

**MCAS, NCLB and AYP**  
**By Dr. Barbara Dunham, Superintendent of Schools.**

Sharon does very well on MCAS tests and is annually cited in the top 10% of schools in Massachusetts. The curriculum in Sharon is aligned with state standards and the MCAS test is an assessment of that alignment. The questions that are raised by an upcoming Public Forum on MCAS have to do with whether the state standards align with skills required for success in the 21st century. Those skills include the ability to collaborate, think critically, process data and produce new ideas, communicate well, think divergently and creatively, accept diverse cultures and beliefs, work with technology and show self-direction and leadership. These skills are difficult to measure on any standardized test and must be included in classroom instruction and assessed as part of the daily curriculum.

The difficulty arises when time becomes so precious that choices must be made regarding time and emphasis in the classroom. It is exacerbated when No Child Left Behind (NCLB Act of 2001) demands that all students must be "proficient" on state-mandated tests such as MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System). Massachusetts has set the proficiency standard at a score of 240 on MCAS for the class of 2010 and further determined that every child must be proficient on each and every MCAS test they take each year in grades 3-10, with grade 10 being the culminating testing activity that determines whether a student will be eligible to graduate. Given the pressure of having every child measure at a proficient level, public schools scramble to align curriculum, teach the material and may become overly focused on the MCAS test and the results that are published far and wide, ranking schools and districts against one another.

Improvement on MCAS is measured by AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) which is a relative measure that answers the question, "Did the group improve from 2007 to 2008 so that it is on track to 100% proficiency by 2014?" The various subgroups that are considered by AYP must have 40 or more students in the aggregate and are defined as Hispanic, Limited English Proficient, Special Education, White, Low Income, African American/Black, Asian or Pacific Islander or Native American. What is not apparent to most parents and staff is that this AYP "improvement" measures the performance of different groups of children who are in the specific grade level that is being tested each year. It does not show learning growth of the same student from year to year. And the AYP determination is based on a mathematical calculation that is a function of the goal that every child will score proficient on all MCAS tests by the year 2014, which at best is a hurdle that is not possible for every single child at every single grade for every single MCAS test. Children are individuals and simply need some wiggle room to develop and learn at different rates.

"According to the preliminary 2008 results, 88 districts (23 percent) and 828 schools (50 percent) are on the state's 2008 list of districts and schools in need of improvement because they did not make AYP for two or more consecutive years. The 828 schools are

spread across 243 districts." [Dept of Elementary and Secondary Education] Heights Elementary is one of those schools.

To increase the pressure and to measure AYP, the state determines where each and every school and subgroup ranks on the "proficiency continuum" that will move every child to a score of proficient by the year 2014. AYP is determined by four factors including participation in the MCAS test, performance at or above the state target, improvement by meeting the local improvement target established by the DOE and additional indicators for attendance and graduation.

The local improvement indicator is the AYP score that represents 100% proficient minus the proficiency score a school received in a subgroup in 2007. The result is then divided by 7 which represents the number of years between 2008 and 2014. District AYP determinations are based on grade-span results (grades 3-5; 6-8; 9-12). Positive results for all groups in any grade-span yields a positive AYP determination.

In FY2007, one Heights subgroup scored 79.2% proficient in Language Arts. This was subtracted from the goal of 100% proficient by 2014. The result is a 20.8 percentage point difference that is then divided by 7 years. The 2.9% that resulted is the AYP that one subgroup of Heights students need to improve by each year in Language Arts. Schools and districts that do not make AYP for two or more consecutive years in the same subject are identified for improvement, corrective action, or restructuring to focus efforts on improving student performance.

In 2008, with the fifth graders from 2007 now in grade 6 and the second graders from 2007 now in grade 3, the average score (for the same subgroup) for a now-different group of students in the same grade span 3-5 was 75.6% proficient in Language Arts. This was a loss of 3.9 percentage points compared to the 79.2% that a different group of students scored in 2007 for Language Arts.

As a point of comparison, while the Heights subgroup scored 75.6% in language arts for 2008, the same Cottage subgroup scored 70% in language arts and the East subgroup scored 83.7% this year in language arts. These variations should be expected as students move in and out of grade levels.

Because the subgroup of students at Heights in the grade span 3-5 did not improve by the required 2.9% each year for two consecutive years, Heights has been put on a "needs improvement" status with the state for its Language Arts scores. This is in spite of the overall population at Heights scoring 92.7% proficient which placed Heights in the top 12% in the state in grade 3, top 11% in grade 4 and top 8% in grade 5 for Language Arts. Heights also placed among the top scorers in math and science as well. Please check MCAS score on the school website at [www.sharon.k12.ma.us](http://www.sharon.k12.ma.us). These scores and other Heights

accomplishments should be emphasized when considering how important is this new determination by the state.

- AYP does not look at the same group of students from year to year.
- The comparison groups that are used year to year are not the same students and depend largely upon who is enrolled in the school in any given year in grades 3-5.
- The ability to meet AYP is not a measure of individual student improvement and not even a measure of the ability of the same group of students to improve.

Additionally, if a school is running several in-house special education programs, that school will have a difficult time getting all students in that subgroup to a proficient level.

It would be easier to accept MCAS as a tool for schools if it required proficiency only in time for graduation and the grade-by-grade tests were used as "progress reports". It might be then a more helpful, formative tool. Children need to have room to learn over time, and not simply move lockstep and in-line each year stressing out as they struggle to see a score of proficient on this one test. The way MCAS is administered serves only to cause "teaching to the test". Schools need to be interesting places to learn and the end product should be a Sharon graduate with both the skills defined by the state as important and the love of learning based in the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills upon which Sharon prides itself. This would represent something more that we can all support and get behind.

I would support any proposal that takes up this issue with the state and the federal government and moves forward to address the manner in which NCLB is reaching into our classrooms and mandating AYP with impossible goals and without so much as a hint of funding this impossible mandate.

It is my professional opinion that children learn at different rates and that a school cannot expect that all children will be proficient every year on an annual test. The comparison for AYP does not look at a child's individual improvement which should be the focus of good schools. It is instead, looking at how grade 3 this year did compared to grade 3 last year, on a similar test but with different children, different abilities, different challenges. One cannot expect to put this kind of stress on our children and our teachers and not change the cost of schooling or the manner in which schools operate. It is simply not a realistic bar for schools to jump over and it does not align with what should be the goal of every school district: Nurturing proficiency with 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and creating learning environments that promote the love of life-long learning for each and every child.