MEMORANDUM

To: Superintendents, Principals, Administrators of Special Education, Test Coordinators, and Other Interested Educators

From: Mitchell D. Chester, Ed.D., Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education

Date: March 2, 2017

Subject: Important information about the MCAS Alternate Assessment (MCAS-Alt) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

This memo provides important information and materials that will help districts make decisions about assessment of students with disabilities in light of the new federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which goes into effect in 2017–2018. Thank you in advance for carefully reviewing the materials attached to this memo, as well as the information presented below.

ESSA and Alternate Assessments

ESSA states in part that

“A State may provide for alternate assessments aligned with the challenging State academic standards and alternate academic achievement standards…for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities, if the State…ensures that, for each subject, the total number of students assessed in such subject using the alternate assessments does not exceed one percent of the total number of all students in the State who are assessed in such subject.”

ESSA also requires that parents/guardians of students with disabilities who take alternate assessments be clearly informed as part of the IEP process that

- their child’s academic achievement will be measured based on “alternate achievement standards” and
- participation in an alternate assessment may delay or otherwise affect their child’s completion of the requirements for a diploma.

In order to assist districts in administering the MCAS-Alt appropriately and effectively to students with significant disabilities, the Department is attaching the following materials:
• **guidance** and a **decision-making tool** for assigning students to take alternate assessments where appropriate;

• **data on 2016 MCAS-Alt participation in each district**, including the number and percent of students in all grades, and in each grade cluster, in the district; and

• **a sample parent notification letter** that may be copied onto school or district letterhead and sent to parents of students taking the MCAS-Alt.

**Determining Which Students Should Be Alternately Assessed**

It is the Department’s goal to provide as many students as possible with an opportunity to learn (and be assessed on) grade-level curriculum; and to ensure that students with disabilities in high school are not deprived of the opportunity to earn a diploma.

While we affirm the authority of IEP teams to act without undue external influence to make final determinations about how (not whether) students with disabilities should be tested, it is reasonable to assume that some students who were designated for the MCAS-Alt in the past may be more suited in 2017–2018 to either

• take the standard MCAS next-generation test, either with or without accommodations, now that new accessibility features and accommodations are available; or

• prepare a “grade-level” or “competency” portfolio for students with significant disabilities who are performing at or near grade-level expectations but are unable to demonstrate knowledge and skills on a paper- or computer-based test. (Note: Additional details on these assessment options are available in the attachments.)

The Department is **not** asking IEP teams to “get students off the alternate assessment” in order to meet the one percent statewide requirement. Nonetheless, the one percent ESSA cap is an opportunity to revisit decisions to assign students to the basic MCAS-Alt who may be able to access either the standard assessments with accommodations or submit a “grade-level” or “competency” portfolio.

**Annual Training for IEP Teams**

Districts will be expected to train/retrain all district IEP team members **annually** on the following topics:

• the guidance and criteria provided in this memo that clarify and refine decision-making procedures regarding alternate assessment participation by students with disabilities; and

• the requirement to notify, during IEP team meetings, parents/guardians of any student in grade 4 or higher who will be taking the MCAS-Alt that participation in an alternate assessment may affect the student’s eventual ability to earn a Competency Determination and receive a high school diploma.
Request for District Justification if Participation in MCAS-Alts Exceeds One Percent

Districts should use the attached “2016 MCAS-Alt Frequency by District” to project the percentage of students that will be designated by IEP teams in their district to take the MCAS-Alt in 2017–2018. Note: “Grade-level” and “competency” portfolios do not count in the district’s total of students who take alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards.

If a district anticipates it will administer the MCAS-Alt in school year 2017–2018 to more than one percent of students who are eligible for MCAS, I am requesting that they provide the Department with written justification, as ESSA requires. The justification should describe the specific reason(s) the percentage of students taking the MCAS-Alt will exceed one percent of eligible students. The justification should also provide the following assurances:

- that IEP teams will receive the annual training listed above;
- that students who take the MCAS-Alt will continue to receive instruction in the general curriculum beyond what is necessary to collect materials and data for the student’s MCAS-Alt portfolio; and
- that students with significant disabilities who are performing at or near grade-level expectations, but who are unable to demonstrate knowledge and skills on a paper- or computer-based test, even with accommodations, will be considered for a “grade-level” or “competency” portfolio.

The justification should be sent by April 15, 2017 to

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
Student Assessment Services
75 Pleasant Street
Malden, MA 02148
Attention: MCAS-Alt

If you have additional questions about the MCAS-Alt, or about statewide assessment for students with disabilities, please contact Student Assessment at mcas@doe.mass.edu or by phone at 781-338-3625. Thank you very much for your attention to this matter.

Attachment 1: Guidance on Designating Students for the MCAS-Alt
Attachment 2: Decision-Making Tool for MCAS-Alt
Attachment 3: 2016 MCAS-Alt Frequency by District
Attachment 4: Sample Parent Notification Letter
Attachment 5: Training for District IEP Teams (PowerPoint)