

BOSTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS



OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT

MEMORANDUM

TO: Chairperson and Members
Boston School Committee

FROM: John P. McDonough
Interim Superintendent

DATE: September 17, 2014

SUBJECT: PARCC Recommendation

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) has given Districts the option of either participating in PARCC assessments in all schools this year, continuing with MCAS in all schools, or selecting a combination of the two. This is an expansion of the PARCC pilot program that included a subset of grades in more than half of our schools last year.

After consulting with our Academic and Operations teams, our school leaders, and with DESE, I am recommending to the School Committee that BPS administer the PARCC assessment in all schools this year. Students in 10th grade would continue to take the MCAS for graduation purposes. We have already informed all families of our recommendation via our back-to-school letter, which was translated into all major languages and distributed to students a few days after school began.

Our efforts to eliminate achievement gaps are strengthened when we accurately measure academic performance in ways that are connected to what our students are learning. With the shift to the MA Curriculum Frameworks, which set new expectations for student learning, we believe the PARCC assessment is a more comprehensive tool than MCAS for this purpose. While DESE is still evaluating whether to replace MCAS with PARCC, it is clear that Massachusetts will soon adopt a next-generation assessment that is aligned with Common Core standards and online learning.

As a District, we must ensure our students, teachers and schools are ready for this next generation assessment sooner rather than later. Put simply, this is not a decision about whether to transition to a new assessment - it is a decision about whether to transition well.

DESE recognizes that this is a transition year and has informed us it will hold PARCC schools harmless in 2014-15¹. This means that school accountability levels would not be negatively impacted if there is a significant swing in performance when comparing legacy MCAS and new PARCC assessments. While this provision does not apply to Level 4 schools, given where Boston's Level 4 schools are in their turnaround lifecycle we do not anticipate BPS schools being considered for Level 5 status next year. At the same time, BPS (including teachers and parents) would have access to school- and student-level PARCC assessment results, which we would use to inform academic decisions.

This would allow our schools to conduct the PARCC assessments in a low-stakes environment for one year. Our students, teachers and schools would have the opportunity to prepare for and conduct a new assessment before the tool is used for accountability measures. If we were to take the alternate approach and offer MCAS in some schools, then these schools could be at a disadvantage in the following school year when they would be expected to administer PARCC (or some other next-generation assessment) for the first time in an environment that would be used for state accountability metrics.

As we have said before, we prefer to offer the assessment online as opposed to on paper. While our investments in technology devices and infrastructure over the last few years will make us "PARCC-ready" from an operational perspective, it is just as important that our teachers and schools embed technology in every classroom for every student well before "test day." In schools that are still building their approach to technology or where we have concerns about our ability to fully support a school's program this year, we may recommend a paper version for now, although our preference will be an online assessment. If the School Committee agrees with our recommendation to offer PARCC in all schools, we will assess and then make decisions regarding particular schools and grades in October. Our current investment of 10,000 Chromebooks this year, combined with additional allocations for student devices and infrastructure upgrades in FY15, will help in the determination of a school's readiness for an online assessment.

Parent and family engagement is just as important as technology as we transition to a next-generation assessment. If the School Committee supports our PARCC recommendation, our Office of Engagement will work with schools to supply toolkits that school leaders and teachers can use this fall to help families and students know what to expect. This would give our schools the ability to lead the way in these important conversations this fall and winter.

We have already begun to work with teachers to ensure that educator voice is included in our planning and preparation for a transition to PARCC. Our Academics teams have been preparing

¹ This provision does not apply to Level 4 schools. The Commissioner maintains the discretion to designate these schools as Level 5 regardless of the assessment administered.

for PARCC (and, more specifically, Common Core standards) for several years and have adjusted our entire approach to curriculum and instruction so our students can be ready to succeed -- not just on an assessment, but in college, career, and life.

There will be growing pains regardless of when we transition to a next-generation assessment at scale. There will be challenges we have not yet anticipated but which we can learn from. This is why it is important to move forward as much as possible this year, before the assessment is used for accountability measures in 2015-16. Our ultimate goal is to ensure our District can assess student learning in a way that is accurate, consistent, reliable, actionable and fair. By shifting to PARCC this year we put ourselves, and most important our students, in the best position for success.