

Department of Elementary and Secondary Education To Allocate \$130 Million To Fund School Programs Addressing Decline in Standardized Test Scores

Education Secretary James Peyser announced that the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) will commit \$130 million in state and federal funds to launch educational programs addressing the continued decrease in [Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System \(MCAS\) scores](#).

“Many students need more time learning, whether it is in the form of tutoring, acceleration academies, early literacy, after school programs or summer learning,” Peyser said in a [Sept. 29 press release](#).

To fund these proposed programs, the Department will use federal money from the [Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief](#) fund and other sources to pay for new programs at the primary and secondary levels.

“We know school districts are using these funds to increase instructional time and implement other proven strategies for improving student outcomes,” Peyser said.

Representatives from the DESE did not respond to requests for comment regarding specific initiatives they plan to fund.

The Department released the 2022 MCAS results on Sept. 29, attributing the continued decrease in English-Language Arts (ELA) scores to adapted learning practices during the pandemic. Compared to 2021, elementary and middle school ELA scores dropped five percentage points and high school scores declined by six.

While MCAS science and math scores saw an overall improvement from 2021, the DESE is concerned that the drop in ELA scores could indicate “challenges in early literacy” at the elementary school level and impact comprehension for middle and high school students.

Tom Leyden, father of a freshman and junior at Westwood High School in Westwood, MA, believes that reading comprehension has been negatively impacted by classrooms’ reliance on technology.

“Children today have many places where they are ‘reading’ material—chromebooks and phones, most notably,” Leyden said. “The number of books being read is on the decrease and children today are not getting a wide range of experiences from a reading perspective. I think this affects students' abilities to read and comprehend but also to apply the lessons and styles learned from reading to what they write on a daily basis. This clearly affects scores on a standardized test.”

Still, the [Massachusetts Department of Education](#) said it has continually updated the MCAS “to better measure the critical skills students need for success in the 21st century.” In addition, the Department sees a benefit in students taking standardized tests on a computer as the medium reflects “the digital world we live in today.”

Leyden acknowledged the importance of digital forms of learning and assessment but worries students have become increasingly reliant on technology. He said he was surprised when his youngest daughter told him she preferred e-learning over being back in person.

“While that never would have been my preference, it certainly opened my eyes to the reality that people learn in different ways and, perhaps, some people actually like the isolation of learning remotely,” Leyden said. “The social aspect of high school can be challenging, and the confusion that alternate learning styles introduced in 2020 and 2021 has made for an interesting, once-in-a-generation dynamic.”

Remote learning technologies enabled students nationwide to continue progressing academically during the height of the pandemic, however, many researchers continue to identify the shortcomings of e-learning. [Data collected by the Associated Press](#) found that the average student lost more than half a school year of learning in math and nearly a quarter of a school year in reading while in-person school was on hiatus.

Some educators continue to criticize the educational system’s emphasis on standardized test scores when approximately 1 million lives have been lost during the pandemic. However, as Stanford education professor Sean Reardon noted when compiling the nationwide data, standardized tests are one of the best measures of child and adolescent development.

“Test scores aren’t the only thing, or the most important thing,” Reardon said in [an interview with the Associated Press](#). “But they serve as an indicator for how kids are doing.”

Even with its lower scores, Massachusetts was once again ranked first in the nation by the National Assessment of Education Progress.

Governor Charlie Baker celebrated this achievement while also identifying potential statewide improvements.

“While students continue to perform well compared to other states, we know that the impacts of the pandemic continue to present challenges,” Baker said [in a press release](#). “Our Administration has made significant investments to help bridge learning gaps from the pandemic, and we remain committed to making sure every student can succeed.”

Leyden said the Westwood School District has reached out to parents and students, encouraging them to focus on content that will be on the next MCAS.

Statewide retests for the MCAS will be held this November and will not have a strict time limit.