

## HOW TO HANDLE MCAS SCORES

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With the **MCAS** tests mired in politics and controversy, it's no wonder parents are bewildered, frustrated, and angry. But with individual test scores not due to arrive in homes until the end of this month or the first week in December, we still have time to shift our focus away from our schools and onto our children:

As parents, how can we keep the scores in perspective so they don't undermine our children as learners? The most damaging potential outcome from the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System isn't that a school scores badly or even that a child does. What's more important by far is the conclusion each and every child comes to about himself or herself: Am I a person who can learn or not?

"At one extreme are kids who feel defeated by the test and incompetent as a result: 'I can't do this, why bother?' " says educator Lowry Hemphill of the Harvard Graduate School of Education. But even students who score well are at risk.

"They can have a false sense of reassurance about their skills and not recognize an area they need work on," she says.

Perhaps the best advice for parents comes from educator Deborah Meier, a MacArthur fellow and founder and principal of the Mission Hill School, a Boston public pilot school. "Try to remember this one thing," she tells parents: "This test is just one piece of evidence of your child's learning abilities."

Parents seemingly have no difficulty keeping that in mind for nationally standardized tests such as the Stanford 9 or the Iowa Test. But MCAS comes with more baggage. The tests are longer, 17 hours typically spread over two weeks. They cover a wide range of material: Fourth-graders, for instance, had questions covering hundreds of years of North American history. And, perhaps at the crux of the problem, teachers' raises and school ratings are tied to the scores.

"There's never been such a high-stakes test where so many decisions are based on the results," says early childhood educator Diane Levin of Wheelock College. Indeed, the stakes are so high that one community last spring considered pulling out of the METCO program because the city students who were bused there were thought to be pulling down the town's MCAS scores.

Mandated by the state Department of Education, MCAS was administered for the first time two years ago to fourth-, eighth-, and tenth-graders. The scores were abysmal. For instance, of the fourth-graders, 80 percent failed or needed improvement in English; 67 percent failed or needed improvement in math; 52 percent failed or needed improvement in science. Scores for eighth- and tenth-graders were as bad or worse.

There are predictions that this year's scores will not be as low, but kids hear the news just as we do, and they're the ones, after all, who took the tests last spring and came home crying about them. They're primed to expect the worst. Which is why when the envelope arrives,

educator W. James Popham suggests not opening it in front of your children, lest your face register dismay. It's also why he says your first words to your child should be a disclaimer: "I want you to know that no test measures with accuracy or precision how much you know or how much you've been taught."

Hemphill suggests not sharing scores with your children except in a general way: "I always thought you were a strong math student, and the results confirm that." When her son and daughter took the tests two years ago in fourth and eighth grades, she and her husband said simply, "You did fine," and told them if there was an area of concern, they would tell them. "If you tell your kids up front that that's the family policy, they'll accept it," she says. Her goal is to avoid peer competition.

"If kids have the information, they'll share it," she says. "That means some kids feel badly about themselves in comparison, leading to the I'm-stupid-I-can't-learn syndrome." The youngest test takers are most susceptible.

"Fourth-graders are still developing their sense of self-competence: 'I'm someone who can learn' vs. 'I'm someone who can't learn.' It doesn't take much for either to become a self-fulfilling prophecy," says Meier. She is the author of "The Power of Their Ideas: A Lesson for America from a Small School in Harlem" (Beacon).

Tenth-graders who score badly are at risk for dropping out, especially when passing MCAS is a requirement for graduation, which it is for the class of 2003, says Levin.

"The thinking is that an at-risk student will be frightened by a failing score and work harder," she says. But evidence shows the opposite is true. Students are more likely to give up: "There's no hope. What's the point?"

Between these extremes is the eighth-grader who may take a low score in stride - after all, he's got what seems like endless years until graduation - but experiences a developmental disconnect. "Kids trust teachers to help them learn what they need to learn," says Levin. So this child reasons, "I've been going to school all along, the teachers have done their job, and I still scored badly. Something is wrong with me."

For an eighth-grader whose self-esteem is already low, a poor score can be the final straw that gives her permission to tune out: "I always thought I was a failure. Now I know it!" Parents' reactions can worsen matters, especially if we take the test seriously even when it's at odds with what we know about a child. For instance, you know she's a good reader, the test says she's not, and you accept what the test says, perhaps by being angry she didn't do better.

"That undermines her," says Meier. "It's like a loss of faith: 'Even Dad thinks I'm a failure.' " In other words, she says, "Don't assume this test is a description of your child." Before scores arrive, she suggests thinking about what you know about how your child thinks: Does he love big ideas or details? Grasp ideas easily or only through hands-on experience? Only like books that are plot-driven? Does he love to write but hate structured writing assignments?

"If you have this profile, when you get the score, you're able to say, 'Yes, this accurately reflects my child,' or, 'No, it doesn't,'" says Meier. That can lead to a discussion about the test's credibility and what to do about it. For instance: You know he's a good reader, but the

scores say he's not. Meier suggests telling him, "I always thought you were a good reader, but that didn't show up on the test. That's a mystery we need to solve. What do you think?" Perhaps he remembers that the material on the test was way over his head. Perhaps he says he only likes nature stories and struggles to read anything else.

You know he's not a good reader, and the scores reflect that. Then you can say, "You always say you don't like to read, so this isn't a surprise. How can we help you become a better reader? Any ideas?" Meier suggests setting aside time each day or week to read together, not necessarily out loud but reading the same material, then discussing it together to aid comprehension.

When a score doesn't confirm your impression, Meier urges talking to the teacher about it. If you both agree it's an inaccurate reflection, is the problem the test - material wasn't covered in school, or the test was too long and he became fatigued - or the child? Was this an anomaly, or does he need help?

Meier says students who are most at risk from a failing MCAS score are those who are already academically at risk. "Consider the score a red flag," she tells parents. "They need help now. Go to the school and ask for it."

What you don't want to hear is that the school is shifting curriculum to prepare students better. "That's teaching to the test," says Popham, author of "Testing! Testing! What Every Parent Should Know about School Tests" (Allyn & Bacon). "That means kids learn by rote. Research shows us that is not the way children learn best," he says.

Students of English as a second language also tend not to do well on a test like MCAS. Because this child could be working very hard to achieve, a poor score can be a real blow to self-esteem. "They need to know it's not a reflection of how smart they are," says Popham. "I would tell this child his MCAS performance is not nearly as important as the effort he makes every day."

Indeed, that's the message Levin would give to any child.

"The danger in taking MCAS too seriously is that we put pressure on children to perform better for the sake of a test. That hurts their image of themselves as learners and turns them off to school and education," she says.

On the other hand, analyzing the score can not only help demystify testing but also teach a child something about the world. "You're helping him judge evidence, to not take things at face value," says Meier. "Isn't that what education should be about?"

## **SIDEBAR: SUGGESTIONS FOR PARENTS**

**View sample MCAS questions at the Department of Education Web site,**  
[www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/](http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/)

**A typical reason a child doesn't do well**, according to CARE (Coalition for Authentic Reform in Education, a group of educators and parents), is that MCAS measures retention of a large amount of specific, unrelated facts, something most good curricula these days deemphasize in favor of depth of learning on one or two topics within a subject area.

**A child's performance can be affected by** attention and motivational factors, distractability, and inability to pace themselves. Fourth-graders in particular may do poorly because they get tired and just stop in the middle of the test.

**If your child performed below expectations**, ask whether he was tested appropriately. If he has a history of special-education services, was it the right decision for him to take the MCAS? Seek out the teacher who administered the test. What does she remember about that day that might have contributed to a poor performance? Ask to see other standardized assessments of your child. How do they compare?

**Globe staff chart**

AFTERTHOUGHT - Recommended: "The Internet Kids & Family Yellow Pages" (McGraw Hill) by Jean Armour Polly. A comprehensive list of sites of family interest, some educational, many commercial.

Barbara F. Meltz's Child Caring appears every Thursday in At Home. Her first book, "Put Yourself in Their Shoes: Understanding How Your Children See the World" (Dell), is now available in bookstores. She welcomes letters and comments and can be reached via e-mail at [meltz@globe.com](mailto:meltz@globe.com).