

A People's Proposal to Prepare Our High School Graduates for the Future From the People's Forum Coalition on Graduation Readiness

Overview/Introduction

In November 2024, Massachusetts voters decided overwhelmingly (59% to 41%) to support Question 2, ending use of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System as a high school graduation requirement. In some communities, the approval vote was even higher. Springfield and New Bedford, for example, voted 66% in favor, while Holyoke and Greenfield approved by 69%. People specifically rejected a one-size-fits-all standardized testing system that discriminated against students of color, students with special needs and English language learners, while narrowing the curriculum for everyone. Voters emphatically embraced the idea that we can have high standards without high-stakes tests.

In January 2025, Governor Maura Healey convened a 32-member council on graduation requirements. Its task is to advise the education secretary and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education on developing new guidelines that would redefine how students earn a high school diploma. Part of the governor's council's charge was to hold listening sessions across the state to solicit the public's ideas and perspectives on graduation readiness.

At the same time, a series of independent listening sessions — People's Forums on High School Graduation — was organized by Citizens for Public Schools, local educator unions and a range of community groups. They seek to ensure that any new statewide graduation requirements reflect the views of parents, students, educators and other community members concerned with public education, and will take race, income, disability, language and other differences into account. These forums are continuing, as a part of building public dialogue about what we all want for our children's future.

A consensus has emerged from both the governor's council listening sessions and the people's forums about what people value for public schools. ([Here is a summary of the people's forum responses.](#)) While participants said they want students to know basic subject matter content, they also felt it was essential to teach the skills that are at the core of learning, including critical thinking, creative problem solving, data analysis, collaboration with others and effective communication. They want students to be prepared for real-life challenges and they believe that students should have opportunities to exercise more autonomy in defining their own goals and more choice in designing educational pathways to meet them.

We anchor our approach to revise Massachusetts requirements for a high school diploma in these fundamental principles:

1. It is critical to engage in **a thoughtful planning process that first establishes a clear vision** of what we want our students to know and be able to do by graduation. This vision must reflect the public's input from the governor's council and people's forum listening sessions. Unfortunately, this process seems to have been speeding up, rather than slowing down to be inclusive, and so far, does not seem to reflect public opinion, as reflected in the listening sessions.
2. We need **state support for local reform**, guided by educators in dialogue with community members.
3. We **cannot impose unfunded mandates** on school districts. Adequate and equitable funding is essential to achieve the goals we all share. We cannot ignore the stark economic equalities experienced by our students and their families, and the stark inequities in resources among school districts.
4. There need to be **multiple pathways to a single diploma**.
5. Our new graduation requirements must center a **commitment to deeper learning**, thus preparing our students for the critical skills they will need when they graduate.
6. We **must not handcuff educators** with onerous requirements, scripted curriculum and standardized tests that undermine their professionalism.

With these principles and the results of the governor's council's listening sessions and the people's forums in mind, we see a growing consensus to set a new direction for defining readiness to graduate from high school.

Setting the Goals

We first need to develop a common vision of a graduate. Educators and others are familiar with the process of "backward design" for designing everything from individual lessons to general curriculum. Its steps are:

Phase 1: Determine the desired ends.

Phase 2: Determine how to assess achievement of those ends.

Phase 3: Design experiences to move students toward successful achievement of those ends.

The governor's council's listening tour and the CPS people's forums have provided a solid basis for articulating these goals for 21st century learning, i.e., a "portrait of a graduate,"

and the governor's council already has developed a draft of one. At least 20 states have created or are in the process of developing these statewide portraits, as have several cities and towns in Massachusetts. While these portraits vary, they all seek a deeper learning experience for students with some common expectations for graduates including critical thinking, problem-solving, communication skills, civic engagement and cultural competency.

While the secretary and commissioner have now issued a broad vision, each district should be empowered to establish its own portrait of a graduate, based on what matters most in that community, as many districts in Massachusetts already have done. A top-down vision of a graduate developed without broad input from parents, educators, students and the wider community will be ignored. **Communities must be engaged in this process and have an authentic opportunity to give feedback.**

We want to emphasize the importance of “backward design” here. As we articulate what we value through the “portrait of a graduate,” we must follow through with assessments that are **directly linked and consistent** with those qualities and skills. All too often, these portraits or visions for our graduates become a nice poster on the wall of a district office or classroom. Sometimes, they don't even make it that far and are buried on a district website. This occurs when no attempt is made to assess the qualities they say they value, using appropriate measures. We need to ask questions like: “What does a critical thinker look like and do?” “How can we measure collaboration skills?” “What will tell us if students are civic-minded members of their community?” Once we answer those questions with the development of appropriate assessments, we can then ask, “How do we transform our curriculum and instruction to ensure that these essential skills drive our work?”

It is at the grassroots level that these skills become a reality. We need to seriously consider these questions if we want real change in our schools. We need to review our curriculum — starting with its goals — and we need to help educators develop their own pedagogical skills to support this learning.

Determining Assessments

Once there are agreed-upon outcomes for a graduate, assessments need to be developed that can measure those characteristics. However, these should **not** be designed until Phase 1 — determining our desired outcomes — is complete. Again, this is critical and will ensure that we match assessment to its intended goals, balance high standards with flexibility, and honor the strong preferences expressed in listening sessions.

Local school districts, not the state, should develop these assessments. DESE can provide support by gathering performance assessments developed by educators throughout the

state, working in conjunction with organizations like the Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment (MCIEA), and offering professional development to educators on how to develop and use authentic assessments such as projects, performances or portfolios. DESE can encourage adoption of these approaches and collaboration across districts.

Building Student Learning Experiences

Planning with the end in mind requires that developing specific learning experiences occurs last to ensure the integrity of the relationship between goals, assessment and learning.

We support some common courses of study across the state, but **not** a uniform curriculum. Local districts must have flexibility in meeting the needs of the diverse learners in their communities. We must establish a baseline course of study that allows for **multiple** pathways to graduation, including career and technical education. Currently, MassCore, the state's recommended program of study, severely limits students' opportunities to select courses that interest and engage them. That needs to change. Also, any statewide framework must encourage experience with and integration of art, music, theater, dance, sports and other areas that often are seen as "peripheral." The periphery should be brought to the center.

Finally, it is critical that all districts have the requisite funding to ensure their students have choices in pursuing a high school diploma, whether they are college-bound, opt for career and technical education, or pursue other goals. Some districts will need to hire more teachers, more school counselors, more paraprofessionals and more specialists.

If we truly want our vision or "portrait of a graduate" to drive our work, districts also will need funding for ongoing professional development. Educators need to participate effectively in all stages of the development of student learning experiences and evaluation of outcomes. Teaching students to be critical thinkers, rather than how to take a standardized test, will be a major shift for some educators. In fact, many educators have only known a system in which the focus is on raising test scores, rather than deepening learning. They will need training, coaching and time to develop their practice.

Conclusion

Too often, we are motivated by "urgency" rather than thoughtfulness. In setting new graduation requirements, it is far more important to do this well, rather than quickly. In focusing excessively on rapid school reforms, we risk undercutting the very transformations needed to meet 21st century challenges. Furthermore, it should be an inclusive, participatory process. As people say, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far,

go together.” We now have an opportunity to make a broad commitment to a 21st century model for public education. We will be more successful in doing this well if we bring all stakeholders along in building that vision.

Massachusetts voters have demanded that public schools move beyond the rote learning and standardization that began during the industrial age and continue to this day. We need a flexible and adaptable approach to students with different assets, needs and learning styles. As any parent who has two or more children knows, each is different. They grow at different rates, have different strengths, different personalities and can be successful in different ways. We need to ensure that our public schools are prepared to nurture them in all sorts of ways.

While we have focused on what a student needs in order to graduate from a Massachusetts high school, this effort must apply to **every year of a young person’s life in school** from preK through Grade 12. We do not suddenly develop compassionate or critical thinkers in high school. We must use our portrait of a graduate to guide our curriculum, assessment and instruction at each phase of our students’ lives.

We all want the best for our children, but it is naive to believe they all can have access to the best educational opportunities while there remain vast disparities in access to resources. As a Commonwealth, we need to reduce the fiscal gap among school districts, using every means at our disposal. The 1993 Massachusetts Education Reform Act was rooted in the issue of funding equity, yet 30-plus years later, it remains a distant goal. The Student Opportunity Act of 2019 was a big step in the right direction, but we still have far to go.

Too many districts with high needs populations currently struggle to meet the needs of their students. Furthermore, we must address the inequities outside of school — poverty, housing, health care, violence — that have a profound impact on students’ ability to reach their full potential. The public school community must be part of the struggle for greater economic justice beyond our school walls.

The passage of Question 2 provides a generational opportunity to set bold new goals, and they can best be achieved by taking the time to build a shared vision of public education, supported by Massachusetts residents. We can then empower communities to build out that vision, and task DESE with supporting it. In doing so, Massachusetts’ public schools, already some of the finest in the world, can lead the way.