



## English Language Learners and State Assessments

Tests are an important fact of life for students in the United States! This issue of *Pointers* is for Massachusetts parents of public school students who are new to the United States or who are English language learners. The Massachusetts Department of Education refers to such students as “Limited English Proficient,” or LEP. It defines an LEP student as:

“...a student whose first language is a language other than English and who is unable to perform ordinary classroom work in English.”

This same group of students is also referred to as “English language learners,” or “ELL students.” This issue of *Pointers* describes the statewide assessments these students must participate in, along with guidelines regarding their participation.

### Why are assessments important?

Massachusetts began a major effort to reform education in 1993. One reason the state decided to make major changes in how students were educated was the large achievement gap between different groups of students. Students with limited English proficiency (LEP), in particular, were falling behind other student groups. This same concern also led to the passage of a national law called the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB).

Both the *Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993* and NCLB require that “standards” and “assessments” be set up to help parents and schools support the academic progress of LEP students. If assessments show that a group of students is falling behind, then proper action can be

taken to adjust how they are taught. In the past, average scores often hid the problems that certain groups of students were having.

### What are Standards and why are they important?

“Standards” are statements of what students should know and be able to do in school subjects (such as reading and mathematics) by the time they reach a specific grade level. Each state sets its own learning standards. Massachusetts learning standards in seven academic areas are described in the “Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks.” The standards define the skills and knowledge that students should learn. They let schools know what they should be teaching.

Standards are important. They give families and schools a clear picture of

what students should be learning. High standards also set high expectations for *all* students. Research has shown that students achieve more when more is expected of them.

### How are Standards linked to Statewide Assessments?

“Statewide Assessments” are tests that measure how well students have learned the “standards.” In this way, students are tested on what they are taught. Their instruction is aligned, or linked, with the standards. This approach to improving education is called “standards-based education reform.”<sup>1</sup>

### What Assessments must LEP students take?

LEP students must be included in two types of assessments:

- The state’s assessment of students’ *academic performance*. In Massachusetts, this assessment is known as MCAS—the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System.
- And*
- Assessments of LEP students’ *English-language ability*. In Massachusetts, this assessment is known as MEPA—the Massachusetts English Proficiency Assessment.

Both of these types of assessments are discussed on the following pages.

<sup>1</sup> For more on standards-based education reform, please contact Parents’ PLACE for a free copy of our *Pointers* “Helping your Child Prepare for MCAS.”



# What is MCAS?

MCAS is a series of tests given to public school students in Massachusetts. The federal education law, *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), requires that *all* students take assessments in English language arts and mathematics each year in grades three through eight and once in high school, and science tests in elementary, middle, and high school. MCAS tests are given in these areas:

- English Language Arts (ELA)
- Mathematics
- Science and Technology/Engineering
- History and Social Science (question tryouts only)

MCAS tests include multiple-choice, open-response, and short-answer questions, plus an ELA composition.

## Must LEP students take the MCAS tests?

All LEP students must participate in the MCAS tests scheduled for their grade, *except for one group of LEP students*. Students who are enrolled in a Massachusetts school for their *first* year may be excused, for that year only, from:

- English Language Arts and Reading tests, and
- History and Social Science question tryouts (including U.S. History).

## What language is used for the MCAS tests?

MCAS tests are in English, except for LEP students in grade 10 who speak Spanish and have been in a U.S. school for fewer than three years. These students may choose to take the English/Spanish version of the grade 10 Mathematics test (and the Retest in grades 11 and 12) if they can read and write in Spanish at or near grade-level.



## Are accommodations allowed?

LEP students may use an approved bilingual word-to-word dictionary for all MCAS tests. These dictionaries may not include definitions or other information. (No bilingual or other dictionaries are allowed during the MEPA tests, described on the next page.) A list of Massachusetts-approved bilingual dictionaries is online at [www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/part\\_req.html](http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/part_req.html).

## How do LEP students with disabilities participate in MCAS?

LEP students who are disabled *must* participate in MCAS. They can take either:

- The MCAS test(s), with or without accommodations
- Or*
- The MCAS Alternate Assessment (MCAS-Alt).

As is true for all students with disabilities, it is the Individualized Education Program (IEP) Team or 504 Team that decides how the student will participate in MCAS testing. Their decision must be written in the student's IEP or 504 plan. Parents, of course, are *key members of Teams*, and *Team decisions are subject to parent approval*.

## How does MCAS affect a student's graduation from high school?

There are two requirements to graduate from a Massachusetts public high school. In order to receive a diploma, students *must* meet all *local graduation requirements*. They must also earn a "*Competency Determination*" by passing *both* the MCAS grade 10 English Language Arts *and* Mathematics tests with a minimum score of 220 or higher.

## What happens if my child fails grade 10 MCAS?

Students who fail one or both grade 10 tests will have more opportunities to take a retest in Mathematics and/or English Language Arts before the end of grade 12.

LEP students may also need to continue their education beyond grade 12 in order to gain the knowledge and skills they need to pass the MCAS tests. After grade 12, students who still need to pass one or both MCAS tests in order to graduate can take MCAS retests in English or Mathematics at the school in which they were last enrolled. There is no limit to the number of times a student, or former student, may take MCAS tests.

# What is MEPA?

In 2002, Massachusetts voters steered the education of LEP students away from instruction in their own native language and required immersion in English. The new law (known as Question 2, Massachusetts Chapter 71 A) and NCLB required the state to establish its first test to measure LEP students' progress toward learning English. Now, in addition to the MCAS tests which measure students' academic achievement, LEP students must take the Massachusetts English Proficiency Assessment (MEPA) tests. MEPA tests measure the progress that LEP students are making each year toward learning English.

The MEPA tests are also based on learning standards. These standards are listed in the *English Language Proficiency Benchmarks and Outcomes for English Language Learners*. (Online at [www.doe.mass.edu/ell/benchmark.pdf](http://www.doe.mass.edu/ell/benchmark.pdf).)<sup>2</sup> The "Benchmarks" describe specific skills, knowledge, and concepts that lead to desired "Outcomes" in English ability at specific grade spans. In addition to setting the standards for measuring students' progress, these English language standards are also meant to be a guide to help teachers teach LEP students.

All school districts in Massachusetts must assess the English language proficiency of LEP students each year. Four areas of English-language ability are tested:

1. Listening (understanding)
2. Speaking
3. Reading
4. Writing

The MEPA consists of two kinds of assessments:

- **MEPA-R/W—Massachusetts English Proficiency Assessment—Reading and Writing:** This test measures proficiency in reading and writing. It is a written test that consists of two reading sessions and two writing sessions. The tests uses five kinds of questions:
  - **Multiple choice questions—** Students read a question and pick the correct answer;
  - **Short-answer questions—** Students read a question and give a one-word or short-statement answer;
  - **Sentence-writing questions—** Students answer a question or respond to a prompt by writing one or more sentences;
  - **Open-response questions—** Students read a longer passage then answer a question about it by writing one or more paragraphs;
  - **Writing-prompt questions—** Students write a composition in response to a writing prompt.
- **MELA-O—Massachusetts English Language Assessment—Oral:** This test measures proficiency in both listening (understanding) and speaking. Your child is observed in the classroom by a qualified tester during actual classroom activities. The student receives a score based on his or her ability to speak and understand spoken English.

All LEP students in grades 3–12 must take the MEPA-R/W. All LEP students in grades K–12 must take the MELA-O. (Some exceptions for students with disabilities are listed below.)

## When are the MEPA-R/W and MELA-O tests given?

MEPA tests are given in the spring and fall of each year. Most LEP students take the tests in the spring. Newly-enrolled LEP students, all kindergarten and grade 3 students, LEP students who did not take the MEPA tests the previous spring, and those who are taking MEPA and MELA-O for the first time take the fall tests.

## Who takes the MEPA-R/W?

All LEP students in grades 3–12 must take the MEPA-R/W tests.

## Who takes the MELA-O?

All LEP students in grades kindergarten–12 must take the MELA-O. Some exceptions for students with disabilities are as follows:

## Do students with disabilities take the MEPA tests?

All LEP students must take these assessments. LEP students with disabilities must participate in MEPA tests using the accommodations, if any, listed in their IEPs. Exceptions to these requirements are listed below.

### MEPA-R/W

LEP students with disabilities who need the following accommodations are not required to participate in the MEPA-R/W:

- Braille
- Electronic text reader (although Teams should consider whether a different accommodation, such as reading the test aloud, would be appropriate.)

<sup>2</sup> Parents who do not have access to a computer may contact Parents' PLACE for a copy of this document.

Also not required to participate are:

- LEP students who require an alternate assessment because of their disability;
- LEP students whose primary disability is reported as “deaf or hard of hearing,” and
- LEP students whose reading/writing skills are Beginning to Early Intermediate.

#### MELA-O

LEP students with disabilities whose primary disability is reported as “deaf or hard of hearing” are **not required** to participate in

MELA-O. Students who are hard of hearing and use amplification devices **must** participate.

### How will I know how my child did on the MCAS and MEPA tests?

**MCAS Reports:** Early in the school year, families will receive an *MCAS Parent/Guardian Report* from the school. This Report describes in detail how your student did on the previous spring’s MCAS tests (or alternate assessments).

**MEPA Reports:** Families will receive detailed information about their child’s performance on the MEPA tests in the *MEPA Parent/Guardian Report* sent to the student’s home each spring (or late fall, if the student participated in fall MEPA testing). This report gives a brief overview of the MEPA and describes the MEPA “performance levels” reported for your child.

Both the MCAS and MEPA are important to making sure that LEP students in Massachusetts develop their ability to learn English and be successful in school.

### SOURCES

Parents who do not have access to the Internet may contact Parents’ PLACE for a copy of the online documents.

*Guide to the 2005 MCAS for Parents/Guardians.* (2005). Massachusetts Department of Education. This Guide assists parents in reviewing their children’s MCAS results. It is available online in English and other languages at [www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/pgguide.html](http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/pgguide.html).

*Guide to the MEPA for Parents/Guardians.* (2005; 2006 update

expected). Massachusetts Department of Education. Available in English and other languages online at [www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/epa](http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/epa). (Scroll down to the last item on the page.)

*Requirements for the Participation of Students with Limited English Proficiency in MCAS and MEPA, Spring 2006 Update.* (2006). Massachusetts Department of Education. Available online at [www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/2006/news/lep\\_partreq.pdf](http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/2006/news/lep_partreq.pdf).

### CONTACT INFORMATION

For questions about MCAS and MPEA, contact the Massachusetts

Department of Education’s Student Assessment Services Office at (781) 338-3625, or by e-mail at [ell@doe.mass.edu](mailto:ell@doe.mass.edu).

For questions about the identification, evaluation, and placement of LEP students, contact the Office of Language Acquisition at (781) 338-3518, or by e-mail at [ell@doe.mass.edu](mailto:ell@doe.mass.edu).

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1135 Tremont Street, Ste. 420  
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