



# **Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education**

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Jeffrey C. Riley  
Commissioner

## **MEMORANDUM**

**To:** Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education  
**From:** Jeffrey C. Riley, Commissioner  
**Date:** April 23, 2020  
**Subject:** Proposed Modifications to the Competency Determination Requirement for Current High School Seniors During the COVID-19 Emergency

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Legislation recently enacted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (St. 2020, c.56, §7) waives the requirement in state law to administer the MCAS assessments to students for the 2019-2020 school year. As I previously reported to you, the U.S. Department of Education has approved our request to waive the federal requirement for annual student testing for this school year.

Given this authority, and in recognition that our schools will remain closed for the balance of the school year, I have cancelled all the remaining MCAS assessments, including the MCAS-Alt assessment, scheduled for this spring.

In addition, the legislation allows the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, upon my recommendation, to modify or waive the requirements of the competency determination for high school graduation in order to address disruptions caused by the outbreak of COVID-19 or the state of emergency (St. 2020, c.56, §6). A copy of the relevant sections of chapter 56 is attached.

At the high school level, the MCAS tests are the method by which most students satisfy the requirements for the competency determination (CD), which in turn is needed to receive a Massachusetts high school diploma. Students take the English language arts (ELA) and mathematics tests in tenth grade, with retests available in eleventh and twelfth grades for those who missed or did not pass the tenth-grade tests. Students must also pass one high school science test, currently offered in four different subjects. Most students take and pass a science test in either ninth or tenth grade.

The vast majority of students in the class of 2020 were able to take and pass the required MCAS tests prior to the closing of schools. In 2018, 53,343 (74%) of students in the class of 2020 earned their CD in all three subjects on their first attempt. Following the administration of retests in their junior and senior years, the number of students earning their CD continued to rise. The

recent return of results from the February and March 2020 retests showed that a only small number of current seniors—3,476 (4.9% of the current 12<sup>th</sup> graders)—have not yet earned their competency determination in one or more subjects, with 1,352 (1.9%) needing to pass only one test:

Need one subject	1,352
Need two subjects	583
Need three subjects	1,541

Based on past experience, we estimate that a significant portion of these remaining students will have also not met their district's local graduation requirements. Many of these students will return for a fifth year of high school. Some are students with disabilities who are entitled to receive a free appropriate public education until they turn 22, if they have not earned a high school diploma.

With respect to ELA and mathematics, the March retests were the last official opportunity for seniors to take the test. Some high schools have in the past permitted seniors to take the ELA and mathematics tests when they are administered to tenth graders in late March (ELA) and May (mathematics). Those were among this spring's cancelled tests. Twelfth graders still needing to pass the science test would likely have been planning to take the end-of-course tests usually administered in early June, with results returned in August.

In the post-pandemic era, ensuring that students have the knowledge and skills to succeed after high school will be even more important. At the same time, we want to make sure that no student is penalized because they missed out on opportunities to demonstrate their competence, particularly through retest opportunities.

### **Proposed Modification to the CD Requirement**

Given that there are likely some small number of the 3,476 seniors who would have earned their competency determination had they been able to take one of these cancelled tests, I am recommending that the Board temporarily modify the CD requirement by authorizing an emergency process through which students can earn the competency determination through successful completion of a relevant high school course. This is not intended to be a permanent pathway to earning a competency determination, but rather a temporary measure needed in response to the extraordinary circumstances created by the pandemic.

For current high school seniors, as well as other actively enrolled students who were on track to graduate in the 2019-2020 school year, the competency determination would be awarded in each subject as follows:

- For ELA and mathematics – upon district certification that the student earned credit this year for a course aligned to the curriculum frameworks in the relevant subject matter, and has demonstrated competency in that subject. For students that were not enrolled in a course in the needed subject area during this school year, the Department will examine relevant coursework the district identifies for which the student received credit in

- previous school years.
- For science and technology/engineering –upon district certification that the student earned credit for a course aligned to the curriculum frameworks in the relevant subject matter, and has demonstrated competency in one of the four tested disciplines (biology, chemistry, introductory physics, technology/engineering) in either the current school year or a prior school year.

This emergency process will be implemented when information about students' course completion is available. This will allow eligible students to be awarded the CD over the summer, on the same timeline that would have been in place had they been able to take part in the spring testing opportunities.

We are still considering a range of options with regard to MCAS testing for the classes of 2021 through 2023, who have also missed opportunities to earn their CD as a result of the pandemic. We expect to discuss these options with you at a future meeting.

I have attached a motion for your consideration, to make these recommended modifications to the competency determination for the class of 2020. I look forward to discussing this with you at the April 28 Board meeting.

Attachments: Statutory language  
Motion

ATTACHMENT 1:

[St. 2020, Chapter 56](#), sections 6 and 7

*AN ACT TO FURTHER ADDRESS CHALLENGES FACED BY MUNICIPALITIES, SCHOOL DISTRICTS AND STATE AUTHORITIES RESULTING FROM COVID-19*

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SECTION 6. Notwithstanding clause (i) of the fourth paragraph of section 1D of chapter 69 of the General Laws or any other general or special law to the contrary, upon recommendation of the commissioner of elementary and secondary education, the board of elementary and secondary education may modify or waive the requirements of the competency determination for high school graduation, in order to address disruptions caused by the outbreak of the 2019 novel coronavirus, also known as COVID-19, or the governor's March 10, 2020 declaration of a state of emergency; provided, that any grade 12 student that is unable to take or otherwise complete any assessment administered in the spring of 2020 as a requirement of the competency determination pursuant to said clause (i) of said fourth paragraph of said section 1D of said chapter 69 shall have the opportunity to take or retake the assessment during subsequent offerings.

SECTION 7. Notwithstanding section 1I of chapter 69 of the General Laws or any other general or special law to the contrary, the requirement for a comprehensive diagnostic assessment of individual students under said section 1I of said chapter 69 is waived for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year in order to address disruptions caused by the outbreak of the 2019 novel coronavirus, also known as COVID-19, or the governor's March 10, 2020 declaration of a state of emergency.

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