) exams, the New York Regents exams, British O and A level exams, and Japanese national examinations. With all these tests, what students are supposed to know is spelled out in great detail and the exams are set up to see if students have learned what they are supposed to know. Jaime Escalante, the former Los Angeles math teacher, got spectacular results with his inner-city students on AP calculus exams because he knew exactly what the challenge was, taught brilliantly, and inspired his students to work to the point of exhaustion. Tests like these reward focused hard work, give every well-taught student the opportunity to excel, and produce results that are respected as real indicators of student achievement and school quality.

We need to use this approach in Massachusetts. The state department of education should get information about the MCAS to teachers early in the school year and make it sufficiently detailed so that they can align their curriculum with it and students can actually study for the tests. What schools need is:

- The curriculum covered: what do students have to know to answer the questions?
- The kinds of test questions that will be used: what will students be asked to do?
- Scoring guides: by what criteria will students be judged on the open-ended items?
- Exemplars of actual student work: what does top-notch work look like?

Staff at the department of education are working on documents along these lines to inform teachers about the MCAS tests. The effort to produce these "bridge" materials should have high priority and lots of support.

If the details of high-stakes tests are made public, will teachers shackle their creativity

and use rote memorization to "teach the test" day after day? Some nervous Nellies may "drill and kill" in the misguided belief that this helps their students. But good teachers know better; they will use the most creative and effective methods to prepare their students. There is a big difference between *teaching the test* (which is clearly cheating), teaching only *to the test*, which deprives students of the broader curriculum, and making sure students are *prepared* for a test that is a good assessment of what they are supposed to know. It is no more troubling for teachers to get their students ready for an important statewide test than it is for a coach to train and condition an athletic team for a big game.

The analogy to athletic competition is apt, and the big-league challenge of statewide tests could have several important benefits in schools. With an assessment that is known in advance, the work of classroom teachers becomes more focused and strategic (there's nothing like starting with the end in sight to sharpen teaching). In addition, a meaningful external challenge could lead students to work with their teacher the way motivated athletes work with a coach as they get ready for a game.

The external MCAS challenge could also help unify a school's instruction across the grades. Since the MCAS tests will be given only in 4th, 8th, and 10th grades, schools need to tease the test information back into the grades prior to those tested and make sure that the whole school is working toward a common core of knowledge and skills.

Let me take this argument a step further. If the MCAS tests are good enough, and if we are successful in getting a good alignment with what is taught in classrooms, the other national standardized tests that school districts are now using shouldn't be necessary. Schools need an external reality check, but it would be better to get it from a well-aligned state test than from national tests that inevitably have big alignment problems. I believe that a reduction in high-stakes/low alignment testing would help improve teaching and learning. It would lower the anxiety level, cut down the last-minute test preparation, and encourage the development of the most productive kind of tests: low-stakes/high alignment assessments written by teachers that measure students' progress on a month-by-month basis and provide the feedback educators need to continuously improve their teaching. This is the kind of assessment that ultimately makes the most difference to kids' learning.

The key to all this is access to detailed information on the MCAS tests. Publicly releasing this information would lead schools to focus on important common outcomes while still giving them the freedom to pursue local curriculum goals and use the best possible teaching and assessments in classrooms. Most important, it would provide a level playing field, create a fair accountability system, and reward good schools, good teaching, and hard-working students. No surprises, no excuses.

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