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# Racial Gap Remains Wide on MCAS Scores

By Sandy Coleman and Anand Vaishnav

For the third year in a row, minority students failed the MCAS exam at higher rates than their white counterparts, fueling fears that thousands of Massachusetts minorities will not graduate from high school.

Even among fourth-graders – whom state education officials tout as examples of students who have been immersed in education reform longer – the achievement gap between minorities (SIC) and whites remained wide.

“There is no confidence to suggest that come 2003, the majority of Latino students” would pass, said Samuel Rodriguez, executive director of the Latino Parents Association. “We will face a crisis.”

The class of 2003 is the first group of students who must pass the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System exam in order to graduate.

There were glimmers of hope among the scores released yesterday: Minority students at every grade level except Native American eighth-graders gained ground in math. The most significant was among Native American fourth-graders, whose failure rate dropped from 46 percent in 1998 to 34 percent in 2000.

With 10 tests given across grades 4, 8, and 10, minority students, in general, boosted their scores in seven or eight of the testing categories.

But the achievement differences between whites and Asian students and black and Latino students remain so wide that single-digit improvements do little to bridge the gap.

“There have been more years already invested in MCAS, and the improvement is not that great,” said Boston activist and parent Jeanette Merren.

“The state should stop this measurement and start finding a better way of assessing kids.”

According to the 2000 MCAS results, 60 percent of African-American 10th-graders failed the English portion of the exam, along with 66 percent of Hispanics, and 65 percent of

Native Americans – compared with 27 percent of white students and 34 percent of Asian-Pacific Islanders.

State officials, however, say the dismal scores may reflect the fact that the test was not a prerequisite for graduation for the 10th-graders when they took it last year and some students may have not given it their best.

Still, the scores for the eighth grade show that the gap is even wider in math for some minority groups: 72 percent of African-Americans, 78 percent of Hispanics, and 70 percent of Native Americans failed the English portion – compared with 31 percent of white students and 32 percent of Asian-Pacific Islanders.

The gap persists in Grade 4, although the failure rates were smaller in all subjects.

In math, 43 percent of African-Americans, 47 percent of Hispanics, and 34 percent of Native Americans failed.

That's compared with 15 percent of Asian-Pacific Islanders and 11 percent of whites.

The racial breakdown of MCAS scores released yesterday tells more about the state's education system than about the students, community leaders said.

"It's an indictment on our school system across the Commonwealth that is not effectively educating our children," said the Rev. Gregory G. Groover, head of the Black Ministerial Alliance's education committee.

"We can't talk about reform without dealing with equity issues," he said. "Clearly one of the reasons there is such a wide gap of performance between white students and students of color is because of the inequity of resources, quality of instruction, and learning infrastructures."

Added Groover, "We were promised since 1997 that the state would move towards getting the school districts ready, and the state has not been able to deliver."

Community activists say they are growing increasingly concerned as the 2003 graduation requirement looms.

Merren, who will receive MCAS scores for two of her three children, said responsibility for closing the achievement gap falls on families as well as educators.

"A lot of parents still are not taking MCAS seriously," said Merren, who is African-American. "How are we going to let them know?"

The best chance to help students now, said Rodriguez, is for his group and other minority organizations to join forces and figure out how to close the gap and make sure minority students aren't denied opportunities beyond high school because of MCAS.

He has been working with the Black Ministerial Alliance, as well as with People Organized and Working for Equitable Education Reform, or POWER, which was cofounded by Groover.

"It's important that every time we get a new statistic or test results we don't jump with a knee-jerk reaction," notes Rodriguez. "We should be able to come together and have a constructive dialogue."

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## **Racial Gap Haunts MCAS**

**by Ed Hayward**

Black and Hispanic students failed the 2000 MCAS exams in math and English at two to three times the rate of their white counterparts, according to results released by the Department of Education yesterday.

The results showed that despite spending \$7 billion on education reform since 1993, the attempt to bridge the "achievement gap" between minority and white students has yet to show significant gains.

The gap, a national issue magnified most notably in the results of standardized assessment exams, could prove the most vulnerable point of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System to court challenge.

Attorneys at the American Civil Liberties Union and other watchdog groups have been discussing the exam and potential legal challenges, said John Roberts, executive director of the Massachusetts ACLU.

"Any time you have a system of measurement that flunks kids of color at those kinds of rates, there's something wrong that needs to be addressed," said Roberts. "You just can't blame it on the kids."

In the 10th grade, blacks failed English and math at rates of 60 and 77 percent, respectively. Hispanic sophomores failed the English and math exams at rates of 66 and

79 percent. White 10th graders posted failure rates in English and math of 27 and 38 percent, respectively.

Few of the black and Hispanic students interviewed yesterday liked taking the MCAS exam, but had mixed opinions on whether or not MCAS is racially biased.

"I think it depends on the individual," said Dana Ruff, 15, a freshman at the Media and Technology Charter High School in Brookline. "It doesn't really matter what race you are. It matters more about the individual and their background."

Benison Pena, a student at Boston's John D. O'Bryant High School, said results are based on how well the schools teach their students.

"I don't think it's fair because different schools have different curriculum," said Pena, 18, a senior at the exam school. "Some of the test is not being taught in schools. They (the schools) have to work this out."

Felix Arroyo, a former member of the Boston School Committee, said the students in these groups are failing because they are underserved by the schools they sit in each day.

"This should tell us very clearly the systems are failing certain types of students and not others," said Arroyo, deputy director of the non-profit Hispanic Office of Planning and Evaluation. "There are correlations between less resources and the academic performance of children."

He said if a large number of the state's white students failed MCAS, the exam would be abolished.

"If 70 percent of the white students were failing, people would feel we were putting their children in jeopardy," he added.

State Rep. Gloria Fox (D-Boston) said the state should continue funding inner city schools at levels mandated by the state Supreme Judicial Court to correct years of inadequate funding. "Because of race and the areas we live in those students have been left behind historically," said Fox. "Those schools have been disenfranchised historically. It takes a long time for any of our students to catch up."