

MCAS scores may be used in teacher evaluations across Massachusetts

Published: Monday, April 18, 2011, 10:05 PM Updated: Monday, April 18, 2011, 10:05 PM

By Jeanette DeForge, The Republican The Republican

Republican file photoThe Massachusetts education commissioner is recommending a universal evaluation process for all teachers and administrators in the state that would use students' MCAS scores as one way to judge educators.

Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Commissioner Mitchell D. Chester said some recommendations are his own and others are based on the findings of a statewide task force of teachers, principals, superintendents and parents who have been studying the issue for months.

"Many of the Task Force recommendations are strong and promise to advance an agenda dedicated to ensuring continuous development of our teaching and administrative work force, and I have incorporated them into the proposed regulations. In my judgment, however ... we need to be more specific than the Task Force was regarding the use of student performance data and the consequences of consistently strong and consistently low performance," Chester said in a memo.

Chester's recommendations call for teachers to be evaluated using results from two types of student assessment, one of which must be the growth data from the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment Systems exam where it applies, the memo said.

Republican file photoMitchell D. ChesterPrincipals can also use a wide variety of other local, district, state or commercially-available standardized exams and student work samples, Chester said.

They will also be judged during classroom observations on elements such as instruction, student assessment and curriculum use, he said.

It also gives teachers who do not make the grade a year to show improvement or face termination.

The changes do not come as a surprise. Before the state applied for federalRace To The Top funds to implement innovative programs in schools, School Committees and teachers' unions had to agree to develop new teacher evaluations that included using student evaluation data.

In August, the U.S. Department of Education approved the state's application for the funds and granted it \$250 million.

Several educators in Western Massachusetts said they are in favor of improving evaluations, but had a number of questions and concerns about Chester's recommendations.

Chester released his recommendations Sunday in an email in reaction to a Boston Globe story. Neither he nor other officials for the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education responded to requests for further information.

Republican file photo Timothy Collins
Springfield Education Association President Timothy T. Collins said he is concerned Chester did not follow the recommendations of the task force closely, especially since there was a strong representation from educators and parents on the group.

"It is another example of something written by politicians and education bureaucrats who are so far from the classroom they really don't know what is workable and reliable," he said.

Just 17 percent of teachers have MCAS data from their classrooms, since students are only tested in math, science and English and only in grades three through eight and 10, Collins said.

He also questioned the idea of using the MCAS growth model. The model places students who received similar scores the previous year into the same category and compares their scores in the next year's test to determine if they had a small, typical or large growth compared to their academic peers.

"I don't have a lot of confidence in their growth model. I don't know if it is a legitimate tool to show growth," he said.

Collins said it would be preferable to use something that shows students' academic history over multiple years.

Springfield teachers and administrators together have improved their evaluation system over the past five years and the School Department now has a record of evaluating nearly all of its teachers every year. The instrument has a improvement plan which gives teachers and evaluators specific instructions on where they can get help if needed, Collins said.

Collins and Holyoke Superintendent David L. Dupont said they are concerned about overwhelming the evaluators, who are mainly principals.

“The immediate impact is the amount of work that will be put on principals. How do you handle all the things people have to do?,” Dupont said.

He said he is also waiting for more information about how art, foreign language, music and early elementary teachers are going to be evaluated, since there is no MCAS test for them.

David DupontDupont, who was reached Sunday, said he also had not seen Chester’s recommendations but he said his biggest concern is hearing that chronically underperforming Level 4 schools, must start the new evaluations in September.

“There should be more time for planning and in-service (training) and we have to do this for the fall with the Level 4 schools,” he said.

In his memo, Chester calls for a two-month public comment period and will ask the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education to adopt regulations in June. By September 2013 each school district is to complete union negotiations and be ready to start using the new evaluations.

But the 35 Level 4 schools in the state are required to start the new evaluations this fall under his recommendations. There are two Level 4 schools in Holyoke and 10 in Springfield.

Many educators, including Dupont and Chicopee Education Association president William D. Howe, said they believe it is a good idea to have a universal evaluation process.

“I think purely from a teacher’s standpoint this will be a lot clearer,” said Howe, who also teaches English at Chicopee High School.

His union worked for 18 months to create a better teacher evaluation instrument and failed. Knowing the state was working on the project, members decided to wait for those results before trying again.

“With Race To The Top we recognize change is going to happen and we are ready for it,” he said.

But Howe said teachers are concerned if tests for students who move in mid-year will be used to judge teachers. Some schools, especially those in Springfield and Holyoke, have mobility rates which are as high as 40 percent.

“We have a high transient population and we have students who are limited English proficient,” he said.

“We are trying to get some sense of how do we fairly evaluate teachers.”

Proposed Regulations on Evaluation of Educators