

April 4, 2025

To the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide public comment on the proposed regulations regarding the state's Competency Determination (CD) for high school graduation, as outlined in Chapter 69 of the Massachusetts General Laws and reflected in 603 CMR 30.00. As an organization committed to advancing educational opportunities for our most vulnerable students, we firmly believe that a rigorous, uniform statewide graduation standard, coupled with strong state oversight, is essential to ensuring that all students- regardless of zip code- have equitable access to a high-quality education.

As currently drafted, we believe that the proposed regulations fail to fully utilize the authority available to the Department and the Board to guarantee that all students receive a rigorous and equitable education. By shifting primary responsibility for determining competency to local districts, the regulations create the potential for significant variation in academic expectations and graduation requirements across the Commonwealth. This fragmentation could lead to disparities where some students graduate with diplomas that reflect true mastery of academic content while others receive diplomas that do not provide the same level of preparation for college and careers.

The Commonwealth has a constitutional duty to ensure that all students receive an education that meets consistent, high standards. Under existing law, unaffected by the recent ballot question, the Department and Board remain responsible for setting the state's educational goals and standards, ensuring high expectations for all students, and promulgating regulations that uphold these statutory mandates. Without robust state oversight, the Competency Determination risks becoming a mere formality rather than a meaningful measure of student readiness for what comes after high school.

While the ballot initiative eliminated the 10th grade MCAS as the sole criterion for earning the CD, nothing in the law prohibits its continued use by local districts to assess whether students have "achieved mastery." In fact, legal experts have affirmed that the continued use of the 10th grade MCAS in competency determinations is legally permissible. The Department's own proposal to allow the continued use of MCAS for certain student groups further reinforces this point.

Lastly, we strongly encourage the Board to act in a way that anticipates that the Commonwealth, its students, and its schools may be operating under these regulations for some time to come. While we are pleased at the creation of a Statewide Graduation Council, there is no certainty that consensus will be reached or that any further action on a strengthened alternative to the former system will ever be put into place. Therefore, we hope that you will act with urgency to provide greater clarity and structure to the vague legislative language enacted by last year's ballot question in ways that best fulfill your constitutional responsibility to the state's students.

Specifically, we ask that the regulations be updated to include the following elements:

Continued use of 10th grade MCAS as an option for students and districts in meeting the CD:

- We support permitting all students—not just those in narrowly defined categories—to meet the state’s Competency Determination by achieving a “meeting expectations” score on the 10th grade MCAS exam. This aligns with the position of Board Member Hills and reflects a fair and reliable measure of student achievement. Maintaining the MCAS as an option available to all students would ensure students have multiple pathways to demonstrate competency while also preserving valuable student performance data for broader educational insights.
- We urge the Board to allow each district, at its discretion, to use a passing score of “meeting expectations” on the 10th grade MCAS as a valid method for students to fulfill the state’s Competency Determination—whether in whole or in part. This should be a universally available local option, independent of any additional requirements beyond local graduation criteria. This approach would provide a necessary safeguard as districts work to review and realign coursework with the state’s curriculum frameworks, a process that may take several years. Furthermore, it would allow time for the proposed Statewide Graduation Council to explore and develop robust alternative competency measures. Again, we believe that there is nothing in current or previous statute that prevents the Department from permitting the use of MCAS as an alternative method for students and districts to demonstrate mastery and successful coursework completion.

Strengthened Coursework Standards and Grading Policies

If coursework completion is to serve as a central measure of competency, the state must ensure such coursework is rigorous, aligned with state standards, and assessed in a manner that reflects actual student mastery. However, under the proposed regulations, districts could set widely varying coursework and grading requirements, leading to inconsistencies in what a high school diploma represents. To uphold academic integrity, we recommend the following:

- The Department should set a standard for the quality and rigor of the coursework it requires by establishing, at a minimum, that each of the courses contain at least 80% of the standards identified for those courses in the state curriculum frameworks. This is necessary for ensuring quality but also for identifying how the Department, through its proposed audit of the coursework, will determine if the coursework aligns with the standards in the frameworks.
- It is not enough to audit the proposed coursework curricula. The Department needs to develop a process for ensuring, either through a review of students’ assessments or other means, that the proposed aligned content was delivered to students. This could be accomplished through a random auditing of schools and districts that could include sampling student performance on selected standardized exit exams that could demonstrate whether content was delivered effectively.

Without these safeguards, there is no assurance that students across different districts will have equitable access to similarly rigorous coursework, which risks widening existing educational inequities.

For these regulations to be effective, the Department must take an active role in ensuring that districts uphold high academic standards. In order for the regulations as proposed, to be effective, there must be a mechanism for the state to identify non-compliance and to intervene where necessary. Again, we believe that this level of oversight and intervention is clearly required and spelled out in both the state constitution and in various court cases over the last several decades where it has been clear that the responsibility to ensure equitable access to quality education and high expectations for all students rests with the Commonwealth. Anything else renders these proposed regulations as nothing more than “guidance.” As such, we recommend:

- Requiring Department approval of district CD plans to ensure they meet rigorous standards
- Conducting regular audits of the courses required for students to complete their CD to ensure the content aligns with a minimum of 80% of the standards in the state curriculum frameworks for those courses.
- We support the plan to collect and report on data that attempts to correlate student GPA with MCAS scores as a way to assess the extent to which the divergence between local grades and MCAS scores may correspond to flaws in local grading policies. We think this information should be made readily available to parents and the public at large if a determination is made that the divergence is significant and indicates a lack of confidence in local grading policies.
- Requiring any district found lacking in the alignment of their CD coursework with 80% of the framework standards, or if data suggests that there is a substantial divergence between local grading policies and student MCAS scores, to utilize 10th grade MCAS scores as their CD determinant until such time as they have corrected the defect in coursework, implementation or grading. Additionally, districts identified through auditing as being deficient in any of these aforementioned areas should have said deficiencies addressed.

We feel strongly that the Department should retain the requirement that students be placed on Educational Proficiency Plans (EPPs) if their 10th grade MCAS scores indicate that they are not meeting grade level expectations. EPPs provide essential structured academic support for students who do not initially meet MCAS benchmarks, ensuring they receive targeted instruction to address gaps in their learning. While the 10th grade MCAS scores can no longer serve as the sole criterion for earning the CD under the ballot question, this should not obviate the use of EPP plans as a tool to help struggling students. These plans are essential to ensure, particularly as we work toward a new statewide graduation standard, that we don’t allow students to fall through the cracks in this interim period.

Eliminating EPPs without a robust replacement system means that struggling students—many of whom are from underserved communities—could be left without the additional supports necessary to help them meet graduation requirements. Educational Proficiency Plans, as utilized here, should include:

- Required coursework tailored to address deficiencies identified in the 10th grade MCAS exam along with any other supports such as tutoring or additional services;
- A process for tracking student progress and delivering regular updates to students and families; and
- A final assessment by the district as to whether the student met the 10th grade standards upon expected or actual graduation.

We also support the following provisions in the proposed regulations:

- **MCAS as an Equivalent Option:** For students who face barriers due to missing transcripts or recent district arrivals, MCAS should remain a valid alternative for demonstrating competency. We recommend that any other proposed equivalents require Department approval.
- **Inclusion of U.S. History:** We support the introduction of a U.S. History requirement for the class of 2027.
- **Local Governance and Transparency:** We support the requirement for local governing bodies to formally vote on CD options within the framework set by the Department and to ensure that all state and local standards are publicly posted and communicated to families.

Lastly, we express our strong support for the addendum regarding the use of the 10th grade MCAS as a pathway for students to achieve their CD. While we have already addressed this earlier in our comments, we wish to explicitly endorse this proposal, which the Department issued separately from its initial set of regulations.

The Board has a critical responsibility to ensure that all students in Massachusetts receive an education that prepares them for future success. Weakening the role of MCAS without establishing an equally rigorous statewide alternative risks undermining the quality and equity of our education system. We urge the Board to act decisively in strengthening these regulations to uphold the Commonwealth's long-standing commitment to academic excellence.

Thank you for your consideration,

Jennie Williamson
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