



News Coverage

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[Schools consider future of graduation requirements following MCAS ballot vote](#)

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The ballots have been counted and the results are in: MCAS is no longer a requirement for graduation. But what does this change mean for students in Franklin County?

“No one has a full-fledged plan yet,” said Martha Thurber, chair of the Mohawk Trail Regional School District School Committee. “Everybody’s still working out what this means. We still have a level of standards students have to meet and we have to make sure students are prepared for life after school.”

The measure eliminated the requirement that a student must pass the 10th grade Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) exam in mathematics, English, and science and technology to receive a high school diploma.

Fifty-nine percent of voters statewide voted in favor of ending the mandate compared to 41% who voted to keep it in place.

An even higher portion of voters supported removing the graduation requirement in the 30 communities in Franklin County and the North Quabbin region, where 69.8% voted “yes” and 30.2% voted “no.”

“As educators, we believe in high standards, not high-stakes testing,” David Conlon and Maya Jalbert, co-presidents of the Mohawk District Education Association, wrote in an email. “A one-size-fits-all approach like MCAS does not work for all students. Students should be able to attend school without the fear and anxiety about whether they will pass MCAS and graduate, or not.” Thurber said she is not worried about the quality of students’ education, as pupils still need to pass a certain number of classes with curriculum guided by state regulators. Students will still take the MCAS next spring and in future years; their passing the test just won’t play a role in whether they graduate.

So, what will serve as the competency determination now? Schools are not sure.

Thurber said she and other school committee members will follow guidance from the state as the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) comes up with a plan.

DESE sent a memo to superintendents and school committees on Nov. 6 saying that “guidance on certification” of competency would be coming soon.

Greenfield School Committee Chair Glenn Johnson-Mussad said that although Greenfield’s public schools will continue to administer the MCAS test, he believes that removal of the test from graduation requirements will facilitate education, allowing them to teach curriculum in a way that isn’t shaped by standardized testing.

The committee voted unanimously to approve a resolution in support of the ballot question prior to the election.

“We can find ways to assess students and meet their educational needs without these high-stakes tests,” Johnson-Mussad said. “In fact, I think it will help teachers to have more flexibility to be able to reach students with the programming they need in the way that they can best respond to.” Pioneer Valley Regional School District Superintendent Patricia Kinsella said she does not believe passage of the ballot question will have much of an impact in the Pioneer district, noting that very few, if any, students fail to graduate due to the MCAS.

“We already require that students take a number of courses — kids need to take four years of English, they need to take four years of math, they’ve got to take three years of science, three years of social studies. All of those requirements are in place and they will continue,” Kinsella said. “Our district has very few students who need to go the route of a competency determination because they failed. MCAS is not a large issue for our district.”

Like Thurber, Elizabeth Zielinski, superintendent of the Ralph C. Mahar Regional and Union 73 school districts, said it’s a wait-and-see situation until DESE determines any new graduation requirements.

“We don’t know if the state is going to require something else,” Zielinski said. “We don’t know yet.”

At Thursday’s Mahar School Committee meeting, Principal Scott Hemlin said administration is examining the school’s attendance rate relative to graduation, as the current loss-of-credit policy mandates that there are a maximum number of unexcused absences that students are allowed. “I’m putting a group of individuals together to look at this to see if there’s a better way to do this,” he said. “Some schools have actually stepped away from linking attendance and credit entirely, where there’s no link between the number of classes you missed and credits — your credits are earned simply by passing the course. A lot of schools have gone this way because of the accountability piece.”

Hemlin also mentioned there are credit-recovery opportunities for students.

“So we have safety nets for kids to restore those credits,” he said.

Hemlin said current graduation requirements are based on MassCore, a state-recommended program of study intended to align high school coursework with college and workforce expectations.

Franklin County Technical School Principal Brian Spadafino told the Franklin Tech School Committee on Wednesday that the school will still seek to have the exam be an accountability measure, even as the graduation requirement is removed.

“We encourage our students to try their best and to give it their best effort,” Spadafino said. “Encourage them, and tell them that it’s really about us and what we’ve taught them.”

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