MASSACHUSETTS
Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
Russell D. Johnston | Acting Commissioner

MEMORANDUM

To: Superintendents, Charter School Leaders, Assistant Superintendents, Collaborative Leaders, Leaders of Approved Special Education Schools
From: Russell D. Johnston, Acting Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education
Date: November 6, 2024, updated December 11, 2024
Subject: Update on Student Competency Determinations

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) is providing a frequently asked questions (FAQ) document relating to competency determination awards to offer guidance to districts and families at this time.

This edition of the Student Competency Determinations FAQ adds new questions and answers to the November 6, 2024 FAQ. This document will be posted on the Commissioner's Special Advisory page.

Questions and Answers

Q1: How does the new law impact students in the class of 2025? *(new, 12/11/24)*
A1: Students in the class of 2025 who have previously earned a Competency Determination (CD) through a regular or retest administration of the MCAS (including the November 2024 retest), or through a DESE appeal process, have earned the CD and are not impacted by the change in statute.

Students who have not yet earned the CD, including those on an Educational Proficiency Plan (EPP), can no longer earn a CD through an MCAS test or retest process, and instead must earn a CD that follows a process as described in the new law. DESE and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education may offer future guidance or regulation on the new law. It is important that districts focus first on students in the class of 2025 who have not yet earned the CD.

As outlined in the new law, a student who has not yet earned a CD must *demonstrate "mastery of a common core of skills, competencies and knowledge..., by satisfactorily completing coursework that has been certified* ***by the student's district*** *as showing mastery*

of the skills, competencies and knowledge contained in the state academic standards and curriculum frameworks in the areas measured by the MCAS high school tests described in section one I administered in 2023."

Q2: How can districts locate the CD status for their current students? *(new, 12/11/24)*
A2: The current CD status for students is available in Edwin Analytics. Users with the appropriate security role can view report "PE618 Student CD Roster" to find this information.

Q3: Are districts still able to establish local graduation requirements? *(new, 12/11/24)*
A3: Yes. The new law only changes the CD criteria. Districts are still able to determine the local graduation requirements in their district.

Q4: Are school districts allowed to use a student's scores on high school MCAS tests as part of their local graduation requirements apart from the Competency Determination? *(new, 12/11/24)*
A4: Yes. The establishment of local graduation requirements is at the sole discretion of school districts.

Q5: Which MCAS high school tests were offered in 2023? *(new, 12/11/24)*
A5: High school MCAS tests were administered in the following areas in 2023: English Language Arts, Mathematics, and Science (including four options: Biology, Introductory Physics, Chemistry, and Technology/Engineering).

Q6: Can students in the class of 2025 earn a CD by attaining the required score on a spring 2025 MCAS administration (regular or retest)? *(new, 12/11/24)*
A6: No. Students beginning the 2024-25 school year without the CD may earn the CD through the November 2024 retest or an appeal (see below), but students may not earn the CD through these processes once the new law takes effect.

Q7: What are the requirements of districts in developing a process to determine if a student has met the new standard to earn a CD? *(new, 12/11/24)*
A7: DESE recommends all districts serving high school students should develop a process that is:

- Aligned with the new language of the statute in a way that allows districts to demonstrate students have met the new requirements
- Approved by the governing board of the district (e.g., school committee, board of trustees, etc.)
- Shared with all students, families/guardians, and district stakeholders
- Publicly available in multiple languages

Q8: Will DESE be providing a list of courses that meet the new language of the law? *(new, 12/11/24)*
A8: Not at this time. The new language in the law gives districts the responsibility of certifying coursework "satisfactorily complet[ed]" by the student. Districts should certify that students have satisfactorily completed coursework aligned with state academic standards and curriculum frameworks in English Language Arts, Mathematics, and at least one Science discipline (Biology, Introductory Physics, Chemistry, or Technology/Engineering).

Q9: Are districts required to accommodate former students who have not earned a CD and are currently not enrolled? *(new, 12/11/24)*
A9: Yes. Individuals who have not earned a CD must be afforded a process for earning the CD and DESE can no longer offer that opportunity through an MCAS assessment once the law takes effect. District processes must allow former students who satisfactorily completed the relevant coursework (see Q&A 8) to earn a CD.

Q10: Will high school students be required to take the MCAS in 2025 and beyond? *(new, 12/11/24)*
A10: Yes. Participation in the MCAS is required by federal and state law and the ballot question did not change this requirement. DESE's accountability system will continue to use assessment participation rates (and the resulting achievement and growth data) in its annual determinations made through the district and school accountability system.

Q11: Are districts still required to provide a "free appropriate public education" (FAPE) to students with disabilities? *(new, 12/11/24)*
A11: Yes. The new law has not changed any requirements around providing FAPE to students with disabilities. Consistent with federal law, a district must provide a "free appropriate public education" (FAPE) to a student with disabilities and must also determine that the student has met state and local graduation requirements, prior to graduating that student. A DESE advisory on this topic is posted here.

Q12: Will DESE continue to offer MCAS retest opportunities for high school students? *(new, 12/11/24)*
A12: DESE will offer all scheduled retest opportunities for high school students in the 2024-25 school year. No student will be required to take a retest in the spring of 2025, but they will have the opportunity to do so. DESE will evaluate the frequency of retest opportunities in future school years.

Q13: Will DESE continue to adjudicate appeals that have been submitted to DESE? *(new, 12/11/24)*
A13: DESE will adjudicate all performance appeals (cohort, portfolio, and transcript) received by the effective date of the new law. Successful appeals submitted prior to the effective date of the new law may count towards awarding the student the CD.

Q14: Will the criteria for the John and Abigail Adams Scholarship program, the Stanley Z. Koplik Certificate of Mastery Award, or the State Seal of Biliteracy be changed because of the new law? *(new, 12/11/24)*
A14: No. These programs will continue to utilize scores from MCAS assessments as qualifications for the award programs. While the new law changed the requirements for earning a CD, it did not change the requirements for the John and Abigail Adams Scholarship program, the Stanley Z. Koplik Certificate of Mastery Award, or the State Seal of Biliteracy.

Q15: When does the new law take effect?
A15: According to guidance provided by the Secretary of the Commonwealth, the earliest the law would take effect is December 5, 2024: https://www.sec.state.ma.us/divisions/elections/download/getting-on-the-ballot/State-Ballot-Question-Petitions.pdf.

Q16: Will the MCAS retests in English Language Arts and Mathematics scheduled for November 2024 go forward? Will students who achieve qualifying scores on those tests be eligible to earn the CD?
A16: Yes. The administration of the MCAS retests in English Language Arts (November 6 and 7) and Mathematics (November 12 and 13) will go forward. Since these tests will be administered before the new law goes into effect (see question above), any student who earns a qualifying score on the retest will satisfy the CD requirements for that subject area. We recommend that Districts highly encourage all students eligible for retesting in the November administration to do so.

Q17: Do high school students still need to earn a Competency Determination (CD) in order to graduate?
A17: Yes, high school students will still need to earn a CD in order to graduate. Since 2003, the CD has been based on achieving qualifying scores on relevant MCAS tests. When the new law takes effect, the CD will be based on "satisfactorily completing coursework that has been certified by the student's district" as written in the ballot question. Guidance on certification will be forthcoming.

Q18: What is the impact of the new law on students who have previously earned a CD before the date that the new law goes into effect?
A18: Students who have already achieved the qualifying MCAS scores in math, ELA and science by the effective date have earned their CD and are eligible to earn a high school diploma provided they meet their local graduation requirements.

Q19: What is the impact of the new law on students who have not earned a CD before the date that the new law goes into effect?
A19: As of the date the new law takes effect, students who have not yet earned the CD would be eligible to do so through "satisfactorily completing coursework that has been certified by the student's district." Guidance on certification will be forthcoming.

Background Information

State law requires students to satisfy the requirements of the "competency determination" (CD) in order to graduate from high school. G.L. c. 69, s. 1D (i). Ballot Question 2 amends the competency determination requirements as shown below, where the text that is underlined is newly added and the text that has been struck through is removed.

The "competency determination" shall be based on the academic standards and curriculum frameworks for tenth graders in the areas of mathematics, science and technology, history and social science, foreign languages, and English, and shall represent a determination that a particular student has demonstrated mastery of a common core of skills, competencies and knowledge in these areas, ~~as measured by the assessment instruments described in section one I~~ by satisfactorily completing coursework that has been certified by the student's district as showing mastery of the skills, competencies, and knowledge contained in the state academic standards and curriculum frameworks in the areas measured by the MCAS high school tests described in section one I administered in 2023, and in any additional areas determined by the board. Satisfaction of the requirements of the competency determination shall be a condition for high school graduation. If the particular student's assessment results for the tenth grade do not demonstrate the required level of competency, the student shall have the right to participate in the assessment program the following year or years. Students who fail to satisfy the requirements of the competency determination may be eligible to receive an educational assistance plan designed within the confines of the foundation budget to impart the skills, competencies and knowledge required to attain the required level of mastery. The parent, guardian or person acting as parent of the student shall have the opportunity to review the remedial plan with the student's teachers. Nothing in this section shall be construed to provide a parent, guardian, person acting as a parent or student with an entitlement to contest the proposed plan or with a cause of action for educational malpractice if the student fails to obtain a competency determination.