

Two states scored wins for student achievement. One lost the momentum.

Standardized testing anchored successful school improvement strategies in Massachusetts and Mississippi.

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School reform programs in two states made a single grade's standardized test the cornerstone of student achievement success. (Photo by Spenser Heaps/Utah News Dispatch)

For powerful lessons for improving student achievement more than protecting adult concerns, look to two states that begin with the letter M.

The 1993 [Massachusetts Education Reform Act](#) mandated that high school diplomas would only be granted to those who passed the 10th grade Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) test — along with local district or school requirements. The law exchanged increased standards, metrics and accountability for more money, professional development and curricula. It evolved from a business alliance's bitter complaints about the state's workforce development, articulated in a 1991 report "[Every Child A Winner](#)."

The bar for passing the test was not high, and the state offered frequent re-takes and interventions, or waivers for kids with special needs. The business community held firm when opponents fiercely called this accountability inequitable and even cruel.

And look what happened. By 2005, Massachusetts' students were outscoring all states on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) a.k.a., the Nation's Report Card, in all four academic categories and all tested grades. Since then, the Bay State became the education darling of the nation with a school reform program that used a single grade's standardized test as its cornerstone.

The same approach — increased accountability in exchange for increased support — was adopted more recently in Mississippi where schools overhauled early reading proficiency by shifting the entire state to research-backed, science-of-reading techniques. Nationally, only [31% of fourth-graders](#) are proficient readers. In rankings, Mississippi's kids had always been at or near the bottom. Now the state requires students to pass the [Third Grade Summative Assessment](#), which guarantees that incoming fourth graders can absorb academic content that presumes reading proficiency. And a dramatic increase in reading test scores over the past decade has brought the state recognition for its [Mississippi "Miracle"](#).

Massachusetts invested over a billion dollars, over seven years, to ensure that the state's high school graduates would have diplomas certifying they had at least the 10th-grade academic skills necessary for productive lives. With only half the population and almost double the level of poverty, Mississippi invested \$9.5 million initially and then \$15 million annually, to certify kids' reading proficiency.

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Granted, Mississippi's strategy was more limited in scope, focusing on about 600 schools. Reading-readiness screenings and interventions start as early as kindergarten, but continue only until the end of third grade, when nonproficient kids are held back.

To educate proficient graduating seniors, Massachusetts had to tackle all K-12 years of schooling in 1,800 schools. To do so, the Department of Education created clear standards that would be evaluated by all the state tests for grades three through eight and 10 and guide district adjustments to each grades' expectations and curricula. Helping every grade take responsibility for its contribution to a solid foundation for the next grade was a herculean retooling job.

To an impressive degree, the strategy worked. Even the most challenged school districts saw significant improvements.

Then, in 2007, a new governor, backed and funded by the teachers union and its allies, reduced the accountability side of the bargain. Specifically, Gov. Deval Patrick dismantled the [Office of Educational Quality and Accountability](#), an independent group charged by the 1993 law to conduct detailed school audits with both data and on-site visits. These evaluations were taken “in-house” where the unions and education bureaucrats were in charge.

Leveling off in Massachusetts

As audits became far fewer and less rigorous, Massachusetts test scores quietly plateaued in 2017. By 2019 both their MCAS and NAEP scores had stalled or declined. That same year, Mississippi shocked everyone with its fourth grade NAEP reading triumph — the one and only NAEP improvement in any state — in math or reading, in grades 4 or 8.

The last nail in Massachusetts’ accountability coffin was the 2024 statewide ballot Question 2, which asked if the electorate wanted to end the MCAS as a graduation requirement. Hugely supported and financed by the teachers union and its allies, 58% said yes. Last year, the percentage of students achieving the old pass rate had already dropped 6 points.

I wrestled with my initial repugnance at holding back 9-year-olds for not reading well, but I’ve never had a problem with withholding diplomas from 17- and 18-year-olds capable of earning one. Students themselves need to have skin in the game. Life is full of adversity and challenges; testing has always been a way for young people to learn how to handle stress and, in this case, to take some responsibility for their own futures. [Kids admit](#) to not trying as hard when tests don’t count.

In 2002, 68% of the graduating seniors in Massachusetts passed the 10th grade MCAS on their first and only try. In 2003, when the test counted and after interventions and re-testing, [90% passed](#). Even after the state raised the cut scores slightly later, roughly 96% earned diplomas as seniors. Schools didn’t change overnight; kids got motivated.

Tests should not be the sole measure of success. But after a period of going “test-optional,” colleges are again asking for SAT and ACT scores, objective assessments that cannot be gamed by AI, grade inflation, wildly various district standards or dubious resumes of unverifiable achievements. Paul Reville, a former Massachusetts secretary of education and contributor to the 1993 law, points out that the [MCAS actually promotes equity](#), contrary to what its detractors say, because passing it is race and income-blind.

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Accountability matters. Without a test-and-verify strategy, how would anyone know they’re on the right track to meet a goal? As the stories of two states tell us, we’re kidding ourselves if we think we can achieve difficult goals without putting up with the discomfort of unwelcome news.

We don’t have to get all mean and punitive about poor performance, which is partly why accountability is resisted. The more hard news feels like mere hard information — up to a point — the more chance it has of making substantive, positive changes. **In my decades of experience in education, I’ve never seen any other big school reform strategies that have had such verifiable success. Bring back accountability.**