

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

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Mitchell D. Chester, Ed.D.
Commissioner

February 20, 2014

David Perda, Chief Research and Accountability Officer
Worcester Public Schools
20 Irving Street
Worcester, MA 01609

Re: Student Participation in PARCC Field Testing

Dear Mr. Perda:

I am following up on your request to Attorney Joshua Varon of our legal staff. You asked for clarification as to whether parents can decline to have their children participate in field-testing for the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessment. In short, participation in the PARCC assessment field test is mandatory and not subject to opting out.

PARCC is currently in the field-testing stage as part of the statewide student assessment program required under G.L. c. 69, § 1I. The answer to your question about the PARCC field test is similar to the response that Attorney Varon emailed to you in June 2013 with respect to MCAS testing: State law mandates that all students who are educated with Massachusetts public funds participate in the statewide student assessment program, and it includes no "opt-out" provision for parents to remove their children from participating.

In November 2013, the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education ("Board") endorsed a two-year PARCC transition plan, under which a sampling of students will participate in a field test during the 2013-2014 school year and districts will choose whether to administer PARCC or MCAS in grades 3-8 during the 2014-2015 school year. Field-testing is an essential step in ensuring that a student assessment program is fair and valid. It is also consistent with the Board's statutory obligations, under G.L. c. 69, § 1I, to "adopt a system for evaluating on an annual basis the performance of both public school districts and individual public schools" and to "update, improve, or refine the assessment system." With the PARCC transition plan, the Board has approved a two-year pilot period for trying out the assessment and gathering data about it to determine whether to adopt PARCC as the Commonwealth's new student assessment system.

Under the field test design, approximately 15 percent of the Commonwealth's students in grades 3-11 were selected as a representative sample of the state. With the possible exception of one school district (not Worcester), each student will participate in either mathematics or English language arts, but not both; and a subsample of students selected will participate in the PARCC

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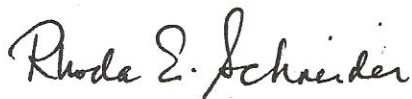
performance based assessment. The Department has offered districts the option in 2013-2014 of choosing not to administer MCAS in a subject to the subsample of students who participate in the PARCC performance based assessment field test in that same subject. This option allows districts to weigh the benefits of additional class time gained by avoiding double testing, against the merits of receiving individual performance scores for those students for the 2013-2014 school year. Students participating in the PARCC field test in one subject will take the non-field test subject in MCAS. In the 2014-2015 school year, districts will choose whether to administer MCAS in both English language arts and mathematics or to administer PARCC in both subjects.

The PARCC transition plan and two-year pilot period provide to a small group of students early exposure to a new assessment system without holding these students personally accountable for the results. Instead, the results will inform the Board in its policy decision, and will provide the Board and Department with the best possible information upon which to evaluate the accuracy, validity, and fairness of questions proposed for a new system of statewide assessment and to make refinements to the assessment as needed. Students, therefore, must participate in the PARCC field test, which is a component of the statewide student assessment program mandated by G.L. c. 69, § 11.

As the Department has explained previously, when the Massachusetts Legislature intends to permit parents to "opt-out" from a specific provision, the Legislature does so explicitly. The statutes and regulations relating to student assessment contain no opt-out provisions. Thus, for the sample of students and schools selected for participation in PARCC field testing, as with MCAS, participation is mandatory. This approach ensures that all students will be tested in all required subject areas during the two-year PARCC pilot phase. It also ensures that after this two-year pilot period, the Board will have the data and information it needs to fulfill its statutory obligation to "update, improve, or refine the comprehensive system" of student assessment in Massachusetts.

I hope this information is helpful to you, Superintendent Boone, and the Worcester school community.

Sincerely,



Rhoda E. Schneider
General Counsel

c: Commissioner Mitchell D. Chester
Deputy Commissioner Alan Ingram
Senior Associate Commissioner Bob Bickerton
Superintendent Melinda Boone