

Guest column in The Republican Metro-South plus

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Education reform remains on right track

Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) is the poster child for Massachusetts educational performance, but it is only a small part of our state educational system. As education reform celebrates its 10th anniversary this year, it's the right time to take a look at the reforms and the test that measures them.

The idea of education reform may be as old as public education. States pass laws every year to improve public education. Massachusetts passed the latest law 10 years ago, and this time, Massachusetts is getting it right.

Previous attempts at reform often began and ended with the promise of more money. The conventional wisdom said more spending would take care of diminishing student performance in our schools. The premise began to change in Massachusetts in the 1990s when a new education law was enacted.

Ten years later, our fourth-graders are leading the nation on reading scores as measured by National Assessment of Educational Progress. Eighth-graders rank second in both science and writing. Our rising Scholastic Aptitude Test scores are among the nation's highest, and our schools have been singled out for national recognition for their performance.

Passage of the law required the public to trust their lawmakers, have faith in educators and believe in our children.

The Legislature kept its promise to provide additional state aid for public schools. More than \$4 billion in new state funding has been sent to school districts in the past decade.

Educators are attaining new standards for teacher certification, following a set of curriculum standards and meeting new measures of accountability for teaching the curriculum.

Students are responsible for learning the curriculum, and their high school diplomas depend on demonstrating their learning on the MCAS tests.

MCAS is the bottom line, the measure of success for educators, children and the entire education reform campaign. It raised expectations for all students and demonstrated that youngsters can meet those expectations. Children with special needs may even gain the most from the law because schools can no longer ignore their educational needs.

The test has evolved from a grueling 15-hour marathon for grades 4, 8 and 10 to a shorter test at many grade levels. Required passage of the 10th grade test for a high school diploma is a constant, though that requirement has been modified.

What are the results? Educators in local schools say their entire staff begins the school year with a new seriousness of purpose. They know the curriculum they are responsible for teaching their classes. One teacher reported with pride that her eighth-graders, including those with special needs, had all passed MCAS.

In the early MCAS years, 10th-grade results were awaited with trepidation. Many students were failing and we knew the class of 2003 faced passage of the MCAS test as a graduation requirement. But a funny thing happened on the road to 2003.

When the tests "counted" students performed better. And if they did not pass the first time, many students took advantage of extra tutoring and passed a second or third test session. The state made accommodations for special-needs students and created an appeal process that allowed students to submit alternate information to prove their knowledge.

Statewide, 95 percent of the class 2003 passed MCAS, and an amazing 80 percent of special needs students passed MCAS and received regular diplomas. Locally, the percentages are: Longmeadow and East Longmeadow, 100 percent; Monson, 99 percent; Minnechaug, 97 percent. Springfield had a 80 percent pass rate, a percentage that has already been matched by the class of 2004.

The state has shown that the combination of hard work, financial support and clear objectives can improve educational results. Congratulations to the dedicated professionals who have embraced the tough standards of education reform and to the children who are meeting the standards.

Our progress is challenged this year by the state's fiscal problems and its reduction of school aid and tutoring assistance for at-risk students, but we must stay our chosen course. By keeping our focus on the funding and performance of public education, we are a leader in achieving the national goal to Leave No Child Behind.