

Stepping Backwards

The Fraying of Massachusetts' Commitment to Students at the Front Lines of School Reform

A policy report from the *Keep the Promise Initiative*
VOL II. NO. 1 – April 2004

New *Keep the Promise* Research Substantiates Key *Hancock* Finding: FY04 Funding Cuts Have Dismantled Much of Massachusetts' Progress in Serving Students Needing Extra Help

THE SECOND YEAR OF *KEEP THE PROMISE* RESEARCH — AN IN-DEPTH, three-year study of academic remediation programs in Massachusetts' three largest school districts — is producing an array of evidence demonstrating the severely negative impact of the Commonwealth's 80% cut in MCAS remediation funding in the F'04 budget.

The release of this preliminary impact report coincides with the April 26, 2004 release of Suffolk Superior Court Judge Margot Botsford's findings and recommendations in *Hancock v. Driscoll*, the state's school funding court case. Judge Botsford's findings and recommendations will have a broad impact on the state's school funding mechanisms and approaches to reform. But her conclusions with regard to MCAS remediation are particularly timely because they relate to students who are

being held accountable *this spring* and over the next several years for meeting the state's competency requirements in order to earn a high school diploma.

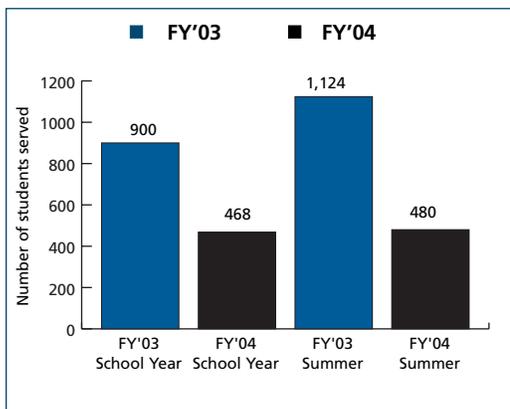
This report — a mid-year, interim publication from the second year of *Keep the Promise* research — puts specific numbers on the impact of the cuts in Worcester, Springfield, and Boston and describes the qualitative decline of academic support programs as well. The inescapable conclusion is that Massachusetts has taken a significant — but reparable — step backwards in its effort to keep its promises to all of the students served by its public schools.

"MCAS remediation grants were reduced from \$50 million in both FY'03 and FY'02 to \$10 million for FY'04...."

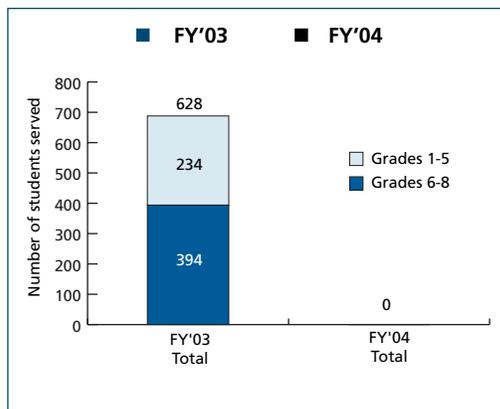
"The evidence in this case shows that for the focus districts at least, the steep reductions in... these grant funds have had a deeply negative impact on their ability to provide adequate educational programs. This has been particularly true for children who are at risk of failure, or in the case of MCAS remediation funds, who are actually failing."

— The Hon. Margot Botsford in *Hancock v. Driscoll*

Impact of the 80% Cut in State Funds for MCAS Remediation on Students Served in the Worcester Public Schools in Grades 9-12 ...



... And in Grades 1-8



State Funding for MCAS Remediation, FY'03-'04:

In FY2003:

Grades 9-12 \$30,000,000

Grades 1-8 \$20,000,000

In FY2004:

Grades 11-12 \$10,000,000

Grades 1-10 0

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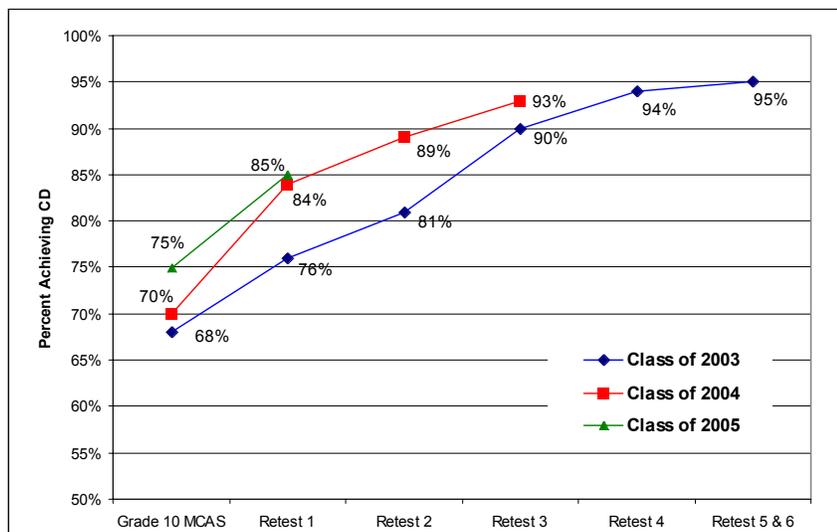
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STUDENTS FROM MASSACHUSETTS' CLASS OF 2003 PROGRESSED A LONG WAY after May of 2001, when they first encountered the 10th grade MCAS exam. The total number of passing students rose from 68% to 76% after the first retest, 81% after the second, and 90% after the third. After factoring in appeals, alternate assessments, and subsequent retests, 95% of the class of 2003 have now earned their high school diploma.

The progress of students from the class of 2004 looks even more promising, with 70% passing their first attempt at MCAS, 84% after the first retest, 89% after the second, and 93% after the third retest administered this past fall. And finally, students from class year 2005 show similar progress, with 75% passing their initial 10th grade MCAS exam and now rising to 85% after their first retest.

Figure 1
Percent of Massachusetts Students Achieving Competency Determination After Each Retest Opportunity



Early evidence gathered by the *Keep the Promise* Initiative – a three-year longitudinal study of high school academic remediation in Boston, Springfield and Worcester – indicates that the continuous gains realized after each subsequent retest opportunity may be influenced by student participation in academic remediation programs.

These remediation programs have been funded in large part by the Commonwealth's Academic Support Services Program (ASSP), administered by the Massachusetts Department of Education since 1998. To date, the Commonwealth has provided nearly \$200 million in ASSP funding for targeted academic remediation services across Massachusetts, including \$50 million in each of the 2001, 2002, and 2003 fiscal years. These funds have been used to establish programs for students in all grades K-12 (up until the current fiscal year), and emphasized the creation of intensive small-group instructional opportunities, including tutoring and mentoring programs, supplemental classes, computer-based learning modules, and programs that link remediation services with work-based learning opportunities.

NEW FINDINGS DEMONSTRATE THAT ACADEMIC SUPPORT PROGRAMS ARE PAYING OFF FOR AT-RISK HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

***Keep the Promise* data now provides some hard evidence that high school students who have taken advantage of remediation opportunities have attained higher MCAS retest scores and passing rates than those who did not attend.** For example, students from the Worcester Public Schools Class of 2003 who participated in state funded ASSP programs obtained significantly higher rates of passing the ELA and math retests – and earning their competency determination

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(CD) – than students who were equally eligible but did not participate. Table 1 shows the impact of ASSP participation for Worcester Class of 2003 students who had not yet passed the MCAS by the beginning of their senior year.

Table 1
MCAS Performance by ASSP Participation During the 2002-03 School Year
Worcester Public Schools: Class Year 2003

Subject Area	ASSP Participants		Non-Participants	
	#	% passing retest	#	% passing retest
ELA	133	73%	59	39%
Math	240	66%	81	40%
Competency Determination	295	66%	80	39%

Differences between groups of participants and non-participants are statistically significant at $p < .05$ using Chi-square. Participation includes summer 2002 programs.

The impact of remediation programs on retest scores is even greater when considering that between FY'02 and FY'03, student participation in these programs grew tremendously. In fact, *Keep the Promise* found that within Boston, Worcester, and Springfield, almost double the percentage of students reported participating in remediation programs during FY'03, compared to just one year earlier in a similar study (*Taking Charge*, Mass Insight Education, 2002). Finally, nearly two-thirds (65%) of students surveyed during FY'03 cite participation in extra-help programs as a reason for their success in passing the retest.

THE 80% CUT IN STATE FUNDS FOR ACADEMIC SUPPORT IN FY04 HAS DRAMATICALLY REDUCED SERVICES FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS

Cash-strapped districts have not been able to replace lost state money with other funds – so academic support programs have largely been cut. For FY'04, ASSP funding was reduced from \$50 million to \$10 million, with new limitations that schools could only use funds to serve students from class years 2003 (now out of school), 2004 (current seniors), or 2005 (current juniors). Educators we spoke to believe these cuts in remediation have been far too drastic, not only compromising the quality of programming to those students still eligible for services, but also totally eliminating the pipeline of support previously established for students in grades K-10.

“The drastic reduction in remediation funding has had a far reaching negative impact,” Boston superintendent Thomas Payzant told us. “This year, we have fewer teachers, fewer remediation programs, and consequently, fewer students receiving the academic support they need.”

This massive cut in high school remediation funding is exactly the wrong message at exactly the wrong moment – the wrong message to the at-risk students in the Classes of 2004 and 2005 who need the same support last year's class had; to their parents; and to the state and federal courts reviewing the equity of MCAS and state funding this fall. Cutting remediation funding by 80% (and in effect the high school funding by two-thirds since during FY'03 \$30 million of the total \$50 million was targeted for high school students) undermines the fundamental bargain all of us made with high school students who must pass the MCAS tests in ELA and math to graduate. The state's commitment – in this transition period – was that we would provide extraordinary support to at-risk students who needed it. This current academic year, feedback from Worcester, Boston, and Springfield educators indicates that Massachusetts is no longer fulfilling that commitment to the Classes of 2004, '05, and '06.

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BEYOND QUANTITY, THE QUALITY OF PROGRAMS FOR JUNIORS AND SENIORS HAS SERIOUSLY DETERIORATED

Not only has the pipeline of support been eliminated for students in grades K-10, the reduction of funds and the new limitations placed on how funds can be used has also taken its toll on the quality of these services. For example:

- **Remediation class sizes and student-to-teacher ratios have increased.** A tutoring class at Commerce High School in Springfield that once had one teacher for every five students now reports having twenty-five students in attendance.
- **Hours of service have been scaled back.** The number of teachers available to provide ELA and math tutoring for the Worcester Public Schools after-school programs has been dramatically reduced. For example, last year Worcester Vocational High School had six teachers but this year only two. Also, programs are now offered two days per week, down from three last school year. Their upcoming summer programs have also been decreased from 20 days last year to 15 this summer. As a result, fewer hours of service are offered to what at times have been very high teacher to student ratios.
- **Monitoring of student progress has been eliminated.** Last year, each senior at Charlestown High School in Boston who needed to pass the MCAS was set up with an MCAS advisor who met with students personally to review, plan, and monitor progress as they prepared for the retests. This year, although MCAS test preparation programs are still offered, there is no longer staff responsible to monitor individual student progress. Likewise, at East Boston High School, one administrator reports that the level of intensity and follow-up has been significantly scaled back from last year, thus compromising the continuity of services that has been very effective in the past.
- **Even some juniors and seniors in need of help could not be served.** Many educators believe the limitations on how funds can be used this year were too strict. ASSP funding could only be used to serve juniors and seniors who previously failed the MCAS. Therefore, high school students who moved into Massachusetts from another country or state could not be supported since they had not yet taken the MCAS, even if all indications were that they would likely fail. This issue is particularly relevant for urban areas in Massachusetts with large immigrant populations.

EARLY INTERVENTION PROGRAMS FOR K-8 STUDENTS HAVE BEEN VIRTUALLY ELIMINATED – CREATING AN OMINOUS CLOUD FOR THE FUTURE

Data collected from Worcester, Boston, and Springfield make it clear that all three urban districts have cut back on remediation services over the past year due to state funding reductions – at the high school level, as described above, but particularly at the K-8 level where state funding has vanished entirely. Less money for remediation services has resulted in fewer teachers, fewer programs, and a lower quality of service across the board. Although each of these districts has maintained the structure to ensure services continue to be delivered to students, all of their programs and services have been adversely impacted. As one central office administrator told us, “We are much more limited than last year. Many things are still in place but everyone is getting a smaller piece of the pie.”

Impact on Students

The greatest impact of reduction in state funding has been on students who can no longer access remediation services that were previously available to them. Table 2 (next page, and the graphs on the cover page) compares the total number of student slots filled for Worcester ASSP funded programs for FY'03 and FY'04.

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Table 2
Students Served by ASSP Funded Remediation Programs
Worcester Public Schools: FY'03 and FY'04 Comparison

Grade	School Year Programs		Summer Programs	
	FY'03	FY'04	FY'03	FY'04
9th – 12th	900	468	1,124	480
6th – 8th	0	0	394	0
1st – 5th	0	0	234	0
TOTAL	900	468	1,752	480

Totals indicate student slots. Thus, a student receiving services through multiples programs or subjects is counted more than once. FY'04 totals through April 2004 and includes summer '04 anticipated slots based on allocations by grade. FY'03 data does not include ASSP funding used to support one-week of summer '03 remediation for 1,400 students.

Relationship to Available Funding

This enormous decrease in the number of students receiving remediation services is directly related to the funding cuts experienced by these two districts. Table 3 compares the total state ASSP funding allocated to Springfield and Worcester Public Schools during FY'03 and FY'04.

Table 3
ASSP Funding Allocated by Year and Program
Springfield and Worcester Public Schools: FY'03 and FY'04 Comparison

Program	Springfield		Worcester	
	FY'03	FY'04	FY'03	FY'04
School Year Programs	\$832,273	\$229,968	\$972,298	\$66,286
Summer Programs	\$1,214,627	\$124,832	\$959,960	\$292,914
TOTAL	\$2,046,900	\$354,800	\$1,932,258	\$359,200

Without question, the pipeline of support previously generated by ASSP funding and channeled up through elementary schools, middle schools, and 9th and 10th grade programs has been virtually eliminated. As one math teacher told our researchers: “Freshmen and sophomores have asked me for tutoring and academic support, but this year I’ve had to constantly turn them away.”

- Last summer in Worcester, over one thousand 9th-12th grade students participated in summer MCAS remediation programs. This summer they have space for less than half of that number, none of which can be used to sustain their highly successful transition programs for entering 9th graders.
- Over the years, most urban areas have relied on federal or state programs (i.e. summer Job Training Partnership Act initiatives) to provide enriching summer experiences for at-risk students. More recently, those programs have been replaced with incentive laden academic remediation, which has proven to be quite popular and well attended. Now, due to less resources resulting in fewer students being served, education officials have expressed concern for what these youth will do this summer.

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- In addition, since many schools will also need to cut summer program incentives – including stipend money for juniors and seniors – this may adversely impact attendance levels for even those students who are eligible to attend as some may be forced to choose between work and learning.

The elimination of early intervention programs effectively derails the state's drive to bring all students to proficiency, as required by No Child Left Behind. The short-term impacts of the program cutbacks on high school students struggling to earn a high school diploma are clear. The longer term effect of the loss of early identification and intervention programs casts an ominous cloud over the state's continuing efforts to bring all students to the MCAS 240 or "proficient" skill level, as mandated in the federal No Child Left Behind legislation. Loss of early intervention programs guarantees the continuing presence of students entering high school who are performing significantly below grade-level – and will make it virtually impossible for the Commonwealth to fulfill its ambitions for every public school child it serves.

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