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## *MTF Bulletin*

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### **Understanding the Competency Determination Initiative Petition:**

*What it Does, Who it Impacts, and How it Changes the Current Standards for High School Graduation*

This November, voters in Massachusetts may be asked to approve or reject a number of proposals that either create new or amend existing state laws. These proposals, known as initiative petitions, are currently under consideration by the State Legislature. If the Legislature does not take action on a petition, it is placed before voters for their consideration.

One of the proposals before the Legislature is House Bill 4252, a petition which would eliminate any statewide standard for high school graduation, and return the Commonwealth to a time when more than 300 individual school districts established their own requirements for achieving the skills, competencies, and knowledge required to earn a high school diploma.

To fully understand this initiative petition and offer clarity to policymakers and voters, this brief poses five key questions on what the petition does, what it means for students, and how it changes the current standards for high school graduation in Massachusetts.

#### ***1. What does the initiative petition do?***

The proposed ballot initiative amends [Section ID of Chapter 69 of the Massachusetts General Laws](#), eliminating the statewide competency determination standard for high school graduation in Massachusetts, currently achieved by earning a passing score on the Grade 10 Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) tests in English, Math, and Science.

The initiative does not propose an alternative statewide standard for graduation, but would instead leave it to each of the more than 300 individual school districts to develop their own standards. The district would certify that students have achieved the competencies necessary for graduation via coursework completion, but the district's decisions would not be subject to any state oversight or review.

#### ***2. What are the current standards for high school graduation in Massachusetts?***

Presently, districts are already empowered to create their own individual graduation requirements. These local requirements work in concert with a state standard that students must meet to receive a high school diploma in Massachusetts: a student must meet local coursework requirements, as well as the single, objective state “competency determination” standard. Since 2003, the statewide competency determination standard has been met by achieving a passing score on the Grade 10 Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) test in the subjects of Math, English, and Science.

Through this shared state and local approach, each individual community determines the coursework, skills, and requirements that it deems necessary for high school success, while the state maintains a consistent and equitable standard of educational attainment.

As the examples below indicate, there is currently wide variation in local requirements for high school graduation across communities.

*Local Requirements for High School Graduation Examples*

<u>District A</u>	<u>District B</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Pass 100 credits (25 credits per year to be promoted to the next grade.</li><li>• Pass 4 years of English</li><li>• Pass 2 years of U.S. History</li><li>• Pass Physical education</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 8 credits of English</li><li>• 8 credits of Math</li><li>• 6 credits of Spanish</li><li>• 6 credits of Science</li><li>• 5 credits of Computer Science</li><li>• 6 credits of History</li><li>• 2 credits of Arts</li><li>• 80 hours of after-school club participation</li><li>• 40 hours of community service</li></ul>

Source: Department of Elementary and Secondary

The partnership between local communities and the state to assess readiness for college and career success has worked well; on average, 96 percent of Massachusetts seniors consistently meet local requirements for graduation and achieve the statewide competency determination standard.

**3. *Does the initiative petition eliminate or reduce MCAS testing?***

No. The initiative does not eliminate the Grade 10 MCAS test, nor does it reduce the amount of time spent taking the exam in any other grades. As required by the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), students would still be required to take the MCAS test in Grades 3 through 8, and Grade 10. In exchange for meeting these federal requirements, Massachusetts gains access to more than \$300 million in federal grant funding.

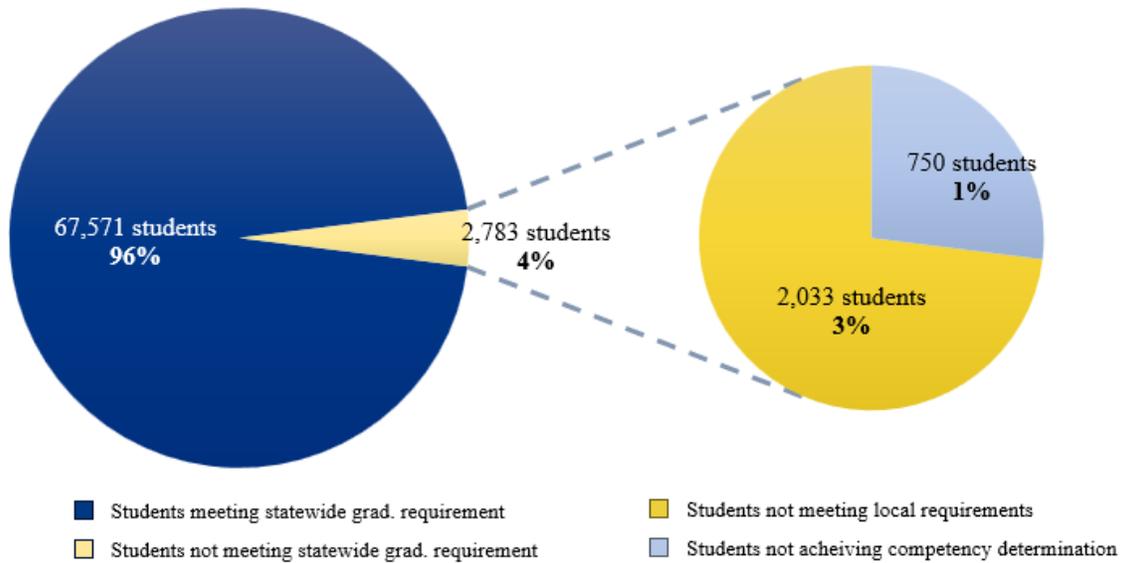
As required by state law, the MCAS test would continue to be administered to all students in Grades 4, 8, and 10, thereby serving as the only statewide measure of student achievement based on the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks.

**4. *How are students currently impacted by the statewide standard for graduation, and what does this ballot initiative do to help students earn a high school diploma?***

According to data collected by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), the average graduating class size in Massachusetts from 2015 to 2019 was 70K students. Each year, more than 96 percent of students (66K students on average) successfully met the statewide competency determination for graduation. Of the 4 percent of students (2.8K students on average) who did not achieve the statewide standard, roughly 2,000 also did not meet local requirements for graduation. Approximately 750 students, on average, were unable to graduate and earn a high school diploma solely due to not meeting the statewide competency determination standard; representing 1 percent of the average graduating class.

**Average Graduating Class, 2015 - 2019**  
70,353 Students

**Students Not Meeting Statewide Standard**  
2,783 Students



The proposed initiative petition offers no additional resources or academic support to students struggling to meet graduation requirements. Nor does it provide assistance to districts to help identify or assist students at risk of not graduating, and it proposes no additional educational supports to help students navigate high school.

In the past, the state has allocated significant funding for school districts to assist students in achieving the competency determination and attaining the skills and knowledge necessary to receive a passing score on the Grade 10 MCAS test. The initiative petition does not commit or propose any additional resources to help prepare students for college or career success; it simply eliminates any minimum statewide standard for graduation.

**5. *Is eliminating the statewide standard for high school graduation a good idea?***

No. The initiative petition would eliminate any statewide standard for graduation and create an inequitable patchwork of more than 300 local standards to determine a student’s suitability for graduation. This inconsistency would inevitably harm the students and school districts that have historically suffered from the greatest educational inequities. It should not be adopted.

Massachusetts has emerged as a nationwide leader in education over the last 30 years in large part due to a twofold strategy: significantly increase financial resources and establish statewide goals and academic standards. That strategy was devised in the early 1990s in response to unconscionable disparities in educational quality between school districts.

Progress has been made – in the last 20 years, the graduation rate for low income students has increased by more than 20 percentage points – but more work needs to be done to close education gaps. This is why the state passed the Student Opportunity Act (SOA) in 2019. The SOA is an historic renewal of the state’s commitment to provide our highest need districts with the resources necessary to ensure that

all students graduate high school with a world class education; and it has already provided \$1.5 billion in new state aid for schools across the state.

However, financial resources alone will not fulfill the state's educational goals; they must be partnered with a minimum statewide standard for educational success. Taxpayers deserve to know that districts receiving significant state funding are providing students with the skills and knowledge necessary to meet a basic and measurable standard of high school success. Even more importantly, students and families should be guaranteed a minimum standard of educational achievement irrespective of the district in which they reside. Eliminating any statewide standard would cause the most harm to students who face the biggest educational obstacles and would increase educational inequality across the state.

Replacing the single statewide standard for high school graduation with more than 300 alternatives would move the Commonwealth back 30 years in its efforts to provide all students with educational opportunity. The question should not be adopted.