EDUCATION

Milford educators highlight deeper educational challenges after MCAS ballot vote

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MILFORD — While local educators believe the elimination of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System as a high school graduation requirement will not impact the vast number of students, they're concerned about its impact on those who are underserved.

"I don't think MCAS played a role in the fact that students graduated ready for success in college and career," said Milford High School principal Joshua Otlin, although he warned that the Nov. 5 vote to eliminate the requirement might exacerbate inequalities among school districts.

Nicholas J. Molinari, president of the Milford Teachers Association, agreed.

"Massachusetts has a way of going considerably overboard with legislation and micromanaging in general," he said. "MCAS testing, as it is now, is way too often too complex and incredibly disruptive."

Effects of ballot question: What changes if Mass. voters approve eliminating graduation requirement?

Approximately 1% of Massachusetts high school seniors, or about 700 students, fail to earn a diploma due to MCAS exam performance, regardless of how many opportunities they get to take it. In 2019, the Rennie Center for Education and Research Policy reported that of the 702 students receiving certificates of

attainment instead of diplomas, 281 were English language learners and 402 had disabilities.

Milford principal says teachers can refocus on academics

With MCAS no longer a graduation requirement, educators say they're now expected to redirect their efforts toward more meaningful academic support.

"It's going to allow us to focus more of our time and energy on helping students," said Otlin, a Milford High graduate who's in his eighth year as its principal. He said students will also benefit from dedicating more time to studying academics rather than preparing for tests.

But in the absence of state-mandated graduation requirements, local school districts now hold the responsibility of setting graduation standards. Otlin observed that many Massachusetts districts have requirements aligned with the expectations of state public colleges and universities, ensuring little variation between schools.

Broader educational disparities persist

Despite the policy change, Otlin pointed to ongoing disparities in the state's education system.

"Students in inner-city schools are not being served well and haven't been for a long time," he said. Removing MCAS could lead to even less accountability for addressing the needs of underserved students.

Inner-city schools have been plagued by decades of dysfunction within bureaucracies, making it difficult to meet students' needs effectively, Otlin added.

'Embrace your challenges': Milford High School grads urged to pursue 'infinite number of opportunities'

"The education system has historically failed to meet the needs of its most vulnerable students," he said. While MCAS was not the root cause of those

shortcomings, its elimination might further neglect students.

"I fear that things could go from bad to worse," Otlin said. "They're not going to go from good to bad."

Systemic barriers and educational inequity

Massachusetts' education challenges extend far beyond standardized testing. There are systemic barriers, such as poverty, limited access to early childhood education and inadequate health care services, particularly for behavioral health.

"Children growing up in poverty often lack access to early childhood education, and we're also seeing an attendance crisis disproportionately affecting these students," Otlin said.

Molinari echoed these concerns, describing the removal of MCAS as "a wake-up call." He stressed the need for balanced reforms.

"We need some commonsense alternatives," Molinari said. "Having no standardized test is just as bad as having a ridiculous set of standardized tests."

Looking ahead: Addressing core issues

Shifting focus from testing debates to addressing the root causes of educational inequity is urgent, educators say.

"If we're serious about improving outcomes for children growing up in poverty, we need to address non-school factors that are inhibiting their success in school," Otlin emphasized.

Among the changes required, he suggested, are securing investments in resources for inner-city schools; providing targeted interventions for at-risk students; and implementing systemic reforms to ensure all children have equal opportunities to succeed academically.