



Helping your Student Prepare for Tests Spring 2009

Why MCAS?

There's a saying: *You measure what you treasure.* Testing is one way to measure something very valuable—a student's learning. "Assessment" is another word for test. In 1993, Massachusetts set out on a road to educational reform. That year the state passed the Massachusetts Education Reform Act (MERA). Standards for all students and assessment of students' learning are key parts of the law. Here, in a nutshell, is how the reform effort is designed to work:

- The first step is for the state to develop lists of skills and knowledge that all students should know and be able to do as a result of their education. These lists of skills and knowledge are called "standards." Standards mark an important first step toward improving education by raising expectations for **all** students.
- These standards are then used to guide what teachers teach, and students should learn, each year—the "curriculum." Teachers use instructional methods to help individual and groups of students learn the curriculum.
- Assessments, like the MCAS tests, measure how well students have learned the standards. They give students an opportunity to demonstrate what they know.
- The results of the assessments are then used to guide school improvement efforts and to identify student needs and schools that need assistance.

In other words, what students should know, what they are taught, and what they are tested on are all aligned, or linked. This approach to improving education is called "standards-based reform."

In 1997, Congress passed IDEA-97, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. This law requires that all students with disabilities take state tests, and makes certain that these students are given test accommodations. Those students who cannot

take tests, even with accommodations, are offered "alternate assessments," called the MCAS-Alt in Massachusetts. The alternate assessment includes a portfolio of work plus other important materials.

The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) added even more testing for all students. Now, reading and mathematics tests must be given each year in grades 3–8 and once in high school, plus science in elementary, middle, and high school.

The purpose of these assessments is to find out if schools are educating every student in important academic areas. The tests are a way to hold schools accountable for doing a good job by rating them on their students' performance. The tests help identify where schools need to improve their teaching. Students are also held accountable to ensure they are doing their very best. In Massachusetts, students must pass the Mathematics and English portions of the MCAS before they can receive a high school diploma, in addition to meeting all local graduation requirements.

What is MCAS?

MCAS refers to a series of tests given to public school students in Massachusetts that measure students' progress toward meeting state educational standards. Standards are statements of what students should know and be able to do by the time they reach a specific grade level. These standards are spelled out in the "Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks" in seven core academic subjects. MCAS tests are based on the Curriculum Frameworks and are given in the following areas: English Language Arts (ELA), Mathematics, Science and Technology/Engineering, and History and Social Science. The tests consist of multiple-choice, open response, and short-answer questions, plus a writing prompt for the ELA composition.

Why Stanford Achievement Test 10?

The SAT 10, unlike the MCAS, is used to measure a specific student's growth over time. The series of tests, when administered in sequence, allow schools to monitor student progress. BArT uses the results to evaluate the school program and to award scholarships to students for achievement and growth to students in Grades 6-11. (Please ask for information about the BArT Scholars Program)

What is Stanford Achievement Test 10?

The SAT 10 is one of the leading standardized achievement tests used by school districts in the United States for assessing students in all grade levels in various subject areas. The SAT 10 measures the academic knowledge of students. The tests administered at BArT consist only of multiple-choice questions.

Each time students sit for the exam, they receive scores comparing their performance to the performance of their peers across the country. Home reports are sent home after each test administration.

Tips to Help Your Child Prepare for Tests

Parents and families can do several things to create a positive test-taking experience and help students prepare for tests. Here are some ideas:

THROUGHOUT THE YEAR

- Make sure your child gets enough sleep, eats properly, and gets to school on time. During test time, make this a special effort.
- Encourage your child to READ, READ, READ. No activity is linked to academic success as much as reading. Even the math portion of the

MCAS uses word problems to test problem-solving ability.

- Write test dates on your home calendar. The MCAS test schedule is online at www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/cal.html. See the BArT Testing Schedule included in this mailing.
- Talk with your child's teacher(s) often to see what you can do at home to support our child's work in school. Ask for regular progress reports.
- Review your child's previous year's MCAS report.
- Encourage your child to participate in practice-test opportunities
- If your child is having difficulty with a subject, call the school and ask if extra support in that subject is offered.
- Praise your children for working hard and for the things they do well.
- Set times each day for study and homework and give your child a quiet, well-lit, comfortable place to study.
- Ask about homework every day, and check to see that it is completed.
- If your child has a disability, meet with the Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 Team to be sure you understand you child's participation requirements and accommodations.
- Help your child practice MCAS test questions. Review the test together so you will all get familiar with the expectations. (Previous years' MCAS tests are online at www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/testitems.html.)