**Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents**

***Position Paper***

***Conditions and Considerations* for a New Generation of Student Assessment\* in Massachusetts**

**Introduction**

As the Board of Education reviews its options for the next generation of standards-based assessment, the Commonwealth’s district leaders wish to share our thinking about the salient features of a quality assessment system and the implementation considerations that will ensure its success. As district leaders we respect the value and the complexity of student assessment and we welcome a new generation of student assessment that measures students’ higher order thinking skills and *the* application of these skills. However, we believe that the choice of an assessment system and its implementation timelines must be grounded in a clear understanding both of the purpose of standardized assessment and of its impact on teaching and learning. This appears to be the missing element in the debate over PARCC vs. MCAS. As the state’s educational leaders, we are less concerned with which specific system the state adopts, and more concerned that whichever system is chosen meets the criteria that we elaborate below. We urge you to include us as a key partner in the impactful implementation of this new system, and we strongly suggest that the implementation process be regarded as ongoing in nature with frequent opportunities for feedback regarding the success of our efforts.

**Purpose of Assessment**

It is our professional position that high quality assessment measures student achievement first and foremost in order to inform instruction and improve learning. The new generation of the Massachusetts Assessment should enhance our work by providing timely data that can be used by teams of teachers to identify learning gaps, modify curriculum and adjust instruction. The feedback that we give to teachers and students and the progress that we report to parents and the community help to ensure that all districts and all populations are equitably served. Improved teaching and learning should be the primary “drivers” for this assessment system with district and school accountability, an important but a secondary factor.

***\*The authors of this paper used the word assessment in the title for consistency with the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System. We do however acknowledge that the term assessment is more commonly applied to the broad range of measures including state wide tests, other standardized measures, common assessments and district determined measures.***

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Secondly, the next generation assessment should be a lever for curriculum change with an increased emphasis on the development of higher order thinking skills that allow students to transfer their learning to new situations and problems. This assessment should complement the formative, common, and standardized and performance based assessments that are administered in districts each year. Furthermore, it should help districts align their own common assessments with the more complex learning expectations that characterize the currentMassachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. The content of the assessments should have predictive value with respect to college and career readiness. Ultimately this assessment should ensure that all children in Massachusetts have the benefit of an equitable educational experience setting a bar that is consistent across the State.

The construction of the test items is critical as student responses to these items should provide districts with rich, diagnostic feedback that effectively measures student growth. Frequent discussions among district leaders and teachers and the test authors will be vital if we are to have assessments that are both authentic and well aligned with Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks.

Given these key assessment system purposes, there are important criteria to consider relative to assessment structure and content: frequency and timing, school-based implementation, and state-wide roll-out and a clear understanding by staff, parents and students of the real meaning of these assessments*.*

**Characteristics of a High-Quality Assessment**

Research supports that any high quality assessment system has the following characteristics: Assessment of Higher-Order Cognitive Skills; High-Fidelity Assessments of Critical Abilities; Standards that Are Internationally Benchmarked; Use of Items that Are Instructionally Sensitive and Educationally Valuable; and Assessments that are Valid, Reliable, and Fair.

Measuring higher-order cognitive skills provides an indication of a student’s ability to transfer knowledge and skills to new contexts within a discipline. New assessment systems should target critical abilities such as research, analysis and synthesis of information, experimentation and evaluation, communication in multiple formats, collaboration and interpersonal interaction, modeling, design, and complex problem solving through authentic, performance-based tasks. The assessment should mirror international trends: several examples of current international assessments such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and The Trends in International Math and Science Study (TIMSS) include the assessment of higher-

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order cognitive skills. Scores on a high-quality assessment should represent the impact of curriculum content and instruction, rather than reflecting out-of-school experiences or test-taking skills. Additionally, the assessment should provide a good model with which to influence curriculum and instruction. The assessment needs to measure the content and skills that are intended. The assessment should be designed *so that it* is broadly accessible for all students.

The previous state assessment did not meet all of these criteria and the new generation of assessments shows promise. In this initial time period of test development and implementation, the new generation of assessments and student results should be weighed against these criteria, in order to ensure that the standardized assessment provides the intended value and meets our defined purpose of assessment.

The following questions are offered as a guide:

* To what extent does the new assessment measure higher order cognitive skills through authentic, complex, performance-based tasks such as drawing evidence from multiple sources*?*
* Is the assessment instructionally sensitive where daily classroom instruction prepares students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills?
* Are the assessment items fair and free from bias?
* Can the assessment be adaptive, where students are able to show a full range of what they know and are able to do whether they are performing above or below grade level*?*
* Does the assessment system provide a mechanism to capture student growth over time?
* Do assessment results correlate with similarly valid measures?
* Does the assessment provide a good model for classroom practice?

**Ensuring that the New Generation of Assessment Supports Teaching and Learning**

**Frequency and Timing**

The value derived from standardized assessments should be weighed against the amount of time that it takes away from instruction, both in terms of actual days and hours and in terms of the inevitable disruption to teaching and learning that it creates. The assessment also needs to be administered *after* the expected learning takes place. Finally, the diagnostic results should be available in time to impact student placement decisions and future instruction. Without question, this presents a complex set of challenges, not the least of which are cost related.

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By way of illustration, the present PARCC administration configuration provides for shorter testing sessions but does not adequately address these concerns:

* The time taken from instruction is excessive.
* The amount of time devoted to summative assessment runs counter to the principles underlying Massachusetts Time and LearningRegulations and to the research supported prioritization of formative assessment.
* The proximity of the Performance Based Assessments (PBA) and the End of Year Assessment (EOY) for both English Language Arts and Math disrupts teaching and learning for much of the third and *fourth* academic quarters. ***We greatly appreciate the vote taken by the Governing Board of PARCC to have one testing window with the goal of reducing the testing time by 90 minutes.***
* During this same testing period students in grades 5, 8 and 9th graders in high school are required to take the MCAS Science Assessment.
* The turn-around of test results does not allow for informed student placement decisions, or timely adjustment of instruction, student support interventions or appropriate professional development.

We recommend that the Board make every effort to minimize the amount of time and frequency of any statewide assessment system. We need to recognize that there are a number of districts find the statewide assessment as an important lever to address achievement gaps while other districts may rely more heavily on locally developed common assessments to address their needs for measuring student growth. Any decision on a new statewide system needs to recognize this variability as we seek to reduce the amount of testing time and maximize instructional time.

**Necessary Conditions**

For the next generation of assessment to authentically measure students’ learning the content and skills outlined by the Massachusetts State Frameworks, certain key conditions must be in place:

* Teachers will have had a reasonable amount of time to make the curricular and instructional shifts to the Massachusetts State Frameworks*:*
  + Teams will have aligned existing curricula and learning outcomes with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks.
  + Teachers will have integrated those new learning outcomes.
  + Districts will have identified resources, instructional programs and materials that support the State Frameworks*.*

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* + School districts will have time to receive the funding for the purchase of instructional resources and materials that meet the increased rigor and demands State Frameworks and PARCC Assessments.
  + Districts will have planned for, the funding and implemented appropriate professional development to support teachers’ mastery of theState Frameworks curricula and instruction and of the instructional math and ELA programs that will be used to help to implement the *S*tate Frameworks and Plan for College and Career Readiness*.*
* Districts will have made the instructional shift from an emphasis on recognition and memorization to analysis, problem solving, synthesis and transfer.
* Students will have had practice through classwork, homework and formative assessments to solve complex problems and to apply their learning in new situations.
* Appropriate accommodations such as extended timewill have been identified to support equitable access for all students including students in special education and ELL students.
* An ongoing process should be outlined (to include *the* regularly scheduled release of *test items and technology tools*) and the opportunities for practitioner feedback identified to ensure the selection of authentic, accessible, rigorous, fair, valid and reliable test questions.
* Classroom technology, in the hands of students, should be familiar, used to promote higher order thinking, and equitably distributed. Additionally, the following factors must be addressed by each school district to ensure that we achieve equity across the State as we implement the new assessment:
* the availability of the hardware
* the integrity of the school district technology infrastructure
* the availability of required technology support personnel
* the provision of the necessary professional development
* the integration of technology within the daily classroom practice including the technology based tools associated with the new generation of assessment
* the effective use of technology to support higher order thinking skills
* the successful transition from the paper assessment to the technology assessment.

**Logistical Considerations**

The successful implementation of this high quality assessment must additionally consider:

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* Clearly defined criteria for the selection of test items
* Provide a transparent explanation that demonstrates the correlation between the paper test version and the technology test version of any new generation assessment as well as the correlation between these new assessments and the existing MCAS.
* Develop a process that integrates the internal district determined measures with the new assessment.
* Educate our school community that the initial results may reflect the challenges that are inherent with any new assessment.

**Critical Roll Out Concerns**

If a new generation assessment system, either some form of PARCC or MCAS version 2, is to accomplish the purposes initially identified in this document, how and when it is rolled out are factors almost as important as the character of the test system itself.

Realistically, it will take years of concerted district effort, with an adequate fiscal commitment from the Commonwealth, to achieve all of the preconditions for a successful and equitable implementation of a technology-based system. There must be, accordingly, a phasing in ofthe new assessment system.

* During the initial years of implementation, while the *a*fore-mentioned conditions are being met, *the proposed* assessment results will not be used to calculate the accountability rating, rather they should be regarded as pilot results. It is both unfair and counterproductive to publicize test results when the implementation issues have not been resolved; when the questions have not been vetted by practitioners; and when many districts are only part way into the full implementation of the *State Frameworks* (see above). To publish results prematurely will cause children to feel like failures because they will have been tested on content or in a manner in which they have not had practice.
* During this initial period, DESE can compare and analyze the results from paper and pencil and computer-based tests and devise a plan for addressing the issues that emerge.

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