How 6 Mass. Communities Are Imagining Life Beyond MCAS

Fifth graders Charlotte Groth, left, and Zoe Gillispie work on their capstone project at the Curley K-8 School in Jamaica Plain. (Max Larkin/WBUR)

This article is more than 4 years old.

As the school year winds down at the Curley K-8 School in Jamaica Plain, Danielle Moran's fifth graders are ramping up.

Weeks of work are taking form in scale models of 21st-century classrooms, libraries and labs. The students are working in teams: placing clay furniture and hanging tiny chalkboards.

The work doesn't look anything like a "bubble test." And yet there are some in the state who hope that this kind of exercise can show just as much — if not more — about what students are learning than the MCAS test.

At the Curley, students say this building project has pushed them academically. Fifth-grader Charlotte Groth says the project began with research — online and in person. Next, they compiled a report.

Then it gets down to brass tacks, Groth says: “You do a blueprint. Then we do the math with that. Now we’re working on the model.”

Moran walks from table to table, watching as groups of students solve their own unique structural problems — like how to get their tiny model tables to stay upright.

"I'm just kind of questioning, and asking, 'What's your goal here?' " Moran says.

Boston is one of six very different districts participating in this experiment, as part of the Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment (MCIEA). The other five are: Lowell, Winchester, Attleboro, Revere and Somerville.

The consortium began just two years ago, so these assessments are in an early phase. Their goal is to better realize what the 1993 ed reform bill originally described: to develop "authentic and direct gauges of student performance" — ones that can be more comprehensive than the current MCAS.

Model chairs prepared by fifth graders at the Curley K-8 School (Max Larkin/WBUR)

Teachers like Moran develop projects like this building exercise with that goal in mind. The design research and writing — that’s STEM and reading comprehension. The blueprints and diagrams are math.

The students' projects go on to be graded by panels of teachers. And while they're still in a pilot phase, eventually their scores will be published — just like MCAS scores.

So it's an assessment — but it doesn't feel like one, fifth grader Zoe Gillispie says: “This is learning, but with a bit of more fun put into it."

The Center For Collaborative Education (CCE) — a nonprofit group headquartered in Boston's Chinatown — has supported these "performance-based assessments" both here and in New Hampshire, where they've progressed much further.

About a third of New Hampshire's students take part in their so-called PACE program, and the state has cut back standardized testing to just three administrations from kindergarten to 12th grade. (New Hampshire's education commissioner, Frank Edelblut, calls it a "both/and" approach.)

Dan French runs CCE. He says that while Massachusetts may lead the nation in its test scores, the same cannot be said of the way the state conducts its testing.

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>
> *Dan French, executive director of the Center for Collaborative Educationnone*

"Massachusetts is being left behind," French says. "More and more states are recognizing the vast limitations of standardized testing — and its inability to move the needle around equity, in particular."

In this state, the MCAS is still a hegemonic measure: the main instrument used to differentiate schools and districts, weigh teacher performance, and evaluate preparedness for high-school graduation.

But French and others in Massachusetts insist that this performance-based approach is fairer and more responsive — as well as more in line with the principles of the 1993 ed reform bill.

"The law does not call for a standardized test," says Monty Neill, an anti-standardized test crusader and director of a national organization called Fair Test. “It calls for assessing students. It calls for a competency determination

in high school. And those can be done with other kinds of instruments."

To be exact, the 1993 law asks that students be judged, "as much as is practicable," on the basis of "work samples, projects and portfolios." Neill says that language reflects a wave of skepticism about "bubble tests" in the early 1990s.

The law also said standards should be designed to "avoid perpetuating gender, cultural, ethnic or racial stereotypes."

Monty Neill is executive director of Fair Test. He lives in Jamaica Plain. (Max Larkin/WBUR)

It was only an educational "coup" that set the course for the MCAS to loom large over Massachusetts' public schools for decades, Neill argues.

During the first years of ed reform, Massachusetts had a lay board of education — so large that it was effectively outside gubernatorial control.

But then Gov. William Weld and a Democratic-led Legislature passed legislation to create the smaller Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. In 1996, Weld appointed Boston University Chancellor John Silber to chair that board.

"Silber was a stone-cold reactionary on education," Neill says. "He was very rigid in his thinking."

A few years later, in 2002, the nation followed Massachusetts' lead with the No Child Left Behind bill, which required standardized testing from grades three through eight.

But Massachusetts' secretary of education, Jim Peyser, says that evolution was no accident. It came about because high-stakes standardized tests work.

"I'm not sensing any real backtracking on standards-based reform: of ensuring high-quality standards, rigorous assessments and accountability for results," Peyser says. "I think that basic foundation is still present — and still highly supported."

At the center of that foundation is the MCAS. It's streamlined, standardized and mostly graded by computers. These new performance-based assessments are graded by teachers — who are, necessarily, subjective.

Dan French is the executive director of the Center For Collaborative Education. (Max Larkin/WBUR)

French believes that the consortium — the MCIEA — has come up with means by which to enforce rigor and comparability in their performance-based assessments.

He adds that the equalizing goals of the 1993 reform bill aren't being achieved under the current, MCAS-first regime.

"I'm not sure why one would choose to continue banging in your head against the wall when you haven't made a dent in the wall itself," French says.

In New Hampshire, French observes, research suggests that students with disabilities post higher scores on performance-based assessments. Other groups, too, may do a bit better on those projects than on standardized tests.

As to why that would be, it might come back in part to the “fun” question.

"When you actually engage kids in learning in ways that excite them, you're going to have that much greater likelihood of reaching students and getting them engaged in the learning process," French says.

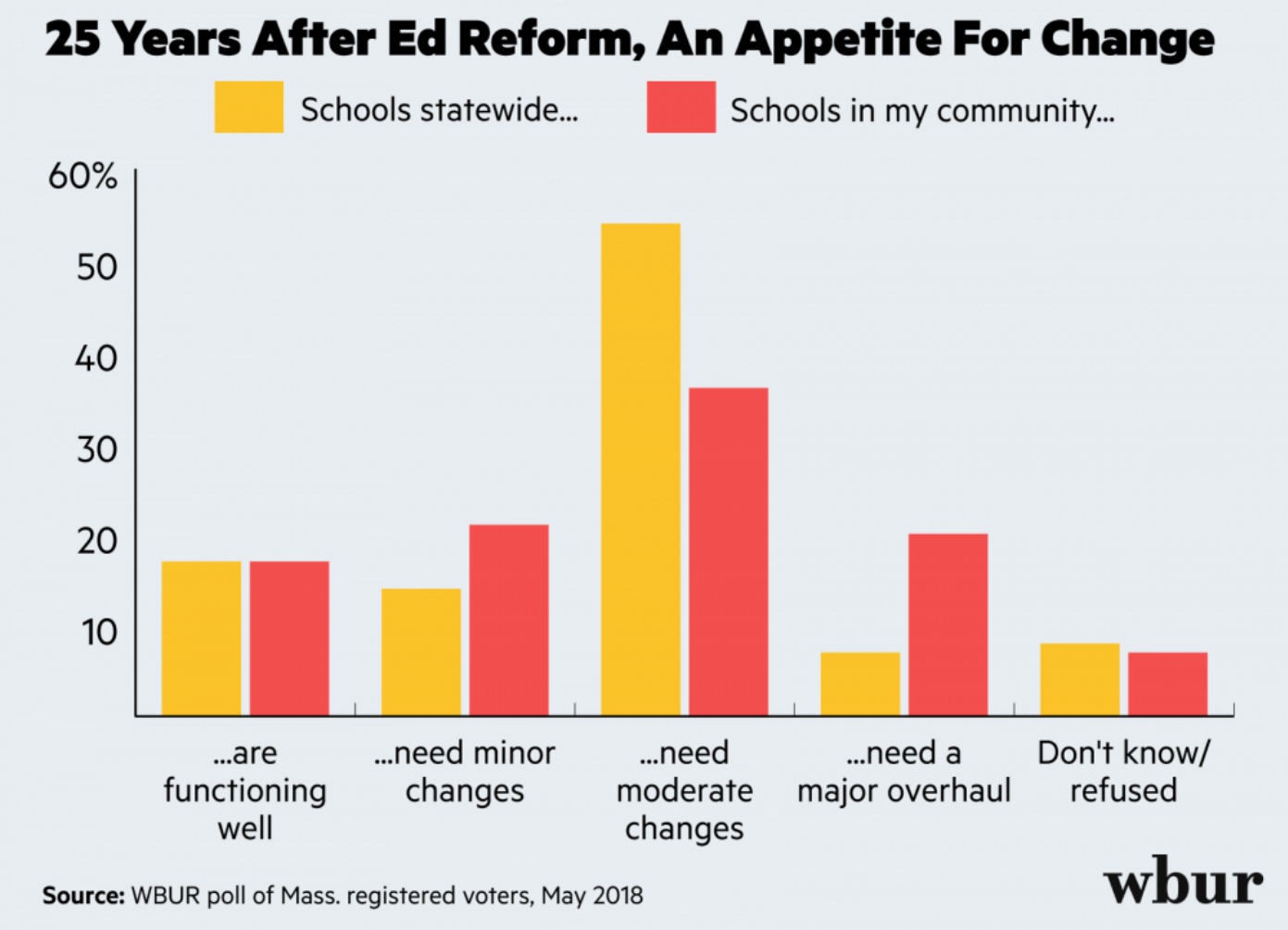
It’s a strange idea: By changing the way you measure how students are learning, you may find that they start to learn different things.

But state education officials aren’t at all ready to make the switch. The MCIEA has had to fight for state funding for the past two years. And Secretary Peyser emphasizes that this is an early, experimental stage.

“I’m very interested in all these experiments to determine whether there’s a reliable, valid, cost-effective way to assess student learning," Peyser says. "But as we’re experimenting with other methods, we need to stick with what works and what we know is reliable.”

In other words, Massachusetts is not moving away from the MCAS — at least not yet. In fact, the state is in the middle of rolling out a revamped version of the MCAS, which is designed to be taken on computers.

French, who wants to disrupt the MCAS regime, worked for the state Department of Education while the 1993 reforms were first taking shape. And he says he knows why today’s officials are reluctant to make big changes, 25 years later: "They're terrified of losing their No. 1 status — even if it means serving your kids better."



(Max Larkin/WBUR)

A WBUR poll released this week found evidence that, indeed, many registered voters feel the state's kids could be better served — in spite of that No. 1 national ranking.

More than half of the poll's respondents want to see change in public schools — and 17 percent favor a major overhaul.

But figuring out what to change, and how, is more complicated — especially since any sweeping change can bring lots of unintended consequences with it.

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